



APPROVAL SHEET

Title of Thesis: WISPOBISH: FOREST OF GHOSTS, TOWER OF VOICES

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Master of Fine Arts, 2018

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## ABSTRACT

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Parastoo Aslanbeik, M.F.A., 2018

Directed By: Professor Mark Alice Durant  
Department of Visual Arts

Wisprobish is a powerful tree in Persian mythology. The tree contains the nest of the Simurgh, a mythical phoenix-like bird, representing benevolence. In Persian, the word Wisprobish means ‘the cure of every disease.’ I am employing the symbol of the Wisprobish in response to the attempts to ban Iranians and other Muslims, from the United States, regarding to the recent Executive order 13769 Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry. I utilize the old photographic technique of wet plate collodion in combination with tree branches to create a ghostly forest. A fragile yet monumental structure constructed from white-washed cardboard boxes, is inscribed with ancient Persian poems and silhouettes of branches. In this piece, I hope to evoke the voices of those who have been demonized and offer healing through collective strength.

WISPOBISH: FOREST OF GHOSTS, TOWER OF VOICES.

By

Parastoo Aslanbeik.

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, Baltimore County, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
2018

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2018



## Preface

In the first-century Persian mythical book *The Book of the Kings* or *Shahnameh*, as well as in the ancient Zoroastrian religious book *Avesta*, there is a tree that is considered the mother of all the trees on earth. Its trunk is made up of nine mountains, and its branches carry the seeds of all species of plants. The tree is called *Wisrobish*. Not only is it the mother of all trees on earth, but it is believed to heal every pain of every living being. Drinking from the Streams of the nine mountains would make a person immortal. *Wisrobish* is the tree of life, and among its branches lives the Simurgh, a mythical bird symbolizing power and solidarity in various stories. It has been written that whenever Simurgh lands or flies from the tree's branches, *Wisrobish* throws thousands of seeds all over the earth. In some tales, this creature is made up of thirty smaller birds who have traveled a long way – metaphorically and spiritually – to meet Simurgh. After arriving at the destination, they learn there is no Simurgh. The real Simurgh is revealed to be themselves. Only the power of each individual bird, gathered together as one, makes the magical and beautiful Simurgh.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This story is written in different ways. One of the most famous one is called *The Conference of the Birds*. This masterpiece is written by Attar.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Conference\\_of\\_the\\_Birds](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Conference_of_the_Birds)

## Dedication

This is dedicated to Mina and Akbar who raised me with love and supported me to move to the other side of the world, only wishing to see me graduate, but their visa application was rejected. To my siblings Parisa and Pejman, my in-laws Mehdi and Mina, and last but not least Rosha, my five-year-old niece who has been counting days to see me again. Also, to Gilda and Javad, who were detained at Washington Dulles International Airport for hours because they were not American citizens but lawful permanent residents of the United States. To Mana, whose wedding was canceled because her parents' visa application was rejected and they could not make it to the U.S. for the ceremony. To Shahriar and Shahin, because of their efforts to bring their parents to the U.S. for a short visit, during those two weeks that the Travel Ban was halted. To Nikta and Hani, for all the tears they have shed because they don't know when they will meet again.

Finally, to the people who are trapped but reach out to grab hope. To the ones who have put their lives into small boxes and borne them to different parts of the world.

## Acknowledgements

I struggle to find the right words to thank everyone who helped me to make this project happen. I believe the best way is to remember beautiful memories with them. So, I will describe these memories as they come to mind.

A family photo comes into focus in my mind, my parents, my sister and brother and my in-laws, in addition to my four-year-old niece. Then, as if looking at other photographs, the memory of my committee meetings with three great artists/writers Mark Alice Durant, Kathy O'Dell and Timothy Nohe, trying to understand the meaning behind the words I say and open my eyes to a new world. The next memory is about Lisa Moren interviewing me: I am in Iran and she is here in Baltimore; she stands up and gives me a virtual tour with her laptop in the ITE classroom to make me feel less nervous. Chris Peregoy, with his unlimited knowledge of photography, teaches the complicated process to me patiently; he was kind of like a father to me through these years. Then the image of my classmates comes to my mind. They are standing in front of the library on campus and singing a Persian kids' song together in Farsi to show their disparagement of the Travel Ban. Every day, I feel closer to them, now, they are not only classmates, they are great friends. The memory of Shahriar talking to me while I am nervous about my future and my thesis. The memory of Sahar reading my thesis and telling me that I should think about a better word to use in the sentence. The memory of seeing more boxes every day in my studio from my friends. The memory of Vin Grabill walking into my studio telling me they all support me and I shouldn't be worried. The memory of Preminda Jacob with her beautiful smiles giving good vibes to everyone around her. I should also thank Rebecca Adelman, Sarah Sharp, and Jay

Gould, who accepted to be my questioners at my thesis defense. Also, I should thank everyone at Center for Arts, Design and Visual Culture. Without their help this installation could never happened.

I should thank every single one of these people who made good memories for me here in the United States. They are a second family for me here while I am far away from my first family.

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## Chapter 1. Start of the Nightmare

The night before the last day of my most recent visit to Tehran, I went to sleep in my childhood bedroom, knowing I would soon be saying goodbye to my loved ones. I woke up the next morning - Thursday, January 19, 2017 - to loud voices. Suddenly, I heard my father shout:

"اي واي! اي واي! داره مياد پايين! باورم نميشه! داره جلوی چشمون آوار ميشه!"<sup>2</sup>

I rushed out of my room to where my parents were standing, openmouthed, gazing at the TV. I looked at the TV and saw people screaming and running from a scene of ruins. My father said the Plasco Building was on fire and had just collapsed.

Built in 1962, the Plasco Building was the first high-rise in Tehran. Although decrepit, old, and short in comparison to the many high-rises built in the next 55 years, to most residents of Tehran, this building still stood as a symbol of modernity, change, and communication with the outside world. A world that looked and dressed differently, and worshipped different gods.

...

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<sup>2</sup> "Oh no! It's collapsing! I can't believe it. It's collapsing in front of our eyes!"

*A faded memory of me walking into different stores of the Plasco Building with my parents, looking for proper-sized boots for the coming winter.*

...

But the worst part of the incident was not over. Many firefighters were trapped in the building when it collapsed. We learned later that most of them died, either from being buried in the ruins or from inhaling toxic fumes. I do not remember how I packed my luggage for departure.

Throughout my 20-hour flight, I thought about the firefighters in the ruins, waiting for someone to help them. While they were taking their last breaths, their families received text messages from them asking for help. They were still trying to connect to the outside<sup>3</sup> world.

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<sup>3</sup> The word “outside” will be expanded in Chapter 6, “Plato’s Cave.”



Figure 1. *The Plasco Building a few months after the incident.* 2017. Photo: Pejman Aslanbeik.

I arrived back in Baltimore on January 20, 2017, the Inauguration Day of the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. Within two days, he signed the Executive Order 13769 Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States, commonly known as the “Muslim Ban,” which prohibited six (mostly) Muslim countries from traveling to the U.S. Mine, Iran, was amongst them. As days passed, my Iranian friends and I gradually realized the impact that this decision would have on us. We gathered every night to support each other, our hearts full of pain.

I did not know where or when I would again see my family and friends in Iran. They couldn’t travel here, and I couldn’t visit them back home and be guaranteed I could return to the U.S.

I still think about that building every day. There were firefighters in the rubble, trying to breathe for days after that incident. There are still fighters trying to breathe under the wreckage of hope for a better future.

...

*I fell into a catnap on a Sunday.*

*I am walking in my childhood neighborhood (figure 2). I vividly see all the details of that alley with its hundred-years-old Plane trees planted on both sides. I can even visualize the details of red bricks of the building next door. I touch the bark of a tree, and I can feel its texture.*

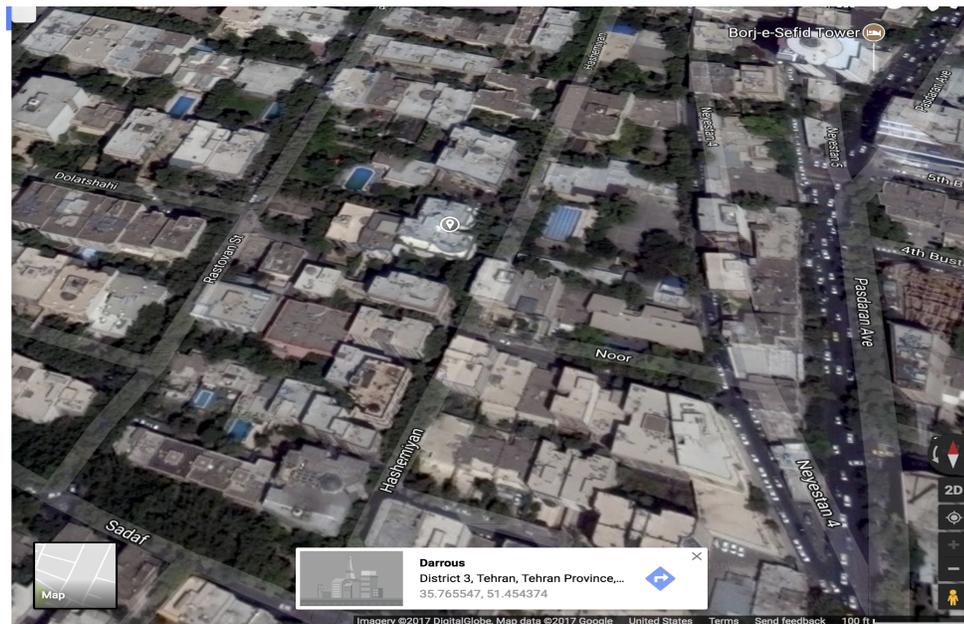


Figure 2. My parents' house and my childhood neighborhood. Google map.

...

I feel like life is going backwards, returning to a past when people were free to decide their present and future, a liberty I do not have now. The dominant political power structure of the country to which I decided to come and experience a whole new life is showing no mercy.

It is telling me: *“You are different because you were born in a certain geographical area.”*

- *“You are a danger to the safety of this country.”*

I grew up in a family that taught me how to love by loving each other. In September 2017, my parents had an appointment at the U.S. embassy in Dubai (figure3).<sup>4</sup> Their visa application was rejected immediately because of the Travel Ban. They will not be able to attend my graduation ceremony in May 2018. Why?

*“They are a danger to the safety of this country.”*

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<sup>4</sup> There is no U.S. embassy in Iran. For visa application interviews, Iranians must travel to a nearby country, such as Dubai, Armenia, or Turkey.

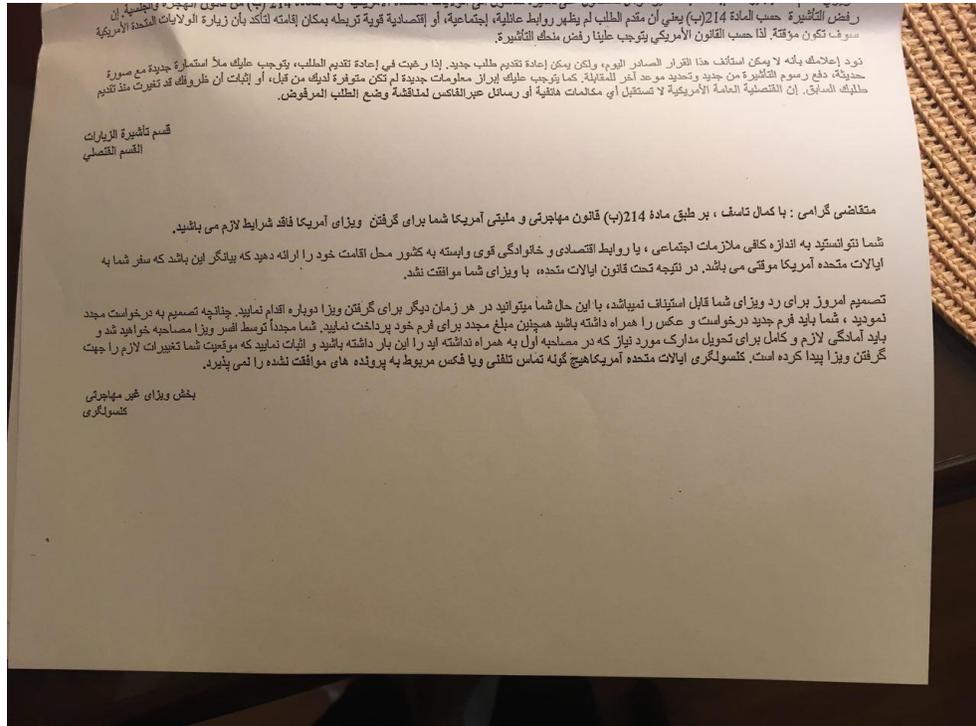


Figure 3. Rejection Paper.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This is the “White Paper” that the U.S. Embassy gives to the people who get rejected in their appointments for visas. When they receive a “Pink Paper,” it means they are accepted, and if they receive a “Yellow Paper,” it means they should wait for FBI and background checks.

## Chapter 2. Process as Meditation

For the installation, I chose to work with tintypes and ambrotypes<sup>6</sup> for specific reasons. Some of those reasons had to do with pictorial and structural concerns, which I shall expand on in Chapter 6, “Plato’s Cave.” Because of the nature of these types of photographic images, only one original photograph can be created. Therefore, every image is unique and special. In addition, with tintypes, the presence of the observer is important to the interpretation of the image, as the photo plate’s mirrored surface allows viewers to see themselves as a part of the image. Also, with ambrotypes, because the plate is glass, when you look at the plate without a black background, you only see a negative image.

During the process, the artist has only about 10 minutes to make the plate, take the picture, and develop it. [see Appendix 1]. The moment I start working in the darkroom, I leave all my worries on the other side of the door and start making plates. While pouring the collodion onto the plate under the yellow light of the darkroom, the only thing I have on my mind is obtaining the cleanest possible pour. Paying extreme attention to details helps me stop thinking about what is waiting outside. Even the monotonous sound of the ventilation helps me cut out everything beyond that door (figure 4).

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<sup>6</sup> This process is called wet collodion process, which was invented by Fredric Scott Archer in 1851. The type of plate that the photographer is using determines its name. Tintypes are made from tin plates, and ambrotypes are made from glass plates. I decided to use clear plexiglass instead of glass because it is lighter. By pouring collodion onto plates and leaving them in a silver bath for about four minutes, the plates become sensitive to light. You need to take the picture as soon as possible before the plate and the emulsion on the plate get dry. Then, after taking the picture, you have to come back to the darkroom and develop the plate and then fix it. At the end, they need to be varnished with Sandarac. There were some days that I could only make two plates after working for five or six hours.

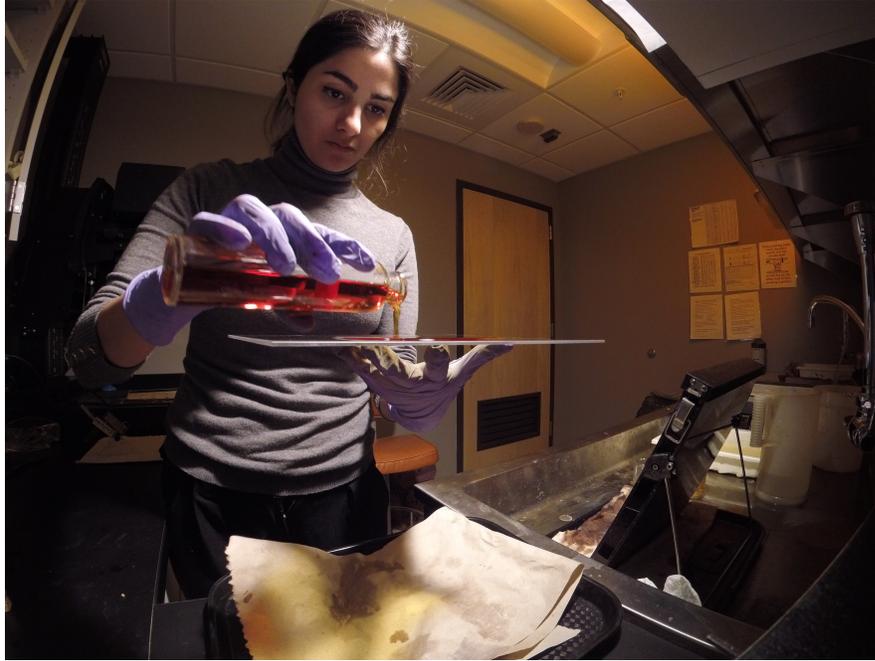


Figure 4. *Me, pouring collodion onto plates.*

...

*“Pour the collodion onto the plate. Pay attention to the edges. You only have about 8 to 10 minutes for the whole process. Be patient!”*

*Talking to myself, working in the darkroom.*

...

I have used the term “making” instead of “taking” intentionally. I make the photos and think of the plates as objects, or sculptures. Distinct from paper images, they have weight. I can hold them in my hands, and I can carry them. What is so appealing about being able to hold or touch something? Is it the sense of possession? If so, this sense of ownership is

comforting, assuring me I will not lose this thing as long as I have it in my hands. I can leave it, but it is my choice to do so.

## Chapter 3. Memories as Transitional Objects<sup>7</sup>

“Ever since cameras were invented in 1839, photography has kept company with death. Because an image produced with a camera is, literally, a trace of something brought before the lens, photographs were superior to any painting as a memento of the vanished past and the dear departed.”

-Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*<sup>8</sup>

Memories could be amongst people’s most precious possessions and cameras can assist humans to recall those memories, which is perhaps why people cherish photographs. Nowadays, most people around the world carry a camera in the form of their cell phones. With it, they save a piece of the “present” to look at later. To me, looking at photos of the past brings a profound feeling of regret, as they remind me of what I have had, but also of what I have lost. In his book, *Swann’s Way*, Marcel Proust declares that “The memory of a particular image is but regret for a particular moment.”<sup>9</sup> Regret over losing something in the past?<sup>10</sup> But is it losing? Or leaving? And what’s the difference between the two? The

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<sup>7</sup> Pediatrician and psychologist D.W. Winnicott coined the term “transitional object” in 1951, and it was quickly adopted by practitioners in a variety of fields. Child development specialist Colleen Goddard recently summarized Winnicott’s term as “a designation for any material to which an infant attributes a special value and by means of which the child is able to make the necessary shift from the earliest oral relationship with mother to genuine object-relationships. Transitional objects are self-chosen — a child’s first ‘not-me possession’ — like a blanket, teddy bear, pacifier, doll. The reliance on such objects is rooted in sensorial elements that lessen the stress of separation, while they soothe and comfort the child.” Colleen Goddard, “More Than Just Teddy Bears: The Significance of Transitional Objects in an Early Childhood Classroom,” *Psychology Today*, July 15, 2014, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-guest-room/201407/more-just-teddy-bears>.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 24.

<sup>9</sup> Marcel Proust, *Swann’s Way*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 462.

<sup>10</sup> Roland Barthes in his book *Camera Lucida* wrote about the relationship of photography, death, and mourning. He wrote the second part of the book about the death of his mother. In the first few chapters of this part, he wails for his mother by looking at her photos. Looking at the details of her photographs had become a type of ritual for him to attempt to eliminate the pain of losing her. In 31<sup>st</sup> chapter, he asserts: “It is said that mourning, by its gradual labor, slowly erases pain; I could not, I cannot believe this; because for me, time eliminates the emotion of loss (I do not weep), that is all. For the rest, everything has remained motionless.” Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 75.

difference, perhaps, lies in purpose. Leaving is purposeful, within our control. Losing is not.

A photograph takes the viewer on a mental journey, an invisible hand throws them back to another place and time.

...

*I'm waiting for my appointment at the MVA. Suddenly, I am thousands of miles away and years ago. I remember my cousin and I playing in my grandmother's house. The smell of rice and chicken stew is very strong. The image gradually disappears; the smell is still with me.*

...

I am using photographs in my installation because photography is a trace of a real memory, sometimes accompanied by regret. Regret has a major role in what an immigrant experiences. The reason some people are called “immigrants” by others is because they are not separate from their past and their origins. I “left” my comfort zone three years ago, I haven't “lost” it. I still have it and bear it with me. There is a Persian poem that says:

اي كاش، آدمي وطنش را

مثل بنفشه ها

(در جعبه هاي خاك)

يك روز ميتوانست

همراه خويشتن ببرد هر كجا كه خواست

در روشنايي باران

This poem made me think about memories functioning as objects. While we cannot carry our homes with us, we can carry our things in boxes – and the memories they represent – to a new place. There, they cease being “things.” They become pieces of our lives. They become transitional objects. Touch is very important in this process. When I can touch something, it means that I can carry it or even possess it. What if I can touch a memory from the past?<sup>12</sup>

...

*My grandmother is sitting on her bed in her house. She looks at a portrait of a man that sits on the nightstand next to her. Picking up the framed photograph, she cleans the dust off the frame with her hands, kisses and talks to the image. My uncle was killed in the Iran-Iraq War in 1986. This photo of her son is always next to her bed, where she spends most of her day watching television and talking on the phone.*

...

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<sup>11</sup> “I wish someday, people could put their homes - like violets - in pots and carry them away, wherever they wish. To the land of pure sunshine and rain.” Mohammad Reza Shafiei Kadkani, *Az Zabane Barg* (Tehran. Sokhan, 2010), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Barthes in *Camera Lucida* writes about the way touch and photography are interdependent. He describes this phenomenon with a daguerreotype: “The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star.” Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. 80.

Photo-sculptures are common in many cultures.<sup>13</sup> People use the objects to remember people who have died.<sup>14</sup> I started thinking about how I could make photo-objects that would be something more than just an image.

Cardboard boxes also began to play an important role in my installation. We use such boxes for packing and transporting our belongings to new places.

...

*I am walking up the stairs. In front of my apartment door, there is a small cardboard box. I see my name on the box but don't recognize the sender. I open it and see a birthday card from my family. There are presents from my brother, sister, and parents in that box. It is one month after my birthday. My mother later told me they asked a friend to bring these presents to the U.S and mail them to me.*

...

I started using cardboard boxes in my installation as a metaphor for displacement. Three thin layers of recycled paper make these boxes strong enough to carry weight. These boxes are made of paper, and paper is made from trees. Trees are trapped in the ground, but then later, after we cut them down to make paper, some of them become boxes for moving our belongings. This contrast between two different lives of trees made me more curious.

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<sup>13</sup> "Many Mexican and Mexican-American homes still display a distinctive form of a photographic portraiture known as fotoescultura." Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget me not* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 61-62.

<sup>14</sup> Also, home altars are another example for the use of photos, in addition to candles, cross, and a Bible.

Gradually, the role of these boxes changed. Collecting these boxes from everyone and everywhere became a habit for me.

## Chapter 4. Forest as Society

Watching a TED Talk about the communication of trees ignited the first spark of my idea for my M.F.A installation.<sup>15</sup> Wandering among trees, taking photographs of them, and listening to nature helped me think about the solidarity among these living flora. I was learning through my research that trees “talk” in forests.<sup>16</sup> They reach out to each other by means of the underground system of their roots. They send signals by way of their chemical makeup, helping each other grow and become stronger. They use their roots, which are underground and invisible, to communicate and create societies. In each of these societies, there are some “Mother Trees,” which are older and stronger. These Mother Trees lead younger ones to obtain chemicals from the ground to gain strength. Trees talk, defend, support, or even make love through a system that is hidden from humans’ eyes.

...

*I am walking in a forest full of trees. Some of them look stronger and older. They might be the leaders. I get closer and put my ear on the bark of one of those leaders. I cannot hear anything. I hear the sound of the forest, but nothing from that specific tree.*

...

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<sup>15</sup> Suzanne Simard, *How Trees Talk to Each Other*, TED Talk, June 2016, [https://www.ted.com/talks/suzanne\\_simard\\_how\\_trees\\_talk\\_to\\_each\\_other?share=183eb05b0c](https://www.ted.com/talks/suzanne_simard_how_trees_talk_to_each_other?share=183eb05b0c).

<sup>16</sup> Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, trans. Jane Billinghurst (Vancouver: Graystone Books, 2016).

Trees grow slowly and become taller and stronger. They look like monuments in forests. Monuments of patience and resistance. They resist difficult situations. Winter comes, and the cold wind takes their leaves, sometimes covering them with white, tyrannous snow. The snow creeps up their branches silently. Some break, but some resist and persevere.

There are many references to trees in both classical and modern Persian literature. Trees symbolize resistance and power in most of the stories and poems because they are trapped in the ground in difficult situations, yet they stand sturdy by grabbing the soil with their roots. The roots are trapped in the ground, while their branches are always dancing freely in the wind, creating silhouettes against the sky, yet they both – roots and branches – grow in a similar pattern.<sup>17</sup>

I started my thesis by recalling the story of the Plasco Building, which in its early years was a center of business and a towering symbol of the modern economy. After spending a lot of time playing with boxes, I figured out that I should put all of them together and make a big tower like a “Mother Tree,” as a sort of tribute to the Plasco Building. An eleven-foot-tall tower of white cardboard boxes and white branches stands in the middle of my gallery space, seemingly gazing at visitors. I have transferred<sup>18</sup> photographs of different parts of trees onto some of the boxes that compromise the “trunk” of the monument, the photo-transfers serving as a kind of “bark.” These photos from various species of trees symbolize individual stories of people in a community. Simultaneously, I made tintypes

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<sup>17</sup> "Each tree grows in two directions at once, into the darkness and out to the light, with as many branches and roots as it needs to embody its wild desires." John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 1997), 122.

<sup>18</sup> A kind of technique to print photographs from film onto other objects.

and ambrotypes featuring details of trees. These plates were, for me, like the people who make up a society. There were no similar plates; each of them was unique. I started making a collection of plates, cardboard boxes, and branches. The act of collecting became as important during the preparation of my thesis exhibition as the objects I was collecting. The boxes are made of paper, which was made from felled trees. The tree, then, has come full circle, first helping other trees grow and then growing older to the point of dying from natural or industrial causes. Yet, the story is not finished, for many trees become something else. They become paper, boxes, envelopes, books, houses, furniture, etc. Their lives continue in other ways.

In addition to boxes and tree photos, I added branches of trees. I have collected these dead branches from all over the city, changed their appearance, and given them a new function. They are not dead anymore. I have given them another life as part of an artwork – even if that life is made possible by my futile attempts to graft them together with pieces of cellophane tape. They were alive in my studio and live again in the gallery.

## Chapter 5. The Tower of Babel<sup>19</sup>



Figure 5. *“People spoke the same language but could not understand each other....”*<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. 2 And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. 3 And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar [sic]. 4 And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. 5 And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded [sic]. 6 And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. 7 Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech. 8 So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. 9 Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.” Bible, King James Version, Genesis 11: 1-9.

<sup>20</sup> *Metropolis*, dir by. Fritz Lang (Universum Film A.G., 1927), film.

From the moment I landed in the U.S., I have wondered why people are different and who has constructed these differences. What if everyone could speak the same language or there were no boundaries?

I watched an Iranian comedy movie a few months ago titled *Radio Dreams*,<sup>21</sup> which was produced in the U.S. The story is about an Iranian poet who came to the U.S. and works for an Iranian radio station with facile programming. There was a scene in which the poet is talking to non-Iranian people about war and the power of music and poems. He struggles to use all the English words he knows to express his feelings about war, poetry, and music. His power, though, was in words he used back home (figure 6). In another language foreign to him, he is like a baby, using body language to convey meaning. He strives to explain a utopian world in which each politician has a musical instrument and instead of battling for power with weapons, plays their musical instruments. So, instead of waging war, they're all playing a part in a symphony. The result of the war is no more piles of dead bodies, it is a symphony.

According to the Tower of Babel story (Genesis 11:1–9), God confused people's language in order to punish them.

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<sup>21</sup>*Radio Dreams*, dir. Babak Jalali (United States-Iran: Butimar, 2016), film.



Figure 6. *Still from Radio Dreams, 2016.*

The tower/tree/monument in my installation is made from cardboard boxes that I asked people to give me. Every day, when I went back to my studio I found more boxes with different names on them. My monument is made of boxes from my friends, all of whom have different lives, languages, and backgrounds.

Ann Hamilton's installation, *Event of the Thread*, 2012, inspired me to think about the use of sound in my installation. In her piece, she put speakers inside paper bags, which people could carry with them in the room. Since my work is about feeling trapped as an immigrant from a Travel Ban country, I decided to put speakers inside the cardboard boxes to reinforce the idea that the people whose recorded voices emanate from the speakers are also trapped, as they talk about their feelings of displacement in various languages.<sup>22</sup> At the end, the

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<sup>22</sup> There are five sounds placed in the tower from five different people speaking in Persian, German, Okinawan, and Turkish. The fifth one is a child singing a well-known kids' song about a baby mouse and a

viewer seeks out and hears a chaotic blend of voices of different people. The content of what is being said might seem obscure, but the voices together create a huge audible monument. Additionally, the boxes are inscribed with ancient Persian poems, which tell various versions of the story of Wispobish.<sup>23</sup>

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bunny. The mouse is scared of the bunny because it looks different. The mouse's mother tells her mouse kid not to be afraid of the bunny because of its appearance. She says the bunny is a guest, and they should invite him to come in and play with him.

<sup>23</sup> Most of the poems I have chosen are about Wispobish and Simurgh. In several ancient stories, a group of birds decides to meet Simurgh who lives on Wispobish. They start a very hard trip to the end of world where Wispobish and Simurgh live. The story ends with only 30 birds meeting Wispobish and learning there is no real Simurgh. The real Simurgh is themselves, and their power as individual birds, when brought together, makes a very strong and even more powerful bird named Simurgh. On the other hand, Simurgh means "thirty birds," with "si" being the number thirty in Persian, and "murch" meaning bird.

## Chapter 6. Plato's Cave

*"Above and behind them a fire<sup>24</sup> is blazing at a distance...."*<sup>25</sup>

Another ancient story that played a part in my thesis research was Plato's Cave. The ties between this allegory and photography are so perfect that Susan Sontag opens her book *On Photography* with a chapter titled: "In Plato's Cave." Sontag describes how photography has changed the way we look at the world epistemologically. "Finally, the most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads—as an anthology of images."<sup>26</sup> We look at the world through the photographers' lenses and comprehend it with their – and our own – knowledge, combined.

In Plato's Cave, prisoners could only see an "image" of the "other" world on the walls. Photographs are also "images" of a piece of "reality" imprinted on a surface. They represent a time that is no longer present, an incident in the past and now gone. Yet, I believe, the combination of photographs and a viewer activates the scene that is saved inside the frame, and also activates the story outside the frame. The flow of thoughts in viewers' minds start in the frame but leads them outside it. Hence, there is a reciprocal

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<sup>24</sup> A flashback to my first chapter, "A Start of the Nightmare," where the fire fighters are trapped in the ruins of the building and sending text messages to the outside world and waiting for help.

<sup>25</sup> Socrates: "And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: -- Behold! human beings living in a underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets." ~Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII.

<sup>26</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*. (New York: Picador, 2004), 3.

relationship between viewers and photographs. Maybe this is what Barthes calls “animation.”<sup>27</sup>

Prisoners trapped in Plato’s Cave were ignorant of what was happening in the other (real) world outside it. And when the person who escapes the cave comes back to report to the prisoners that there’s another world outside and what they are seeing on the walls are shadowy replicas of it, the prisoners think the person is crazy. They do not want to leave their familiar habitats, to see another world.

In my installation, I invite the viewers to see something beyond the photos’ borders. I want them to “migrate,” conceptually speaking, to a “new world” outside the photographs and beyond the frame. In other words, the viewer is given a choice either to leave the dark cave to see the outside world for themselves, even though it is madness to believe there is anything beyond its walls that is completely real, or to stay trapped inside the cave, feeling resigned to a limited sense of reality.

To facilitate this choice, I placed branches around the edges of my photos such that the linear patterns of branches inside the frame extend beyond it in the form of actual branches. This arrangement helps emphasize the importance of the atmosphere around the photos, where shadows of the branches are cast on the white walls behind the plates. Together, they make a new form. The photographic images, the plates on which they’re printed, the

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<sup>27</sup> “In this glum desert, suddenly a specific photograph reaches me; it animates me, and I animate it. So that is how I must name the attraction which makes it exist: an *animation*. The photograph itself is in no way animated (I do not believe in ‘lifelike’ photographs), but it animates me: this is what creates every adventure.” Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 20.

branches from different species of trees, and the shadows on the wall, all compose an enormous image in the corner of my gallery space: an image of a wise, beautiful, and silent Mother Tree. The source of illumination creating this shadow is housed within the towering boxes in the center of the space. The shadows symbolize the unreal side of the world, while the assemblage itself is a metaphor for the real “outside” world.

## Chapter 7. Tribute to the Survivors

*“Like other American landscapes [Washington, D.C.] is a dream or vision with overtones of nightmare, and warns of summoning up grandeur only for dead things.”*<sup>28</sup>

The U.S. is no different from other nations around the world in glorifying their dead through monuments. But why do we as human beings feel so attached to this method of paying tribute? Is it just a reminder of the people who are gone and their contributions to this small part of the world? Is it all about the past and not about the present? In my second chapter on “Memories as Transitional Objects,” I wrote about the relationship of photographs to the past. Some of us think that only buildings or statues can be reminders of memories of people who made changes in the past. And typically, these reminders are gigantically tall and made from marble, bronze, granite, and other imperishable materials.<sup>29</sup> But, I believe that a photograph so small that we can hold it in our hands can have the same effect as these colossal monuments. The sense of touch is that powerful because you don’t need any language to understand it.<sup>30</sup> It is a universal language.

I think photographs and monuments have many similarities. They are both about memories, and they are both created to direct attention to memories. But one of them is usually

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Harbison, *Eccentric Spaces* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 17.

<sup>29</sup> “Photographs and monuments offer very different materials for marking history—paper versus stone, a sliver of silver against a lump of bronze. One wouldn’t expect much of a contest in terms of endurance, yet as Roland Barthes has observed, photography has replaced the monument as the site of collective memory. The very act of memorializing has been de-centered and dispersed through the complex and ever-growing web of images that witness the big and small events of our public and private lives, binding us to personal and collective memory in a way that few monuments could hope to match.” Mark Alice Durant, “Photography and Monumentality,” *Aperture* 196 (2009): 36.

<sup>30</sup> To repeat: “I wish someday, people could put their homes - like violets - in pots and carry them away, wherever they wish. To the land of pure sunshine and rain.”

massive and seemingly permanent,<sup>31</sup> and is meant to guide your eyes to the sky. The other is meant to be held in your hands (at least some of the time), referring to your earthbound bodily presence. When we take a photo, we save that moment with a camera, but after that, the moment is gone. We kill the “thing” to save it for later.<sup>32</sup> The surface of the negative or sensors of my camera is the last thing that touches the reality represented in the photo.<sup>33</sup> In his essay “Photography and Monumentality,” Mark Alice Durant talks about the relationship between monuments and photographs, and the paradigm shift “from site of memory to the sight of memory.”<sup>34</sup>

One artist who works with this concept and has influenced my project is Christian Boltanski. According to Boltanski,<sup>35</sup> his biggest fear is death, and he has tried to find a way through his works to run away from it. His installations are good examples of objectifying

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<sup>31</sup> Monuments are typically thought of as permanent, a concept that has recently been challenged in cities throughout the U.S. with regard to their Confederate statues and the underlying racism that they represent.

<sup>32</sup> “Such is the fact, that we may receive on paper the fleeting shadow, arrest it there, and in the space of a single minute fix it there so firmly as to be no more capable of change.” Henry Fox Talbot, “On the Art of Fixing a Shadow,” a section of the paper titled “Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing,” delivered January 31, 1839, published in *The London and Edinburgh Philosophical Magazine and Journal of Science*, vol. XIV, March 1839; reprinted in Vicki Goldberg, ed., *Photography into Print* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981), 36-48; and available at: <http://www.photocriticism.com/members/archivetexts/photohistory/talbot/talbotaccount.html>.

<sup>33</sup> “Photography is privileged within modern culture because, unlike other systems of representation, the camera does more than just see the world; it is also touched by it. Photographs are designated as indexical signs, images produced as a consequence of being directly affected by the objects to which they refer. It is as if those objects have reached out and impressed themselves on the surface of a photograph, leaving their own visual imprint, as faithful to the contour of the original object as a death mask is to the newly departed. On this basis, photographs are able to parade themselves as the world’s own chemical fingerprints, nature’s poignant rendition of herself as memento mori. And it is surely this combination of the haptic and the visual, this entanglement of both touch and sight, that makes photography so compelling as a medium. Compelling, but also strangely paradoxical.” Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2001), 61.

<sup>34</sup> Durant, “Photography and Monumentality,” 36.

<sup>35</sup> “Christian Boltanski: Studio Visit,” TateShots, 13 March 2014, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/christian-boltanski-2305/christian-boltanski-studio-visit>.

memories, functioning as monuments to people who are gone.<sup>36</sup> Monuments imply eternal life, yet his monuments are paradoxically fragile. Durant, in his essay, names Boltanski as an artist who wants to remember and to materialize the memory and the tragic and heroic past.<sup>37</sup> Boltanski's creation of fragile seemingly improvisational monuments, are antithetical to the conventional understanding of monuments. Similarly, my 13 feet monument, made from cardboard boxes which are attached together with a simple tape presents the idea of both fragility and perseverance.

*Wispopish* is a memorial or a tribute to all people who are experiencing displacement. To the people who have decided to move to other places to avoid adversity in their lives. These individuals are in between states of nostalgia for the past and hope for the future. They are like survivors from a storm, like those about whom Haruki Murakami writes in *Kafka on the Shore*:

Sometimes fate is like a small sandstorm that keeps changing directions. You change direction but the sandstorm chases you. You turn again, but the storm adjusts. Over and over you play this out, like some ominous dance with death just before dawn. Why? Because this storm isn't something that blew in from far away, something that has nothing to do with you. This storm is you. Something *inside* of you. So, all you can do is give in to it, step right inside the storm, closing your eyes and plugging up your ears so the sand doesn't get in, and walk through it, step by step. There's no sun there, no moon, no direction, no sense of time. Just fine white

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<sup>36</sup> Boltanski's works suggest the Holocaust as a reference point, at the same time functioning as more general reminders that genocide continues, my project may have started as a response to the 2016 Travel Ban but goes beyond it.

<sup>37</sup> "His monuments are fragile, seemingly improvisatory, constructed as they are out of blurry photographs, tin boxes, wire, cloth, and the faint but insistent glow of low-wattage lightbulbs. The pathos of Boltanski's futile attempt to remember the nameless dead can overshadow his less prominent desire to renew the idea of the monument. Boltanski wants us to remember, he wants to materialize the tragic and the heroic, yet he cannot bring himself to invest in the myth of an enduring and heroic history. The wounded ephemerality of his sculptures embodies a painful contradiction: the ideological zeal required to erect the monument can also ignite the fervor by which an ideology's opponents are vanquished." Durant. "Photography and Monumentality," 36.

sand swirling up into the sky like pulverized bones. That's the kind of sandstorm you need to imagine....

And once the storm is over you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about.<sup>38</sup>

After the storm, the survivors know how to resist in Winter, because they know the Spring will come with its blossoms. They can be trapped under tons of white, silent, creeping snow, but they eventually will bud. They grasp the earth tightly with their roots, yet their arms are in the sky dancing (figure 7).



Figure 7. Parastoo Aslanbeik. *The Great Salt Desert. Iran, 2009.*

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<sup>38</sup> Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*, trans. Philip Gabriel (New York: Vintage, 2006), 5-6.

I used white paint in my installation to cover boxes and branches to create these poetic implications. Snow absorbs all sounds around it. It has a kind of totalitarian behavior that covers everything, changing the diverse appearance of nature to a more uniform whiteness. Life seems to stop. Color seems to vanish. These ephemeral qualities remind me of a scene in the movie *The Pianist*,<sup>39</sup> in which the main character Wladyslaw Szpilman (Adrien Brody) is pretending to play the piano by moving his fingers a few inches above the keyboard, because he has been asked to keep quiet. This beautiful scene of him playing the “air piano” cuts to a scene outside the window, where it is snowing. The music fades into the snow. And, then, silence.

My focus on white is also due to insights gained from the book *Chromophobia*. In the first chapter, the author describes a kind of violent whiteness that dissolves everything.<sup>40</sup> Painting boxes and branches white was improvisatory at first. I wanted to show a kind of inevitable change in all the elements of my installation. Similar to the change we as immigrants are forced to accept. But then, gradually, whiteness became something that I could not avoid. I could not see the branches and boxes in any other color; it became an obsession to transform everything with white. The use of white in my installation signals the poetics of seasonal change, but also points to the complicated life of the survivor. There are times in life when you simply cannot change the things happening around you. When such a storm is upon you, you must stand sturdy, grab the soil under your feet, and not let

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<sup>39</sup> *The Pianist*, dir. By Roman Polanski (USA: Focus Features, 2002), film.

<sup>40</sup> “There is a kind of white that is more than White, and this was that kind of white that repels everything that is inferior to it, and that is almost everything. This was that kind of white. There is a kind of white that is not created by bleach but that itself is bleach. This was aggressively white.” David Batchelor. *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 10.

the wind grind you into oblivion. It is just you and the storm. Then you can see something faded in the background: trees dancing in the wind...

...

*I am back in my childhood house. There are two old Weeping Willow Trees in front of our windows. I usually play under them on the grass. There is a storm coming. I'm looking at the Willows from the window. Suddenly the left one bends and breaks from the middle. I cannot believe what I have just seen.*

...

An unstable monument of cardboard boxes and tortuous branches is standing in the center of the room, and another one made from glass and tin plates sits like a hermit in the corner. They look big and monumental, yet they are fragile.

## Chapter 8. Regarding the Pain of the Others

There is a thin line between voyeurism and sympathy. Operating together yet separately, these responses sometimes overlap, but sometimes operate far apart from each other. Sontag, in her book *Regarding the Pain of the Others*, examines the meaning of “we” as spectators of distant sufferers, plus the different ways “we” react to incidents of violence observed live, versus those shown on television and other media platforms. Sontag argues that photography bears the responsibility of transmitting the feeling of war to those not in war zones.<sup>41</sup> She hypothesizes a complicated unconscious pleasure in sympathizing.<sup>42</sup> Among other possible reactions, the viewer may even find pleasure in feeling safe from the situation pictured.

Rebecca Adelman, in her article about Aylan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian boy who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea during his family’s attempt to seek refuge in Europe, also investigates this issue of the voyeuristic gaze of the spectator related to photos of war. She defines a “good” spectator and declares that “the ethical spectatorship of these photos requires candor about the costs, benefits, and gratifications of looking at them.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> “The understanding of war among people who have not experienced war is now chiefly a product of the impact of these images. Something becomes real – to those who are elsewhere, following it as ‘news’ – by being photographed. But a catastrophe that is experienced will often seem eerily like its representation.” Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 21-22.

<sup>42</sup> “There is a satisfaction of being able to look at the image without flinching. There is a pleasure of flinching.” Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of the Others*, 40-43.

<sup>43</sup> “Ultimately, the argument collapses a range of spectatorial positions down to two, apparently mutually exclusive, possibilities: ‘good’ spectators who look at the photos and feel outraged or sad, versus ‘bad’ spectators who look at the photos and do not. Such ‘bad’ spectatorship is often attributed to emotional

In *Wispopish*, I am addressing the collective memory of a group of people who leave their homeland and experience something new. This experience is full of ups and downs. They don't withdraw. They stand and look into the eyes of their pain and start to dance. I am talking about a pain of being "an outsider" or another "we." But I do not want the spectator, while looking at the piece, to sympathize. My goal is for them to remain as observers. They should silently look at the strength of the Mother Tree as representing "outsiders," an amalgam of individuals who are not individual anymore. *Wispopish* is a simulacrum of every single person, combined into a monument to flaunt the glory of equality and solidarity.

My project started with collecting materials. Since January, 2017, I have collected boxes from people I knew and branches from trees around Baltimore, which is now my second home. I took photos of trees wherever I went. These collected items are now detached from their origins. The box-receivers do not "possess" the boxes anymore, the branches and photos do not "belong" to dead trees. They are part of another thing. I want to show their variation and uniqueness in the monuments that I have constructed. They are not *pieces* of something anymore. They are *one* thing, like the Simurgh. *Wispopish*, above all, is a note

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laziness, an inability or unwillingness to be moved. But 'good' spectatorship here requires only minimal emotional ambition; it is largely a matter of channeling the cultural, historical, and political forces that instruct and condition our sentiments, predisposing us to grieve for deaths that look like this. Adhering to those codes by feeling appropriately bad might feel automatic or right, but it can also feel good." Rebecca Adelman, "Feeling Good About Feeling Bad About Aylan Kurdi," *Antenna: Responses to Media & Culture*, September 22, 2015. <http://blog.comarts.wisc.edu/2015/09/22/feeling-good-about-feeling-bad-about-aylan-kurdi/>

to myself, reminding me of what I have gone through during this year of instability and madness.

...

*I am walking on the streets of Ankara<sup>44</sup> after my visa interview. There are many swallows flying above my head (figure 8). I think about them and myself. My mother is walking next to me. She starts crying. She knew I would be leaving soon. She says maybe it was not a good idea to choose "Parastoo" as my name from the first moment.<sup>45</sup>*

*I think about swallows while listening to Chopin's Nocturne in C sharp minor. They do not know where home is, they are always migrating....<sup>46</sup>*

...

And the memory fades out...

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<sup>44</sup> As mentioned in footnote 3, there is no U.S. embassy in Iran. My interview was in Ankara, Turkey.

<sup>45</sup> The meaning of my name is swallow in Farsi. Swallows always migrate with the change of seasons to find warmer places.

<sup>46</sup> Frederic Chopin, "Nocturne in C-sharp minor," 1870, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G33opPoryh4>.



Figure 8. *Swallows flying above our head.* Ankara, Turkey. 2015.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Wet Plate Process

When I decided to use tintypes and ambrotypes for the installation, my first concern was the process. I was planning to take the photos outside in forests, which would require making a portable darkroom and transporting it wherever I decided to shoot. It was a good idea if I were making only a few plates, but I needed to make many for the installation, and that would not be possible in the amount of time I had. So, I decided to take the photos with a digital camera. After shooting the photos, I used a film recorder to transfer them onto black-and-white film. This process involved first converting the photos to negatives in Photoshop and then using the film recorder to make positive images on my films. Next, when I was back in the darkroom, I made the plates sensitive to light by pouring collodion onto them and leaving them in a silver bath. Finally, I used an enlarger to expose the photos through the film to the plates. This made my process one step shorter, allowing me time to focus more on the content of the images and to make more plates successfully during the time I had.

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