

# Penumbra

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*Penumbra* is the official, refereed, scholarly journal of Union Institute & University's Ph.D. Program in Interdisciplinary Studies. The journal is published at regular intervals and dedicated to challenging traditional academic and creative disciplinary boundaries in the context of social change.

*Penumbra's* purpose is to promote theoretically informed engagements with concrete issues and problems. The journal publishes socially engaged, innovative, creative and critical scholarship with a focus on ethical and political issues in the humanities, public policy, and leadership. *Penumbra* is a peer-edited and peer-reviewed journal committed to spanning the divide between scholarly and creative production, and to fostering work from graduate students, junior scholars and emerging artists, in addition to more established critical and creative voices.

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## The Day Trip

The air outside the car windows already has an early spring tone here: sun-warmed yet not fully soft, still vaguely fragile. If this were home, there would be late forsythia, early daffodils. Instead, trees bright with lemons flash by. In the fields beyond, then suddenly quite close, white blimps float overhead, filming the sky. Heading south, they become more frequent, and Tobi's father eventually stops pointing them out.

"When the peace comes," his father says, five, six times. "When the peace comes..." He coughs. His father is narrating our trip. He has just seen a doctor. Something is wrong with his lungs. "When the peace comes, this field will be, this land will be –" he says again. Then he coughs.

We pass through towns where every bus stop boasts its own concrete bomb shelter. "And there," his father points, "is a kibbutz that took lots and lots of rockets these last eight years, during the –" and he coughs.

We drive and drive and look and look. Stopping at a persimmon tree, he jumps out to the road's edge and gathers fallen fruit. I join him. They're tiny, dry, mottled orange globes. He's faster at collecting than I am. Soon he has two handfuls, and presses them into my palms, cupping his own hands around mine, as if I were a child.

§§

We're stopped at a gas station, and he comes out with cups of espresso. "Just here," he says, pointing beyond the parking lot, "Forty-thousand people were crossing this road every day, in both directions, before –" and he coughs.

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“This was the border crossing,” says Tobi. “The check-point.”

Now, on a Saturday afternoon, there are tourists. Drove of them, parked below a mound of earth, the highest point on the plain, from which you can look beyond into Gaza.

“There, on that hill,” his father points, “were twelve, fifteen rockets falling every day, during the –” and again the cough. The events? The disturbance? The unrest? The incursion? The invasion? The war? Is he waiting for Tobi to finish his phrase? “Have you two had lunch yet?” he asks.

Tobi and I look at each other – somewhat guiltily, as his mother fed us before we left – and I let Tobi answer no.

The smack of a meat tenderizer on chicken flesh sounds at the counter behind us. “My own father ate lunch in this restaurant every day for fifteen years,” says his father. “Because his office was just across the street.”

Tobi’s mother had walked us along this same block of the city that morning, strolling back and forth on our way past the traveler’s insurance office and the money-changer’s, the Russian quarter, the town’s first shopping center and a dried foods store, past the same restaurant she must have known his father would take us to later today. Each of them has taken us on their own tour of the old town’s same five blocks, each claiming their own stake, in our minds, of spaces central to the other’s life, tracing nebulous trails that overlap in ways they must when two people live in the same space over the course of decades without sharing its parts.

Tobi’s father drops us off at his mother’s building after lunch, then sits in the car across the parking lot until we’ve reached the door.

In the entry hall, Tobi presses the button for the elevator with an angry sudden jerk, his lip curled. “He said his girlfriend was coming with us today. That’s why my mother wasn’t coming,” he says.

Through the doors, we watch his father’s car pull off finally, slowly tracing its route to his apartment a few blocks away, as if moored like one of the white surveillance blimps to the earth. When the peace comes, I think.

Five floors up, his mother’s living room is papered with yellow roses. In a corner behind the dining table sits a collection of silk and plastic flowers in vases, sun-bleached, as is everything else near the louvered windows on the apartment’s south side, the side one avoids when a siren sounds.

After showing us how to use the coffee maker and the oven, she’d explained that, “When you hear the siren, you have five seconds, counting like this,” she’d slowly counted off the five numbers on her fingers, “to get to the stairwell.”

These days, apartments are less expensive on this side of the building. Outside, a sandy park stretches to the next building, then the next, low and crowding the horizon so you wouldn’t guess the city has any real end.

## §§

In accordance with the spirit of modern convenience, the city's archeological center is designed for drivers. You pay through your car window at an entrance booth flanked by flowerpots, then, pressing the gas pedal, continue up the drive past freshly planted flowerbeds. In theory, it is possible to see the center's entire collection of unearthened exhibits without leaving your car seat. A Roman forum's bleached ruins lie spread across a freshly mowed lawn as if pushed up through the green turf like teeth from gums, or dropped from the sky. On nice days like today, Tobi's mother muses, one would normally have difficulty finding a vacant parking space, let alone a table in the picnic area. Today, though, every table is deserted. Further on, the way is blocked by a security van.

After speaking with a ranger, Tobi's mother says, "The other side of the park is closed. Two rockets just fell over there. Only one went off. The police are coming to explode the other one."

In due course, an ambulance pulls slowly up beside our car, followed by a military jeep. She parks, slides her seat back, lights a cigarette, and opens a magazine.

"We'll go for a walk," Tobi says, "Over to the Canaanite gate."

"Come with us?" I ask his mother.

"She's already seen it," says Tobi.

"I'll be in the car," she says.

We walk along the coast taking photos of freshly planted flowers, pausing on the cliff's edge to gaze south at the power plant supplying electricity to Gaza. Tobi's arms are already brown from two days of sun. As we kiss, the short pop of an exploded rocket sounds from the parking lot, and birds rise from the trees in concentric rings, like a stone dropping in the water.

By the time we arrive at the marina for lunch, the air has cooled. His mother rests facing the huge modern row of buildings behind us. A dozen tiny sparrows balance on the railings above the water, watching our table with quick, anxious sideways glances.

"That's where Tobi's father lived after he moved out," she says, distracting my attention from the sparrows when Tobi leaves for the bathroom. As his father's father left behind a ruined country, his own father left a marriage. "In one of those apartments," she says, gesturing with a back-handed wave, at once proud, vague and dismissive. This is her job, I think: to show us her apartment, the street where his father grew up, the shops, the place where his father went after he left her apartment. The before, during and after of an absence. And this is his father's job, I think: to show up at random times in her narrative just to prove his presence, that he still exists as more than an imaginary geography.

The power plant is still visible down the coast at the beach's far edge, supplying electricity to make our coffee and the complimentary biscuit now feeding sparrows.. Soon, as we drive home, Gaza's lights, like those all along the coast, will flick on, the sea-blue twilight folding over the shore like a luxurious bed quilt.

§§

In the city, people lounge on white sofas in white living rooms with enormous black coffee tables and enormous black televisions, talking into telephones, playing video games and watching scenes of incredible fictional violence filmed in Los Angeles. Between calls or during commercials, they pause to say, “I’m doing an MBA. I don’t know why I’m doing an MBA, but I’m doing it.” Laughs ensue.

His father has followed us to Tel Aviv after another appointment with his doctor. “It’s not asthma,” his father says, before hanging up. “I’ll tell you about it if you’ll meet me for dinner.”

“He’s such a drama queen,” says Tobi. There’s a warm breeze between the wings of the mall, and Tobi’s sister comes out in gold jewelry to meet us, flushed from an argument with the cell phone company over her bills.

At dinner, I’m afraid to ask. I want to say the restaurant is elegant but ugly, but it’s not. It is like a beautiful country where everything is wrong. That everything is wrong seems proven by a reversed axiology flawed by only two points: nothing here is ever quite right, except coffee and a cigarette. It’s a quiet meal.

“Smoking is nice, but you pay a heavy price,” his father says as we return to the table for a second time.

§§

In night-time Jerusalem, Klimt-like faces glow fleetingly in the streets. His father drives in for dinner, and gives us a tour by car in the dark: here, a lookout point, here Tobi’s old flat, further south, down a road one shouldn’t travel at night, a checkpoint dimly displayed in the distance. A small taste of adventure. All roads lead to checkpoints, either simply because all roads do lead to checkpoints, or because his father likes to push at the boundaries of this world, to feel and share its sides, its edges. Through the darkened car windows, the distance between the Old City and the West Bank is measured only by the streetlights flashing by between them, yellow pools marking space in the black road.

In the morning over breakfast, a glimpse of a low-green valley grazed by a herd of goats on the far side of the city wall tempts me with a sudden urge to climb the hill from its far side, and I wander off alone. The city wall sits atop a mound of yellow rubble glittering with smashed bottles. Walking up is like climbing a sand dune – it shifts under the feet, and slowly accumulates bits of plastic, discarded car parts, torn bits of cloth as it rises. Up along the wall, raw spring branches are speckled with lone sparrows, and the musty odor of scraggly horses and ponies seeps out in the still, cool shadowed air between the wooden lathes of sheds. Near a low, broken, taped window indicating a house, the bark of an angry dog tied to a stake sounds, and a group of boys coagulates on a rocky mound.

“Hello, hello,” they cry in surprise, “Money-money!”

I walk on, thinking of Jesus as a stone pelts the back of my coat, then another. En-

tranced by a jolt of adrenaline, I see safety ahead in recognizable objects: a paved street, a garage with a car pulling out, a woman standing in a driveway, a crowd of Russians on a terrace. Tobi and I meet in the bazaar, striding on wordlessly together to the Dome of the Rock's barbed wire (closed save for prayers; neither of us prays), down to the Gethsemane garden, up to a Muslim cemetery with dried palms stretched over graves behind the city wall. Sunset.

We were originally supposed to spend a few days at the Dead Sea with his father and the girlfriend, at a hotel where his father's own mother, suffering from a skin disease, spent summers floating in curative water, but Tobi decides to make it a day trip. Perhaps simply to have more time alone for the two of us, perhaps to spare his mother jealousy. Early in the morning they're downstairs loitering in the hostel driveway. Half an hour later, the sun has warmed the asphalt as his father, seeking coffee, weaves us around a herd of goats blocking the entrance to a gas station.

Then, suspended above the asphalt in our bubble of steel, glass and rubber, the four of us descend together to the lowest place on earth. Signs along the roadside mark our depth.

"The sea is shrinking every year," the girlfriend says quietly, aligning our gaze with hers through the car window as it appears. You can see where it's receded, the shore lined with concentric rings of salt. Jordan, a soft blue haze across the water is, in a sense, slowly growing closer.

At a seaside hotel we'll buy swimsuits. But we won't stay in the hotel. This is a day trip, after all. We won't swim in the sea, but instead float in a heated pool of filtered water drawn by a spa on its shore.

"You have to be very careful to keep the water out of your eyes," the girlfriend warns as we follow them into the pool.

"The water is full of –" his father coughs.

"It's best just to keep your eyes closed," says the girlfriend.

So the four of us float weightlessly, surrounded by the spa's other visitors in our own private circle, eyes closed, legs curled embryonically beneath us in the salted water, the glancing of our limbs guiding us together.