

Pablo Soler Frost

Enclosures

For María

“I really don’t know what I am looking for.”

The first man talking was in his mid-fifties, still very strong, with a heavy neck and muscled arms ending in small, clean hands. The second one was a little younger, and frail, both in spirit and in body, and looked pale and haggard in the humid afternoon glow. One, the first one, was an artist, and the other, a writer. They had known each other for many years, years that had led to the progressive discovery that they enjoyed each other’s company—not least because talking was something they both liked. Still, they were quite different. To start with, one was straight, whereas the second one was queer. One had moved freely from station to station across three continents; the other, while a rambler, preferred not to move at all. The first was a bull; the second a monitor lizard. They both came from the oldest part of the old country.

All images are of the *Dés* in process, Bali, 2017–2018.

But they were also alike. Both were passionate readers, sharing an admiration for metaphysical writers. They both smoked clove cigarettes. By that fact alone an observer could probably have guessed their ages (they had been born in the previous century) and the whereabouts of their provenance (somewhere near the planet's tropical belt), for people in other latitudes had almost stopped smoking, citing health concerns, even the hazards of fire.

"I don't know what I am looking for," the first man had said.

The phrase had struck the second one as incongruent. Had he really flown all the way to this island, a famous one in this magnificent archipelago, to be told by the first one, in front of the yet unfinished limestone cubes, that he did not know what he was looking for, that he did not know what he was doing there? He tried to detect a trace of irony in the words that the other had just uttered, but he found none. The first one was being earnest, showing a face of himself—a face of vulnerability—which the second one had never seen before. He used to think of his friend as a person who was always dead-sure about his intentions. After all, he had "triumphed," not just once, but many times, in many different situations, with extremely different materials, lasting or ephemeral. His first solo exhibition had been hailed as a major turning point in contemporary art. And others had followed suit, proving that his was not a mere stroke of luck. He swam amidst the sharks of the art tank and left unscathed. He was sometimes feared and there were artists that hated him or pretended to despise his work. But his work succeeded on many levels, and was precise, and was precious too.

The second one was a writer. A gay writer in the winter of the world. A loner, a changing man. He had flown here with high expectations, invited by the sculptor to write a piece on his next work—these limestone dice.¹ But the text was not flowing.

At first the writer had thought of making a piece depicting the disposition of a typical island home, with their different pavilions around a court, their family temple and shrines, the gate with the guarding pair of statues, flanking the enclosure used as a defense against the spirits. He had finished it, knowing it was a draft but feeling quite proud of himself. But the sculptor, who had lived on the island for a year, had pointed out the many clichés the draft inadvertently repeated. Such was the awe that had struck the writer as he entered this isle, such was his wonder that he felt overwhelmed. The sculptor was not impressed.

The writer guessed that the sculptor, since his arrival, had been acutely aware of the following dilemma—what can you possibly create on an island so filled with talent as to have hosted such accomplished musicians and dancers, as well as painters and sculptors? (Lempad as one towering example). Even more, this island had attracted many different artists from around the globe since the days before the First World War, all in search of that absolute which they thought would redeem them, each one distilling their own process of individuation in a place so exuberant it had been called both an earthly paradise and an island of demons.

So here he was, sipping coffee while the other was having a whiskey in the *joglo*. At the table were five of the six unfinished limestone dice. An ashtray. Cellphones. Privileges. Yes, but also, hard work, at least in the case of the sculptor, who had

¹ This body of Orozco's work is entitled *Dés* which translates from French to English as dice.



taken the extreme measure of coming here, with his family, to learn a new skill—to expose himself to learning, that is.

He had learned to know, or should I say he had known to learn, that the single most important thing in this life was constant change. And he acted upon it. That is why he had chosen to be on this island. He had never used this particular kind of stone. A stone that crumbled if uncoated, a stone exposed.

The writer himself knew he was as exposed as the stone. He was running out of time, time being something he had squandered as a young man, only to be given a new chance after alcoholism had taken its toll. He was one too long for many things, but one, perhaps, was certainty. Was he really waiting for the answer? For he had come with one question (well, he had many questions, and that bothered him because he would have liked to have many answers), but there was one in particular he wanted to ask the sculptor. That question, over which he mused on the long flight, was why it was that the human body was almost never represented in his work.

The sculptor fixed his eyes on him. That made the writer slightly uncomfortable, for he knew the other to be extremely intelligent and that he had spent a lot of time thinking about the limits and the possibilities of the depiction of the body, denying himself that depiction of the body, discarding it, in part, he explained, because a body always conveyed a specific identity, and he was more interested, so to speak (or at least one could discern that in his work) in the absent signs that suggested the presence of bodies.

His work abounded in the traces left by bodies: marks, prints, shells, skeletons, skulls, auras, shadows, reflections, haloes, atoms. All these things that orbited around bodies, so to speak. And the dice—they had faces. Were these dice meant to be parts of the body? They looked like elbows, like knees, like torsos.

The writer, showing off a little, told the sculptor about a painting in one of the museums on the island, a painting called *Atomic War in Indra's Heaven*, by Ida Bagus Made, a painting that represents this conflagration as intertwined bodies—beautiful, naked male bodies locked in an embrace surrounded by flames.

He fell silent then, still thinking about bodies, while the sculptor, who had not seen that painting, told him, in fewer words, that he thought that each action with a meaning is a circle, that the sense of action—of a complete action—is a circle, and that bodies in meaningless actions were not circles, but lines. A swallow, swiftly flying over the rice terraces, had suddenly reminded him of that.

Night fell swiftly also. There was the problem of getting back to the hotel, a beautiful place, albeit falling apart. The sculptor offered him a ride on his motorbike. That posed a problem to the writer. He had never done that. His fears were so huge, like a net collapsing over a gladiator—all lost, all of a sudden. But it was that or walking in the dark, unknown streets. Oh, the tricks his mind played on him. But he had no choice. So he said “yes.” The ride went smoothly, and it was scary enough, but less scary than he thought at first.

Back in his room, helping himself to a tonic water, he thought that the sculptor’s dice were different from anything he had seen before—cubes with enclosed asymmetrical circles, in each of its six faces they had arms pointing to the four cardinal points. But there was also a hidden cardinal point: the center.



And the center could be either a swarm of tremors, *ollin* in náhuatl, movement, or a perfectly still point which is yet another circle.

What did it mean, not knowing what was to follow? It meant to search. To reveal something enclosed. The stone collapsing in a controlled implosion perhaps. To carve from the outside and allow the inside to appear. There was a plausible logic, a possible logic inside the cube and the hope of finding that logic.

Frogs and geckos answered his silent musings. The night, enclosing upon them, was their own.

The next day he went to the sculptor's house again. Neither he or his family was there, but the cook allowed him in, and offered him a coffee with milk. The view was astounding. Paddies and coconut groves mingled with banana plantations; little temples dotted the landscape. Butterflies in yellow, in black and blue, in green and black flew around; you could see a muddy river streaming downhill.

Suddenly, the writer was aware of a presence, a sweet old man, stone-deaf, who entered the house as if the house was not there, to place new offerings and pray. He saw him walking around the shrines, his own mystical path crossing what the writer thought was his own.

A message arrived. The sculptor and his wife were delayed in traffic but would he stay for lunch? He texted back, and, instead of writing while he waited, thought about his other friend, who was presently at the next island snorkeling, even though the coral barriers had withered, whitened and died. Then the sculptor arrived.

The writer lunched (there was a water-spinach salad, mushrooms, and fried fish, then coffee and mangosteen ice cream) with the sculptor and his family: his wife, a highly accomplished person who was trying to save the waterways, and their son, a boy about eleven, who, despite the enormous success of his father, was easy going, sweet and intelligent. One could think of him as being unscathed by the fame and fortune his father would bestow upon him. There was another guest, a gallerist, that the writer knew from many parties. She was dressed in black and was about to take a plane to see a newly opened contemporary art museum in the big island where the political power of this land merged—an island hundreds of kilometers away. They talked about the old country, which was gradually descending into chaos, but also about coral reefs, and vanishing birds, and destruction, and facing the things that seemed to be inevitable.

After lunch the sculptor helped himself to a glass of whiskey and water, and they started to talk about the cuneiform writing of Sumer and Ur and about the process which allowed symbols to become figures of speech that in turn became a sign, a series of signs, which are not symbols, and about carving being like writing, and then about carving these limestone dice. The gallerist was taking pictures of yet another of the sculptor's projects while sipping whiskey. One could hear the sculptor's son skateboarding. The writer felt real gratitude and he felt himself longing for a family; he had recently proposed to a longtime friend, the one who was snorkeling. He was an extremely handsome man, who was, of all the people he knew, the one with whom he most enjoyed silence. The writer had convinced him to come on this journey with him, and the other, an environmentalist, had agreed. But he had not said yes. And now he was on another island. So the writer slept alone and cried a little.

The next day he went by taxi to the workshop, where stone was being chiseled away. Many Buddhas watched and moss grew on their calm faces. He would have preferred to watch—or to pretend to watch—a nearby pond, where dragonflies buzzed over the water. But there was work to be done. The sculptor had paused. He made frequent pauses pondering the next step.

All work has unintended spaces, pauses in an effort. As it is in walking, or in climbing, or in writing, so it is in sculpting. You move your body to the tune in your mind. A pause. You switch off. And then on. Again.

It was a hot morning, one of those mornings in which you yearn for shade. Nonetheless, reflecting, the sculptor went for his compass while the carver watched the unfamiliar motif of the dice materialize. The stone carvers on this island have been doing things at their own pace and in their own way—looking at their memory, copying things as they have been done for hundreds of years. Not only they do have their own mythology in stone, and about the stones, but they also have their own way of drawing, their own way of carving. So even in this new century in which machines had mightily replaced other tools, sculptors here still





use their own chisels, their own hands, their own ideas. That is what had drawn the sculptor to this island in the first place—not their tradition of depicting the universe, but their know-how. After all, he was trying a different geometry. The dialogue with the master carver was not without difficulty. *Their practical use of cosmos* differed. Their languages differed, their ages, their background, as did their intentions. But they understood each other just because of their skills.

The writer bade them both good-bye. He wanted to be alone and walked into the beautiful, clean streets, and, being hungry, he started to search for a restaurant. He chose a place, a restaurant near the forest; but the food had a strange taste, a little bit like petrol, as some mangoes do when they are not good. He felt a little dizzy, but nevertheless, he entered a bookshop. Addictions are like that. He was paying for some books he knew he would not read, but that he thought he wanted, when he unexpectedly found what he was looking for without knowing that he was looking for it: *Indra's Net: Alchemy and Chaos Theory as Models for Transformation* by Robin Robertson; a treatise on squares and circles.

In the taxi towards the hotel he felt strange. When he reached his room his heart was pounding. He read a few more pages on Indra's net. It was a net set with trillions of precious stones, each reflecting the light and glory of the others—a mesmerizing maze of light. Some books are shining jewels...and then they collapse, writing imploded.

He decided to take a pill, trying to sleep, only to be awakened by what? A glint, a dent, a spark, a scream in the night?

You know those bursts of fever that consist only of numbers and complex, unintelligible phrases that leave you exhausted because you cannot stop them, so that you get no rest at all, as if you were in a mangrove of ideas that called your attention, caught you and tried to drown you—a landscape of roots, stems, branches, all confusing but, at the same time, clearly defined until they converged or they rotated or changed into another thing which was the same monstrous idea, in a progressing complexity like that of Koch snowflakes or Sierpinski's cubes transforming themselves into themselves—until you understood nothing, meanings closing on opening mandalas. As if caught in *Indra's Net*..., glistening enclosures, glyphs. It is said that coastlines gave Mandelbrot the insight and the numbers that allowed him to propose fractals. “But high fever could have done the same trick,” the writer said to himself, sweating. Mercifully he slumbered into sleep—the tablet was gaining. The last lines of fever ran like this:

to delineate a map is to complete a body. A description of a moment of the self is a mantra. A mandala is a dice. And again. And so on.

The morning started with a welcome cool breeze that suddenly died. The writer felt a little better. Nocturnal terrors were annihilated by the glaring sun. He breakfasted on poached eggs and toast. His friend, with whom he was trying to write an epic fantasy novel, was due to arrive today. They were going to the mountains, where coffee grew. And the sculptor and his family were also leaving the island, for yet another island where they were going to board a clipper.

He put himself to write. Things like:

Solid sand. Compressed dust. Generating dust. Accumulated dust: opacity. To be swept away with a broom. Illuminate the floor. Angles of light.



To find the central point where all points converge, where all lines meet. The intersection of one with oneself.

Or things like:

*That central point is always a cross. (I am not saying this in a religious sense, although I am fully aware of its implications, but I decided to say it, *sauve qui peut* as Nigel Barley would put it in his novel, *Island of Demons*, because, geometrically, to say that at the center of a circle there is a cross, which at its center has a circle that has a cross et ad infinitum, is a statement which is a correct definition, which, by the way, is a circle.*

The dice are low reliefs collapsing unto themselves. So are the offerings, yielded by the believers at specific places, then scattered by pigeons, dogs, motorbikes, pedestrians. Rain or wind. By time, happening.

The following day was all light. He spent it with the sculptor, talking, for talking is like sanding; brushing the enclosure.

Bantams crowed afar. He thought of the men, squatted in front of their houses, each holding another fighting bird in their hands, proud of them, comparing them, just as in his old country. It might be that one can only see what we comprehend.

The next day he tried to write, to no avail, so he walked to the center of town, near the palace. He could picture the sculptor on his scooter going somewhere in town to buy some paper, or to bring a pair of tennis shoes to his son. And on each side of the road: paddies, buildings, walls, enclosures, pavilions, pillars, columns.

And on top of them: gods, demons, animals, monsters, all in stone, all gazing down at him, all with fixed stares, all carved, their gestures petrified. A sculptor's hell or a sculptor's heaven. You could choose either. Or perhaps, as everything here, they were inextricably woven together. He returned to write, to write a little.

Things like:

From there you can carve the defying lines, the defining lines, which will become the outside opening.

Or:

An island is a circle. Even when it is uneven it is a contained universe, which is what a circle is. A room is an island. Perhaps an island is an enclosure in time. A cave. A pause. A circle. A sculpture. A dice thrown on the blue felt of the orb.

The writer dined alone. His friend had not yet arrived. Rain started as if switched on. *A circle is open only to its own inside.* Had the sculptor said that? The second one could not remember. Or at least, not with the irritating precision the sculptor demanded.

He hated his writing. But he continued. What else could he do? The sculptor waited for a text; the gallery where the dice were to be exhibited was also waiting. Had he lost his touch? He remembered the phrase the sculptor had said:

"I really don't know what I am looking for."

The limestone dice, while obeying its own geometrical explorations, were camel-colored figures, he thought, that could be used to tempt the extremely ancient ways of fortune. This soft astragalos (weighing between thirty and forty kilos) would come in handy for a giant like the one who carved the Elephant's Cave (Goa Raja) with his fingers in that sweaty boulder.

An image from a previous eastward voyage came to him. In Kung Tse's hometown, Qufu, near the sacred T'aishan mountain, there are pillars and pillars of black stone, turtles and dragons of stone, and it is said that as not to arouse the wrath of the gods, or, equally dangerous, the Son of Heaven's envy, each perfect pillar has a flaw, an intentional error, a doubt. Was doubt a gift? Were mistakes something to be cherished? Inroads?

These dice are carved to their core by laws. These enclosures are voids thrown into matter. Carving as writing time in stone (following the map of the implosion of themselves). The continuous line defines the enclosure which is a circle. In collapsing there is a point of inner completion.

It had rained, and his friend arrived wet, tired, and happy. The writer felt, all of a sudden, tenderness. Yes, even in stone, a soul. His phone whistled—the sculptor had sent him a message—it was a picture of his feet, comfortably set atop the table, where the heavy dice rested. All was well.

On the road, 05. 03. 18

