

Bearing Witness

A study of shadows, dreams, and tales

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Abstract

This paper tries to locate (and in the process, perhaps, create) a space for a particular kind of entity, formulated here, as the witness. The unfolding occurs through looking, in particular, at art installations by Mounir Fatmi, and particular moments in three movies from Andrei Tarkovsky's oeuvre. However, what also comes to the fore, is the conceptualisation of 'narratives', primarily in the working out of the multifarious ways in which they (narratives) seek to (re-/)create, not only 'events' or the spaces of/for occurrences themselves, but also the mediums which, in the process of communicating/translating 'meaning', are transformed themselves. Following which the question emerges: where does one then begin to look for the witness?

Keywords

Ruins; sight; telling; witness; September 11; storyteller; narratives.

Reality and its Shadow

The planes can be seen as moving across the skyline towards the towers – through the many skylines onwards to the many towers moving through and through vision till each vision stops at the moment of the crash; the first crash, followed by the second. Through fire and smoke, vision trying to readjust, to reframe thought, to try and relay understanding to the sensitivities of the onlookers. Through hands held high, and screens left flat (in the truest sense), the towers crumbling, one after the other, move space towards a ruthless anonymity that keeps attacking the onlookers, who keep demanding reality to peek past the absence that is now so hauntingly clear. And as the smoke begins to clear out after hours and hours of fabricating forms in the formless with eyes that still seek the past, two shadows emerge as one to create presence, in place of – now – infinite absence.

ILLEGIBLE this

world. Everything doubled.

Staunch clocks

confirm the split hour,

hoarsely.

You, clamped in your depths,

climb out of yourself

for ever. (Celan 2001; 56)

Time is split, time, in its unseen insanity, is seen as an old man spinning in circles holding his own hand, dancing to no music we can say we heard. These words move towards representations, for they seem to tell a story.

Does not the commerce with the obscure, as a totally independent ontological event, describe categories irreducible to those of cognition? We should like to show this event in art. Art does not know a particular type of reality; it contrasts with knowledge. It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow. (Levinas, 1987; 3)

Moving in the gap between knowing and the space that Levinas calls ‘the meanwhile’, there seems to exist yet another space, a space of the *witness*. For now however, this witness hides behind representations, waiting in the shadowy corners of the side stage curtains, knowing full well of its inability to ever take center-stage, for if the witness ever truly comes under the spotlight, the stage as we know it, will change forever.

Can we save ourselves from Manhattan?

In 2003, Mounir Fatmi began a series of questionings through his *Save Manhattan* series, and over the course of the three installations (2004, 2005, and 2007) continued with his exploration of the various aspects of the September 11 attacks. In *Save Manhattan 01*, Fatmi recreates the skyline using a ‘variety of books all of which were written following the events of September 11th, except for the two copies of the Koran... (creating) the spectral image of the twin towers.’¹

¹ As taken from – mounirfatmi.com.



Fig. 1. *Save Manhattan 01*

There is a light that falls sharply on the words that are bound together in the shape of a city. It is the viewer, as he crosses the various sides of the white block, who becomes part of the viewing itself. The skyline moves from person to person, shape to shape, always transforming depending on who participates, but just like the shadow of a city (seemingly) locked in space and time, it returns to the intimate rhythm that it plays in the vision of the first sight of (the) everyday. This shadow in fact, attempts at rewriting history from the place of that very misinterpretation that creates and destroys histories on a daily basis. This shadow tries to voice the memories locked in the architecture of a city - the skyline of the everyday that was rent apart by the two self loathing missiles that ruptured the distance between intimacy and intimate spaces seemingly (at the time) forever.

Berger's Manhattan finds a parallel across time, with his Hiroshima –

The immediate correspondences between the two events include a fireball descending without warning from a clear sky, both attacks being timed to coincide with the civilians

of the targeted city going to work in the morning, with the shops opening, with children in school preparing their lessons. A similar reduction to ashes, with bodies flung through the air, becoming debris. A comparable incredulity and chaos provoked by a new weapon of destruction being used for the first time – the A bomb sixty years ago, and a civil airliner last autumn. Everywhere at the epicenter, on everything and every body, a thick pall of dust. (2008; 43)

The shadowy forms of the people returning to dust seemed to have left an echo – a shadow – on the walls of the ruins of the city of Hiroshima. The shadows of the twin towers, however, cast long unforgiving shadows on the walls of the city of Manhattan, reflected on the walls of the minds of the victims’ families – forever doubling themselves behind the everyday of the unheard, unseen, and the un-thought of.



Fig. 2. *Save Manhattan 02*

In *Save Manhattan 02* empty VHS tapes stacked on top of a white counter try to recreate the lost Manhattan skyline once again, this time trying to ‘evoke a moment of silence surrounding all of the chaos which was magnified on every TV station and newspaper around the world.’²

Manhattan, like a lost story being retold by every person you encounter begins to sound out vowels of the past – mouths metamorphosing. Memory seems to have altered the image to serve memory’s needs. Sontag’s words about reconciliation echo through these words, resonating past the silence(s) of this particular work, putting forward questions regarding the impossibility of understanding the event itself.³ These hands stop typing, and try to listen.

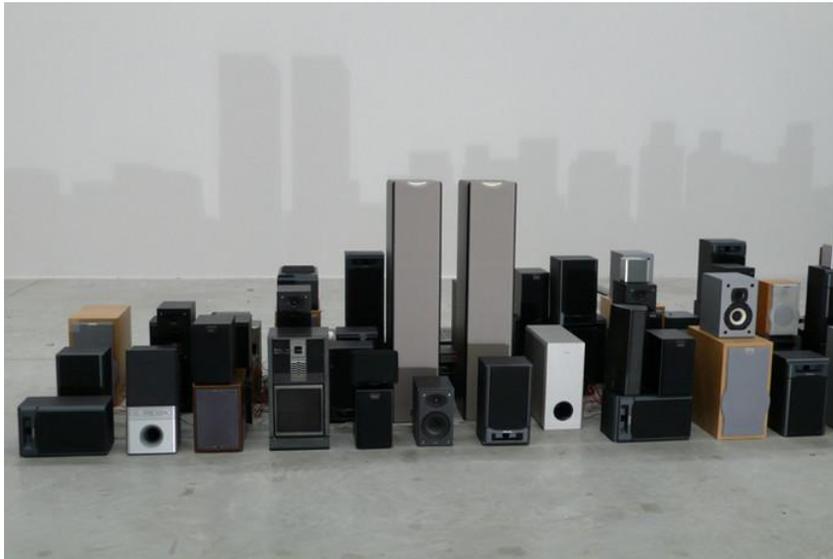


Fig. 3. *Save Manhattan 03: Sound Architecture*

The city seems to recreate itself and the event with sounds that speak in the voice of the city. With various noises – the blaring of the car horn, screeching tires, etc. – looped with sounds of car crashes, and ‘fictional sounds of explosions... extracted from dozens of Hollywood

² Ibid.

³ ‘To reconcile, it is necessary that memory be faulty and limited.’ (Sontag, 2003; 90).

blockbuster movies’, *Save Manhattan 03* tries to recreate the ‘strong image of New York City’. ‘It presents the city as if it were a body that breathes, that lives, that suffers and that which is capable of resisting even the most catastrophic events.’⁴ In temporal terms, the sounds still acknowledge the September 11 attacks. It, of course, means that it has no way to avoid it. In fact, these particular sounds realise New York because of the attacks themselves. It is a strange lingering sensation that fills clocks in New York now. It almost seems as if the clocks restarted after stopping on one particular day – creating yet another rupture in the measurement of time in the majority of the world. It is almost as if language itself broke with the fall of the twin towers, with September 11, 2001 becoming ‘9/11’; with its constant repetition moving in two very separate (but not entirely disconnected) directions – one where the repetition of ‘9/11’ has almost created an empty phraseology, and the other where events ‘post-9/11’ somehow take up their stature from inevitable comparisons to it.⁵

We are talking about a trauma, and thus an event, whose temporality proceeds neither from the now that is present nor from the present that is past but from an im-presentable to come (*a venir*). A weapon wounds and leaves forever open an unconscious scar; but this weapon is terrifying because it comes from the to-come, from the future, a future so radically to come that it resists even the grammar of the future anterior. (Derrida 2004; 97)

There is a space, however, that, although signaled to at the beginning of this paper, has not been elaborated on so far - almost as if there was no other moment that this space could emerge from without the narration of the events that, perhaps, engendered it – a space of hope.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ A mind being unable to shake off the image of a second tower of Babel falling.

The story of little karyatide

There was once a sphere that stood in front of the World Trade Center in New York City. *Kugelkaryatide* was its name, commonly known as *The Sphere*. It was designed by the German sculptor Fritz Koenig commissioned specifically to stand in front of the twin towers upon completion at the grand opening, and there it stood for years and years till one day catastrophe struck. The towers, it stood in front of, were attacked by two flying structures it later found out were called planes. Though fascinated on finding out that some metallic structures could fly and transport other things, it was very saddened to hear that there seemed to have been lots of innocent people on board who died along with the thousands in the buildings themselves. The Sphere could not make any sense of what seemed to be happening and before it knew one bolt from another, the towers started to crumble, piece by piece falling on top of little karyatide who was shocked at the fact that it could do nothing to stop what was happening. You see, little karyatide was very proud of its lineage. It came from a long line of Greek sculptures, which seemed to have been named after an actual group of people who lived in an ancient town in Greece. These sculptures Koenig told it, used to be sculpted on top of various large blocks of stone which were then used as pillars to hold up ancient buildings, some of which could still be seen in modern day Greece and several museums around the world. It was, in fact, one of little karyatide's dreams to visit its ancestors one day, but alas that particular day, it could do nothing but watch the towers slowly burn and then eventually collapse, mostly on top of it. For hours and hours it stood like that under the rubble it could not understand, for it had only ever seen the towers from the outside. Eventually, after a considerable amount of time had passed a sudden light broke through the rubble. It seemed that there were people trying to clear the space out. It

wanted to express its gratitude to the good people but every person it saw seemed to be really sad. It was only when most of the rubble around it had cleared and people began to realise it was it, for you know, most of little karyatide's parts had been damaged, did people start getting a little less sad. It seemed to give people some form of happiness for some strange reason. It didn't understand that yet, since it had never evoked this kind of reaction in people before. Soon enough though, some people with hard hats on came and dismantled little karyatide and put it in storage. Though it felt lonely at first, being in more parts than one after a long time, it felt like an even littler karyatide being created by Koenig again. Soon news came of Fritz' refusal to put little karyatide together again. It didn't understand why, seeing that it was enough to be put together again. A lot of time passed and one day the magical thing happened. People, once again happy to see it, put it together again, this time, however, taking it to a new place very different from where it stood before. This new place was called Battery Park, and it was located near Hope Garden. These were names it had heard before only in passing. After it was established there, it wanted to ask the people who came to see it about what happened to its beloved twin towers. It was still guilty about not being able to, like the caryatids of old, hold up the towers and prevent them from falling. However, the people who came to see it now seemed to be holding flaming sticks of wax and other things with the towers' image on it. They were always crying, or really close to it when they came to see it, but on seeing little karyatide they seemed to light up like the flaming sticks they would hold, and that is when little karyatide realised its role once and for all. It wasn't here to support the towers, but the people of the city themselves. It was then that little karyatide became *The Sphere* that survived.

News bulletin

This just in:

Today, Monday, late afternoon, while the crane was trying to move The Sphere from Battery Park, it seems that the crane operator suffered a mild cardiac arrest and passed out due to the result of the attack, and the sculpture, already battered due to the events of 9/11, was dropped from a height of 25 feet. The sculpture in question seems to have rolled away, and is currently missing. There were several eye witnesses who saw the event take place, but none, but one, seem to be open for comment. One, Mr. Peter Andrews claims that he saw The Sphere rolling down the street. Mr. Andrews reported – “You wouldn’t believe it if you saw it happening before your own eyes! You know, like the sphere right? It was like rolling, but only on the shadows on the street, you know what I mean? You know! Like, of the houses on the street. It was only rolling on the shadows; it almost seemed to be jumping, as it rolled, from one shadow to another. Man, it was some trippy shit. And that ain’t even the end of it. The police don’t believe me, but someone out there might, so I’m a tell you. So as the sphere rolled down the shadowy street, it was moving really fast towards these Brass doors at the end of the street. Man, I ain’t even seen these doors before in my life! They were all unrepaired, you know what I mean? They looked like ruins is what I’m saying. So anyway, the sphere just rolled through the half open brass doors. There was so much darkness behind the door man, like pitch black, you know what I mean? I swear it was almost as if the darkness swallowed the sphere whole, like a capsule. I got so scared man. I don’t really know why! I just got the hell out of there.”

No one has come forward on the whereabouts of the beloved sculpture, and the police seem unable to analyse the situation at hand. Furthermore, the sole testimony of Mr. Andrews is under

suspicion as neither the ruins, nor the ‘brass door’ have been seen in the locality. ... On gaining consciousness the crane operator seemed to be suffering from some acute form of amnesia. He doesn’t seem to remember any of the events of the past day, and on being further questioned, he refused to see his role in the catastrophe arguing against the point of why anyone would even try to move The Sphere. It seems he doesn’t remember. It seems he never did.

The Witness

When, as we say, we come to our senses and reflect on ourselves, we come back to ourselves from things *without ever abandoning* our stay among things.
(Heidegger, 2012; 252)

If one were to give an account of all the doors one has closed and opened, of all the doors one would like to re-open one would have to tell the story of one’s entire life.
(Bachelard, 1994; 224)

Several moments, in *Ivan’s Childhood*, *Mirror*, and *Nostalghia*, will be taken up in this section. The language one must adopt – adapt to – here, is that of dreams.

*

Eyes. They could belong to anyone. They are Ivan. They are his childhood. Is he a *witness*? It's too soon to tell.



Fig. 4. Still from the opening shot of *Ivan's Childhood*.

Spider web. One we tend to associate with the house, his eyes directing. Could this direction be leading towards somewhere in particular? The spider web is key. It signals towards the unkempt house, or perhaps the forgotten one, with the unused corner; the one corner that always escapes sight. It is here that the journey begins, but it is also here that sight, itself, begins, leading towards the half open door.



Fig. 5. Stills from *Ivan's Childhood*.

Ivan, having attempted at escaping the fate that awaited him (to go to a military school), while simultaneously forever trying to escape his past, finds himself at a war torn village – site of the ruins of a house, and what appears to be madness.

The man seems to be looking for something.

“I lost a nail.”

A nail, to try to fix the house that once was? A nail, to try and use as a divining rod to the past?

No, merely to frame it.

“Where’s your ma? Alive?”

Why are you alone? Why should anyone be?

“A Nazi shot my old woman too.”

There is no answer.

All that remains are the remains of the past, of a house that once was, the fireplace that survived, and the door – still unhinged, still inviting the past to come knock and wait for an answer.

Ivan is not Borges. He may have encountered his older self, but there is no recognition, since there was never going to be a future self for Ivan in this particular reality. Ivan caught in an inescapable space - of having witnessed, of having experienced - all he encounters is infinite sadness.

“O Lord, will this ever end?”

The movie ends with Ivan free from this earthly realm. Free to relive – regain – his lost childhood.

But will it be freedom for the witness?

He falls towards recollection. We move towards memory. The butterfly leads towards mirrors.



Fig. 6. Stills from *Mirror*.

The first still is the moment in the film where Alexei, unable for some reason to open the door, walks away, leaving his shadow (reflected on the door) to trail after him. In the very next scene, the door opens seemingly on its own accord to reveal his mother, storing potatoes, and the dog, which walks out the now open door. The second still begins the sequence of the recollected Alexei opening a door and walking through it to a room full of curtains, as a gust of wind seems to spectrally charge them only for him to disappear amidst them. He reappears soon after, reflected in a mirror drinking milk from a glass jug.

The screen changes as the eyes do. Alexei tries to reach past the experience of *déjà vu*, and tries to walk through the door, only to be returned to another, at another given instance somewhere in between recollection and dreaming, where the landscape of reflections emerge from the unifying/separating darkness of memory. Alexei seems to be moving towards the space of the *witness*.

As Arseniy tells:

...Live in the house – and the house will stand.

I will call up any century,

Go into it and build myself a house. ...

I only need my immortality

For my blood to go on flowing from age to age.

I would readily pay with my life

For a safe place with constant warmth

Were it not that life's flying needle

Leads me on through the world like a thread.⁶



Fig. 7. Stills from *Nostalghia*.

These moments take place in the film *Nostalghia* after Andrei has entered the house of Domenico, an already contested site of/for madness between the past and the elusive present.

⁶ Extract from 'Life, Life', written by Arseniy Tarkovsky, translated by Kitty Hunter-Blair, and quoted in *Sculpting in Time*.

Opening the closed doors, Andrei looks on towards the two landscapes – one that is within the boundaries of the house, and the other outside the open window – one flowing into the other.

Eyes, again. Reaching out of the screen beyond the landscape they seemed to have viewed. Eyes that seem to be penetrating through dreams, past recollection into the very essence that binds the two, to the very fabric of memory.

*

This is the door that seems to have led to an almost primordial memory, of the first witnessing, of the first instance of survival, framing the past before it became the always-already past – before the rupture of time itself, and this is where the reconstruction of the event must begin. The movement of these particular moments - travelling from Ivan, to Alexei, and finally to Andrei - being made of necessity, to elucidate the point (or rather several points) where each come(s) close to becoming the witness. What is left out of this oneiric journey, so to speak, is everything else – both within the stories they are part of, and especially the life they become a part of outside of the space of the screen. In that each of them becomes a witness, lies that very essence of witnessing that is left out of regular discourse on dislocation, and news articles on survivors – that of the experience of witnessing, whether it be a singular ‘event’ or a set of ‘events’ comprising the violence of the everyday. But what do these images of houses, eyes, and doors lead towards?

Image is being piled on top of image, as the cycle repeats itself; the oneirism splitting through the diegetic – the very essence of diegesis. How does one break this cycle?

But is he who opens the door and he who closes it the same being? (Bachelard 224)

The only way, in the current line of reading/dreaming/analysis is for the *witness* himself to change.⁷ But having witnessed what could he possibly become beyond the painful complexes he is a part of? The answer lies in the telling itself.

Constructing the House

The violence of the everyday is a violence of absence. Working on presences in the mind, spatially wrenching while simultaneously placing you (whoever you are) in the forever-meaning producing space of subjectivity, where the stage is all set, and the actors have all played these parts before. The danger, however, lies in that very liminal space, somewhere in between, and yet with each set of feet firmly planted in each space - of the inside (the dramatic ‘aside’), and the outside (the stage itself); the dangerousness *lying* (in each sense of the word) in the idea of something sinister looking at once inwards/outwards simultaneously. This moment of recognition becoming, once again, a moment of displacement (re-placement?) into the before – the before that comes after the retelling of/through memories – another form memorialisation can take/has taken. The character that has seemingly been (forcefully?) drawn out of the screens beyond the visible, has already taken shape as being the *witness*. The witness, claiming the singular, ‘the’ rather than the anonymous ‘a’; moving this very singularity into the ipseity of, not the universal, for witnessing is not a universal phenomena, but the essential – in that the kernel of possibility lies within each spectator. This paper has so far, through an abstract meandering, tried to place the moments of possible recognition into movements concerning walking through

⁷ The *Witness* is a gender neutral category, given a distinctive masculine sense in this place for sake of continuity with the imagery so far. This too shall be ruptured in the following sections.

visible thresholds leaning firmly onto the Bachelardian language of doors.⁸ The house has come up to become a repository of loss, while simultaneously providing the idea of inhabiting (somewhere in the vicinity of the Heideggerian notion of ‘dwelling’). Furthermore the house has moved through the space of the symbol, and has now reached the realm of the metaphor. Though, the next step within this paper should be to elaborate the transformation of the *witness* into a new category, it may be required to try and problematise the various theoretical movements involved in the construction of the house itself.

The experience of re-living through the construction (the one beyond the limits of remembrance itself):⁹

Having seen the construction (in the material sense) one would again be caught between the dialectics of one space being replaced by another. In the Heideggerian sense, one already inhabits that essence of space when thinking of it, and is therefore, perhaps, closer to the site than one who travels past it every day.

In case of such violent forms of spatial destruction, the essence of inhabiting itself is affected. Witnessing thus is an act of marking; an act of marking space as much as it is a creating/destroying of it. Could they be seen as one and the same thing, perhaps taking place

⁸ Complete recognition would be the witness recognizing himself as being one. But this paper has pushed forward the idea that, that moment, perhaps, would occur in a less visible, and hence less obvious, way; recognition lying within the possibility of that very recognition.

⁹ As an extreme example let’s continue with the case of the twin towers. The generation who lived through the construction of the original World Trade Center would have as recollection two (often overlapping) layers within memory itself, that of the space before the towers were built, and the space inhabited afterwards, thus changing not only their conception of the city skyline, but of their essential idea of inhabiting itself. If the same generation witnessed the September 11 attacks, memory – or rather the recollection of space – would be split another time. And so on. The paper, at this point is trying to focus on the essence of this relocation-destruction nexus at the site of spatial anchorage itself.

simultaneously? Creating, destroying, and marking space in that very instance of violence – in the experience of the event.

*

This paper began with speaking of the visual fragmentation of a site (the twin towers) elaborated through three art installations, moving towards the site of resistance – of survival; following which, we were led towards the space of dreams, where we encountered the remains of the site of the event itself – what escaped the attempts at escape. At this point one thing became clear – something had remained, hidden in plain sight, a place where one looks only towards the closing, when objects leap out and confront the spectator, pushing him towards becoming the witness, and beyond.

With the construction of the house almost complete, the circle begins to form itself, and all that is left to do is to tell.

Tell it to the Walls

The art of losing isn't hard to master

So many things seem filled with the intent

To be lost that their loss is no disaster... (Bishop 2008, p.166)

The violent event pushes the witness into a state of 'seeing', where, as Bataille has demonstrated, 'it seems that the desire to see is stronger than horror or disgust' (Formless 43). But the desire to

‘tell’ must emerge as something even stronger – engendered from that very place of ‘horror’ and ‘disgust’, erupting from a place between that of desire, and un-desire. Having constructed the house, this is where the witness must tear the walls down, reversing the process that he/she had no agency in, had no control over, and was thus controlled by; but here, breaking down the walls of the house (never just of the past) in order to create rubble. Rubble, to clear out, and sift through, in order to (re-)build space, in order to move past the event, the need to reconstruct the site of violence from another direction, with a different set of tools – that of the ‘tale’. For the witness must tell. And it is only at that moment when, having completed the act of ‘telling’, does the *witness* transform into the *storyteller* creating agency from within silences.

There was once a lady who lived with her three sons. Over time she got each of them married. So now she lived with her three sons and three daughters-in-law, and for a period of time they all lived happily together. Soon enough the eldest daughter-in-law began to tease the now elderly mother-in-law for her lack of mobility around the house, and the relationship between the two began to sour. The mother, not knowing what to do would complain to her eldest son, who would in turn blow off the whole matter as petty household squabble. On hearing about the complaint, the eldest daughter-in-law would then begin an even more ferocious onslaught of insults on to the terrified mother-in-law. Each time the mother-in-law was scolded, she would overeat in order to make herself feel better, due to which she started gaining weight. Noting this immense weight gain in her mother-in-law, the wife of her eldest son now found new ammunition against her, and so this vicious cycle continued. The mother of the three sons wanted to escape, to go away somewhere but the opportunity to do so would never come around. Day in, day out she, faced with a battery of abuse regarding her weight, would eat more, and thus get even fatter. One day, however, she woke up to find herself alone at home. All three sons had taken their respective

wives out for a party, thus leaving the elderly lady to her own devices. This was the last straw. After eating her morning meal, she decided to walk out of the house and never come back again. As she left the house, she had no idea where she was going, and all she could think about were the torments she was faced with on a daily basis. Well, no more! She thought. When she had walked quite a good distance, she came across an old abandoned house in a state of ruin. She proceeded to go inside and discovered that no one was there. In fact, from the state of dilapidation it was in, she was certain that no one had lived there for several decades. At the site of the house, she felt a great upsurge of anger towards her eldest son, his wife, and her other daughters-in-law. Seeing that no one was there, she began to let out her anger towards her youngest son's wife by screaming at the top of her lungs at the south wall of the house. To her great surprise, the moment she was done, the wall collapsed. She then proceeded to rant against her middle son's wife on the east wall, and the moment she was finished, that wall collapsed as well. This went on, till she reached the wall holding up the front of the house, where she started to complain about her worst enemy – the eldest daughter-in-law. By now she was so tired, that she was complaining in whispers to the wall. But the moment she exhausted her arsenal of abuses, the wall came down, thus collapsing the house in its entirety. Having done this, the elderly lady felt infinitely better, finding all her anger dissipated with the crumbling of the house itself. Even more surprising to her, was when she looked down at herself to find that all the extra weight she had gained over the years had disappeared. Thus, happy and satisfied, the mother of the three sons started to walk back home.¹⁰

¹⁰ This is a retelling of a folktale that Ramanujan once recorded. I believe that this retelling changes many things, thus recreating, and therefore placing itself in the tradition of storytelling itself.

Bio-note

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