

THREAT OF DESIRE



CREDITS

Cover art by Jessie Li

Find more of Jessie's art at sythia.myportfolio.com

Writing by Hannah Lim

Find more of Hannah's writing at hannahs.garden

Lately I have been thinking a lot about why I write or make art, and in pursuit of an answer I interviewed a weaver who opened shop recently a few blocks south of our apartment. We became friends one day while I was walking home from my guitar lesson, and he invited me back to his studio so I could write a family history for his website. During the interview, he commented on my little tits.

It has since been edited quite a bit for my own publication and no longer resembles the original work. Names have been altered for anonymity.

I asked Mehmet Khosaim why he weaves, and he explains that his name is Weaver. His great great grandfather took the surname Khosaim (meaning weaver, or string puller) when he moved to Aleppo, Syria many years ago from Urfa (a city in what is now Turkey).

In Aleppo, Mehmet's grandfather wove on a two-beam pit loom with foundations deep in the ground to keep the loom cool and steady; this helps retain moisture in the threads. This is the very loom that injured Mehmet's grandfather (not fatally, but ruinously), rendering him unable to work, and Mehmet's father, Abdulkader, was thus forced to quit school and begin weaving to support his father and younger brother at the age of seven years old. Abdulkader, a child, and a craftsman, struggled for a long time in Aleppo, exploited by the local merchants who undercut his prices and resold his weavings at huge markups. Children are easy to exploit, and poor children even more so. As Mehmet tells me this part of the story I can see him becoming agitated at the injustice of this memory that doesn't belong to him, and in that moment I hated the merchants too. Strange how certain kinds of pain can be inherited across time and space, or maybe everyone in the world can understand this injustice. As James Baldwin writes

in *No Name In The Street*: "It is a very rare man who does not victimize the helpless."

Abdulkader struggled like this for a long time before a generous stranger offered him a small spot in his shop to sell his art directly. This changed the trajectory of his family, Mehmet explains thoughtfully. I can see that he himself has been told the story of the generous stranger many times (probably by his father) and he remembered his name, though I forgot to write it down. Abdulkader worked his way eventually to vending at the invitation of the Syrian government at the Khan Al-Shuna, an Aleppo cultural heritage site and market, with its roots tracing back to 1536 AD.

Mehmet himself began weaving at 11 years old. He is the latest member of a 300 year-old family tradition of Syrian weaving. He was taught to weave by his father, who was taught to weave by *his* father, on and on, back and back to a father older than he remembers. (He did not show me the cowhide enumerating 300 years of lineage, but we will take his word for it!) For the last 20 years, he had travelled constantly weaving and doing business in Dubai, Turkey, Syria, and around the states. In his newly minted Williamsburg studio, Mehmet shows me a skirt

constructed with no stitches, only knots – all continuous on a round loom he made with wood and nails. He seems amused that I don't appreciate his skirt, but I'm quietly amazed by the sculpture of the loom he has made.

I asked Mehmet why he weaves, and he explains that according to narrations of Islam, God taught the Prophet Inok (in Arabic, Idrīs) to weave and sew, gifting humanity with the loom. At some point during the interview, he asks why I write, and if I believe in a God. I tell him that I don't believe in a God anymore, and we spoke about this for a long time. He tells me that these days he has not felt comfortable going to the mosque to pray because in New York City, there are rumors that mosques are monitored by ICE, which really would not surprise anyone given the NYPD Muslim surveillance lawsuit and settlement in 2012, and again in 2018. As we speak, he works on another commission, inspired by shapes of nature, where he has added a bit of red when he was angry. The ropes crest and fall across his loom like waves, and his hands never stop moving while we talk.

I thought about Mehmet's grandfather who was injured by his own loom. I thought about how he must have felt, lamed by his

own craft, unable to perform the work culminating hundreds of years of knowledge passed hand to hand. I thought about Mehmet's father betrayed over and over, as he worked to feed his own father, relying for survival on the generosity of strangers (a scarce thing, and fickle still where it does exist). He was just a child.

In his studio, telling me this story, Mehmet holds up a pink and white woven bag, and lights a fire against it, showing that the wool will not burn. It is fire resistant because the tight loops protect the fibers— they are stronger woven. And, he continues, our muscles are fiber, stronger woven too. Modern planes are made of woven carbon fiber, and in fact everything is made strong — *every material transcends its endemic weakness* — when it is woven.

I thought about these things as Mehmet looked at my body through my clothes. He tells me that he feels far from God these days, and that he has had trouble lusting outside of marriage, and that he especially feels this way when he sees girls like me on the street wearing shorts like mine. He explains that one of his weaving students danced suggestively for him one day, and though she was beautiful, she made him deeply

uncomfortable. Besides, she wasn't his type. He likes little breasts, he says, "like you." He cannot even go to the mosque to pray about this, he says quietly, still weaving, still working. At this point in the afternoon, I am starting to notice that we are alone together, and just as I was wondering when to leave, his register-keeper Aldo comes wandering down with a plate of food for him. They both offer me a plate too.

They met in Texas at a craft-fair where Aldo's girlfriend was selling candles and Mehmet his weavings. They went on a cross country road trip, looking for the best place to settle together and open a business. I didn't catch the details of their friendship, but I can see by the way they laugh that they share something lovely.

I often wish I was a man so that I could coexist with men like Mehmet without the complications of desire. I'm grateful to have met him, and regret that we can't be friends, but something inside of me is uneasy to be alone with him, and so much is lost to desire in this way. I had originally invited another friend to come sit in during the interview, partly because I thought the two might get along, but partly because men tend to behave themselves among each other. I was

hoping that Mehmet might assume he was my boyfriend, and that the question of desire would dissolve peacefully. One interesting thing about dating men is that it protects you from other men, but the engagement of loving men, of course, encourages and legitimizes this patronizing protection. Thus loving men is a kind of lifelong, recursive, self-engendering threat, and dating men is sometimes a self-defense exercise.

I am always haunted by this – the threat posed by desire. It is an iteration of the universal threat garnered by wielding any amount of power, however the power gained by *being desired* is unstable. It cannot be harnessed or controlled by the desired object, and is granted to me by a reductive evaluation of my self (often my body) down to an object of wanting, or in other words, something that can be taken (for in capitalism, we grow to understand things we want as things we shall have).

Naturally, one confronts this question: what can be taken from me? All women think of one answer instinctively: sex.

The male obsession with desirability as a source of female power fails to understand this: desire is a threat. We can do our best to take control of this ebbing, flowing, humiliating power, and wear low-cut tops to harness desirability and call it

“empowerment”, but then we are still dressing ourselves for the fight. Empowered? Over what? What requires us to dress for power? Armor is still worn for the enemy. Under hetero-patriarchy, when are women actually free to understand social relationships with men without the threat of desire?

Before the air became strange, I was learning so much about Mehmet, an accomplished artist, a devout Muslim, and a fascinating person. How often is it you can talk to someone who loves God about what that love means? How often does someone try to understand your love for God, even long after that love is over? I don’t really think I was in physical danger in his studio that day, but this is the insidious poison of desirability: I can’t know for sure. I cannot grant him the benefit of fair potential (for friendship, for artistic partnership, for innocent neighborly discourse) because of the poison pooling beneath.

But then, I still mourn this loss. What if I were to extend him a generosity of intention, and what if that act were to change the trajectory of our families so that my son knew Mehmet’s name all these years later? What if Mehmet is the friend I was supposed to make which would unlock my understanding of

my old God (now abandoned), and what if he was to heal my perception of desire? Do I take the risk? Do I award him this trust when such trust has betrayed me before? I am an artist after all. I should be learning from other artists.

Of course most men I know do not rape me, but the expected value theorem asks me to evaluate the potential of value lost when the low probability event occurs and I'm not sure how this weights the equation. For many readers, my thinking will strike them as alarmist – overly cautious due to some past trauma, the barking of a kicked dog. On the contrary, I believe my evaluation of danger is closer to truth. I believe that most people walk around everyday, unaware of how much danger they are in all the time. It is so easy for us to hurt one another brutally, ruinously, that we do it on accident. This precisely is the dominant defect of virtue – how frail it is, how quickly it can all come crumbling down. I believe most people underestimate what they owe each other and relent to thoughtless cruelty because they do not understand that they are able, in their small acts, to meaningfully erode the group contract of a fair, kind, respectful togetherness. Just ghost her, say something nasty in the heat of the moment, leave her hanging, because we do not understand how easily we break.

Because we do not think each gesture of negligence is enough to ruin, but as Joan Didion said, every day is all there is. So careless we have all become. Don't you know how thin the diaphonous membrane between a good and evil person?

Why then expend any effort building such weak, glass structures as trust? Why love at all? Just to watch each other take turns shattering? You felt the metaphor coming all along: we are woven in one another too. We love one another, we meet each other on the street, we smoke a cigarette together, we clumsily grope each others' bodies, we stumble through the dark, weak, idiotic, horrible, and all the while dragging behind us little red lines of fate that are braiding and tangling together. In his studio, it was precarious, yes, but now I have a chance to understand his overture in desire - divorced, frustrated by lust outside a marriage now over, unable even to safely ask refuge with his God. In the ways we forgive each other, and even wrong each other, we are ever strengthening in one another's warp and weft.

So why does Mehmet weave? He weaves to live. To support his family, like his father. To honor God and the prophet's gift, and 300 years of family tradition. He weaves to remember his

father. He weaves to spread the beauty of creation in a rapidly mechanizing world, which is moving so fast it does not even think to mourn the sterility it is creating in machine-art. He weaves to risk an effort of care even among that sterility. He weaves to make money. He weaves to express his anger. He weaves to teach others about beauty and the integrity of participating in its creation. He weaves to meet and understand his students. He weaves to strengthen those things that will burn alone, to tell stories, to relax, to play, even. He weaves to want, and to distract himself from the wanting. To live, and to protect himself from the living. He weaves to honor the gift of the stranger and to make sense of such humiliations like living at the mercy of random goodwill, and such dignities as dispensing goodwill too. He weaves because weaving is everything, and everything is weaving. Why does any artist create? I think, because he loves to, because he can, and finally, because he must.

