Learning to Remain

Mavi Hamali

I did not arrive in Scotland all at once. First there was London — a year of learning to exist in a city that did not know my name, but that offered, in its own impersonal way, the freedom of beginning again. Then Glasgow, where my husband's work took us, and where I gave birth to my daughter. Then, when she was six months old, we moved to Dumfries. Smaller. Quieter. The River Nith running through it, the hills visible from most streets, and gradually — though I could not yet see it — exactly the right size for a life to take root.

What I noticed most in those early years was not silence, but unfamiliar sound. There were sounds everywhere, but none of them carried accustomed memories. In Antakya, the city itself had a voice. You knew where you were without opening your eyes. In Dumfries, I had to keep orienting myself — but there was also something honest in that, in having to learn a place rather than simply inherit it. My daughter began to recognise the neighbours' voices before I did. She learned the names of the ducks on the Nith. I followed her lead, and slowly the unfamiliar started to become mine too. I began to understand that belonging is built through repetition and time, and that this is not a lesser form of it. Even as Dumfries grew familiar, Antakya remained — in the cadence of certain words, in the sounds I heard when I closed my eyes. It had not gone anywhere. I had simply stopped noticing how much I was still carrying it.

On the night of 6 February 2023, my brother called. An earthquake had struck while the city slept. I woke my husband. We turned on the news and began to understand the scale of it. For hours, we tried to reach family and friends in Antakya — one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities on earth, known to the ancient world as Antioch — and most of them, we could not. It is the place that formed my origin, carried within me in ways I had not understood until — in a single night — it was changed.

In the weeks that followed, I was physically present in Dumfries, but psychologically displaced. Grief created a condition of dual presence: one body in Scotland, another continuously returning to a place that no longer existed in the same form. It became a state of disorientation I could not resolve through language alone.

I turned to Ebru during this period. I had first encountered it briefly at university — the traditional Turkish practice of painting pigment on water — and I did not return to it as nostalgia, but as a need for a form of attention that could hold contradiction. The first time I stood at the tray again, water still and colours waiting, I remembered why it had stayed with me. You place pigment onto the surface and it spreads according to its own logic. You intervene with a stylus — the biz in Turkish (a word that in English slang happens to mean something excellent — perhaps that is fitting) — but you do not determine the outcome. Some colours expand rapidly; others resist and hold their edges. The process requires responsiveness rather than control. When the paper is laid onto the surface and lifted, the image is complete: fixed in material form, never reproducible, made in the space between hand and water and time. In grief, when so much had been removed from my agency, this felt less like making art and more like learning how to be present again.

When we returned to Dumfries after a month in Antakya — spent attempting to reach those who had survived and to make sense of what remained — we found that our neighbours had cut back the overgrown grass in our garden and planted daffodils. They told us, simply, that no matter what grief enters a life, spring returns. In that gesture, I began to understand belonging not as location, but as relation —

something practised and maintained, extended beyond presence. It exists in the neighbour who tends a garden while you are away, in the material that responds to your touch, in the acceptance that not everything can be controlled or held.

Amin Maalouf writes that every person is a place where many allegiances meet — that identity is not a single inheritance but a living sum of all that has shaped us. I think of that now when I work. Antakya is in my hands. Dumfries is out the window. The water holds both.

I now make Ebru in a small studio in Dumfries. Each work begins on water and is completed in the encounter between material and intervention. No two outcomes are ever the same. I am still learning to remain here — in this moment, in this practice, in this life.

About the Author

Mavi Hamali is a Turkish-born artist based in Dumfries, Scotland, working primarily with Ebru — the traditional practice of painting on water. Her practice explores displacement, memory, material process and forms of belonging shaped through migration and lived experience. Through Ebru, she investigates the relationship between control and unpredictability, using water-based processes to reflect on grief, transformation and relational care.

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