



# Closer to Myself

*Speaking with* **Dafna Rehaviah**  
*about the loss within migration  
and her anti-nationalist sentiment.*



Kimi Hanauer: In the summer of 2017, my mom, Dafna, and I took a trip together to Sedona, Arizona. My mom had wanted to go there for a long time because she thought the desert would remind her of home. On the trip, we would take walks alongside empty roads and in-between mountains. We also climbed a small mountain together. One day I watched her dig holes and arrange rocks in the ground; she was making a set of small memorials for my grandfather, her father, who had just passed away. What follows is a segment of a conversation we had while on a walk.

Dafna Rehavia: This place brings me closer to myself, it reminds me of places I used to be in. I can't not feel a sense of loss when I think about us moving to the states, something that's finished and doesn't exist anymore.

But it's just an environment; aren't there other more meaningful things that you do have here?

It [the environment] is a big part of it; its memories, a type of sunlight and heat, its culture. Maybe I feel loss for parts of myself and it's hard to move forward.

The part of yourself that used to live in Tel Aviv?

I dreamt that I moved to the Dead Sea.

You can do that.

You say I can, but I can't really; I can't really live there for many reasons. And I would have to leave you all here, to be far from you and David [Dafna's partner].

*~I have no idea where we are going~*

Like, you make a decision and you move somewhere else, and when you make that decision you are losing something—losing a part of yourself.

Hole #1, stones, nails, paint, and ground, 2017, by Dafna Rehavia.





*~I think we are definitely lost~*

You need a lot of courage to really make a change like that, to dream beyond the circumstances that you have, and you need to know that it will awaken a lot of hurt in you.

*Did you know it would hurt?*

No, I didn't know it would hurt as much as it did.

*What did you think?*

I didn't really know, you never *really* know. You just make decisions, you make assumptions, you think it will be hard, but you don't really know what it will feel like. I didn't realize it would be so hard on you, my family. I didn't realize that when you move somewhere else so far, you become invisible, like, all of a sudden you are no one. I moved into a position where I didn't have a community, and I saw that you were all struggling with the same issues I was. I think we are still getting over it, all of us in our own ways.

*How does it [being an immigrant] show up for you in everyday life?*

I have this experience all the time, that I don't understand the nuances in conversation, cultural references, or shows on TV. It just gets boring. I just place much less importance on the social aspect of my life here because of that. Remember when you were in judo growing up? As long as you had a real connection with other people through judo, you felt good. You had a way to communicate with people; judo, for you, was the common language you could speak with Americans.

*~I think we need to walk another way; let's not get into the water here, it looks gross~*

Anyways, we used to have all sorts of rituals when you were little. Every morning, I would braid your hair, we'd make breakfast, and

Untitled (My Flag), rope and Israeli flag, 2015, by Dafna Rehaviv.





then we'd play a game. And today you still make games! I never thought of that. It was always so hard to get you to play a different game—I finally got you to play backgammon and then you started to beat me every time!

I miss the sea, maybe there used to be a sea here.... Remember our first apartment when we moved to the states? I wanted to make it a good experience for us, so I tried to have us pick out certain things together, like the little closet in your room. You liked your room, right?

Yeah, it was OK. It bothered me that you and dad didn't have a room really, just in the living room.

It was OK. You know we didn't really rent that apartment ourselves, one of your dad's students rented it for us. It's what we had and it was good enough. I started to look for other places, houses, but I just found them to be so foreign. I couldn't get used to the stairs—it was just really strange, the way the houses are laid out here. I don't know, I had to see so many houses just to get used to the idea of living in one. There's something that didn't feel right to me about living in one.

Was migrating worth the experience of loss that you had?

I felt like I lost my identity when we moved here. I suddenly realized I had to reinvent myself, I had to get my license to do therapy again, I had to go through all of these processes again just to get to where I already was with my career before we moved.

But we made a decision that was informed by certain things, by our circumstances. The Yitzhak Rabin assassination was a turning point for us, we lost hope in Israel's direction as a country. It became more and more right-wing and felt dangerous.

Being here, it pushed me to focus more on my work as an artist. I began to make work about loss. Here, I learned about American Jewry; I learned about their idea of "Israel" and how they feel

Hole #2, stones, nails, paint, and ground, 2017, by Dafna Rehavia.





like it belongs to them for some reason. I don't understand it; it drives me crazy. It seems like it's a fantasy for a lot of people that I've met. Some people even buy apartments there, go there for vacation, and even send their kids to the army! They don't see it [Israel] as it is in reality. They don't have the experience. I remember a neighbor in Pittsburgh had told me that his kids wanted to move to Israel, and he was happy with it. And I told him, "Don't you understand, they'll have to serve in the army?" And he said, "What's the problem?" He just didn't understand. We came here to change our circumstances, so our children could have more opportunities, to build a better life for you. We didn't want you to have to go through what we did and to go through the army, we didn't want to live in a constant conflict anymore.

Since we've left, Israel has become much more religious, much more radical. When we got out of Israel, it was during the Second Intifada. And since then, everything has just gotten more extreme. There wasn't a place for us there.

**Did moving here affect how you see Israel? Now that you are at more of a distance.**

I think it sharpened my resistance to the government and ongoing war, and that it sharpened my view of the bigger picture of what's going on. As long as Palestinians are living under the occupation of Israel, there will be violence and war. I think also, especially since we moved here, it sharpened my feelings of anti-nationalism. There's this need here to identity with a nation or a particular identity, and I just so don't feel that way. Especially now, since moving here, that I don't feel a sense of belonging to Americans, to American Jews, nor to Israelis I know. It shows in my artwork, I don't believe in nations. What is happening in the United States now is the opposite—there is a stronger nationalism going on. And it is violent. I understand people want to have an identity. I don't believe nationalism is a meaningful way of doing that.

*My American Flag, cardboard, fence, string, nails, rusted fabric, vinyl, 2017 by Dafna Rehavia.*

