The Scent of Heaven

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2026

Exegesis in support of practice-based Thesis
Master of Visual Arts
Auckland University of Technology

Abstract

This research investigates the conditions that enable imagination. Rather than understanding imagination as an individual capacity, my research argues that imagination depends on the conditions of survival. To imagine requires time, safety, nourishment, rest, and the ability to live beyond crisis. Working through ceramics, poetry, social practice, and the sofreh as both subject and methodology, this research asks how art can create these conditions for imagination to thrive. Through works including *damagh*, *canopy, Sobahneh*, I examine gathering, hospitality, and shared ritual as artistic practices that build relationships rather than simply producing objects. These works draw on my lived experience as an artist in diaspora, where cultural knowledge is carried through acts of care performed around the sofreh. This research proposes care as a form of living infrastructure. Rather than treating care as an outcome of art, I argue that care is the condition that makes art, culture, and collective life possible. The sofreh becomes both a methodology and a site through which nourishment, hospitality, and collective responsibility are practised, demonstrating how everyday acts of care can become forms of cultural survival and political resistance.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the Acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed

Leva Biyoughardalan

05.11.2026

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to my family, my mamani, baba, maman, my daies Azin and Ashkan, my Tiana and many khales.

Thank you to my cat, Sabzi

Thank you to my friends – Natalia, Carmel, Nina, Rosetta, ilish, Santiago, Savy P, Aria, Johnny, Jack, Georgia, Imy, Lee, Oliver.

Each person mentioned has touched some part of my creative process; their work as creative laborers is inspired and full of love.

Thank you to my supervisors - Fiona and Ziggy, you have expanded my language and, therefore, my world.[1]

Thank you to everyone who works at the AUT labs. ET, Sav, Joan, Matt. Harriet, Fleur, Winston, Greg, Taashi, Angus, Erika, Sophie, Joel, Claudia, Bronte, Mitch, Finn and last but not least Glenn, who reminded me that it was possible. Thank you. You have taught me what it means to surrender to your craft. I enjoyed every moment on levels three and seven. Thank you for believing in me, teaching me, and for your patience. I believed in myself because you all believed in me.

Shout-outs to my longtime mentors, Ian Thompson, Jack Tilson, and Krystal G.

Thank you to my pillars.

[1] Anat Biletzki and Anat Matar, "Ludwig Wittgenstein," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/wittgenstein/.



Figure I. Leva Kusari, *Gol (Damask Rose Garland),* 2025. Image by Camden Jackson

Preface

My Daie — uncle, father, brother, best friend — passed away unexpectedly halfway through this project.

Before he passed, I had been infusing beeswax candles with damask rose, inspired by traditional Persian tea, infused with rose and cardamom. I cast these roses in bronze, fifty-three in total: forty-eight for each year the Iranian regime had remained in power, with a few extras just in case. It was good that I made extras, because I was able to place one with him at his burial.

What I did not know then was that the damask rose is considered the scent of Heaven.

Rosewater is poured onto the grieving family and into the grave during burial rituals. That knowledge was not in the books I was reading; it wasn't taught to me at my mother's feet. I had to encounter it through grief itself. It was the smell of heaven at the funeral. The scent of heaven became an unknowing attachment to the divine before I had ever wished a loved one a safe journey there. I am still grieving. This work is born of loss and emerges from the comfort I feel toward this accidental spiritual connection that, like the rose, I, too, will return to this earth, maybe one day to the same soil where my ancestors are buried in Kurdistan.

With Daie's passing, my pillars of survival were crumbling, and I could no longer create. In hindsight, this experience deepened the question already underpinning this project: how do we live beyond survival in order to create and imagine? After losing him, I could not return to making without my grief shadowing me. Instead, I decided to invite my grief to rest.

My Daie was always so fond of my art. He understood the urgency to create. He would constantly send me videos of cats playing with pottery wheels. When I arrived at his house after his passing, my ceramics were scattered throughout his home: on the mantlepiece beside the damask candles I had gifted him during his last visit, a small vase on his office desk, and others lining the kitchen windowsill. I was everywhere in his house. Even though I did not see him every day, he saw me daily through the objects I had made.

* * *

In 1979, Iran shifted irrevocably. The Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, ruled with American backing while dissent was violently suppressed by SAVAK (Organisation of Intelligence and Security of the Country), Iran's secret police. Protests erupted across the country. When the Shah fled, Ayatollah Khomeini returned and consolidated power. The Islamic Republic was born.

For religious minorities, like the Bahá'í faith, life became perilous. Baha'is were arrested, tortured, and executed. Their properties were seized. Their places of worship were burned or reduced to rubble. My grandfather was dishonourably discharged from the army because of his faith. My grandmother's seamstress business collapsed because no one would have a Bahá'í mend their clothes. My uncles were beaten by their teachers, bullied by their classmates and were still told they were lucky to be educated. Baha'is were/are denied passports and deliberately isolated within their communities. The scapegoat for Iran's problems.

Politics is not abstract. It lives inside families. As a Kurdish Bahá'í, I carry a past where dignity and self-determination were denied, where faith itself became a reason to flee. My grandparents are Kurdish. My great-grandmother wore her traditional headdress until the day she died, passing her language, love, and inheritance to seven daughters and one son. If I watch the world from her eyes, she sees her Kurdistan dislocated and her Iran sour. She had to fight for the rights to speak her mother's tongue, her culture, and her faith. All within a single lifetime. Her existence was radical.

In the early 2000s, my family fled Iran on foot, crossing the Urmia mountains into Turkey seeking refuge from the Iranian regime. My grandmother, grandfather, mother, and two uncles were guided by smugglers through harsh terrain. The reasons to leave outweighed the fear of what would happen if they stayed. Loss is the only constant in this story. Without any promise of return, they filled their suitcases with as much home as they could carry and stepped into the unknown. The work I make is a responsibility I feel towards this story of survival: it is, after all, how my heart beats.

Preserving my family's history is an act of care. To rebuild albums, to create memories, we look back on photographs, not knowing how life crashes like a car. Preserving history within the frameworks of care. I want my audience to feel safe and seen by this work. I want them to recognise that the longing for home is a shared language.

My existence is born from survival and sacrifice, yet with all my freedom and autonomy, I have chosen a life in art. I am full of firsts. The first woman in my lineage to live alone at eighteen. The first woman in my family to be unmarried at the age of twenty-five. The first person in my family who does not speak Kurdish fluently; the first Kusari who has never been to Iran. When I am the first woman in my lineage to possess this much freedom, what do I do with it? Why did the women before me not have access to this life? Do I even belong anywhere? I have lost the physical line to Kurdistan; now it only runs through my blood. I possess the ability to do something as simple as go on a date with a cute boy or even a girl, without fearing imprisonment because of my sexuality or simply because I exist publicly.

Growing up, white people would tell me, “Your name is so pretty, where is it from?” before immediately butchering its two syllables repeatedly. Once, I corrected a high school teacher on the pronunciation of my name during attendance. Irritated, she replied, “I’m not in the mood today.” The only other brown person in the class and I exchanged a look of horror while everyone else remained glued to their laptops, unmoved by what had happened. Yet these same institutions praise you when you link your culture to your work. It is exhausting to exist within this contradiction. At least I am safe. I can criticise governments online without fearing that my family will disappear. I endured microaggressions, many before I was old enough to understand them, but I was still allowed to live.

Refugees and migrants are taught to be grateful they are not “back there.” This narrative is full of contradictions. I am only allowed to be a little Persian or otherwise expected to erase parts of myself to make white people comfortable. I am not allowed to fully claim Aotearoa as home because culturally I am imagined elsewhere, even though this is the only home I have ever known.

Most of the time, when I am asked to explain my identity, I say Iranian. Their eyes widen. A rehearsed smile appears, exposing polished teeth. They do not know Kurdistan, but they know “Eye-ran.”

They have seen it on the news.

* * *

Note on the positioning of "You", "We", and "I" in this text

Positions are not fixed. Throughout this thesis, "I", "you", and "we" move between one another. They address who is speaking and who is being spoken to. At different moments, I become you, you become we, and together we return to I. Like the objects I make, these pronouns are relational. They ask not only who is speaking, but how we might speak to one another with greater care.

***You** - "You" is not a label I place upon my reader as an other. Rather, it is an invitation.*

If you recognise yourself in this language—if you know what it is to translate yourself, to soften yourself, to make yourself more palatable to fit another person's imagined projection of who you are—then I am sorry. I write to you from the bottom of my heart. You do not need me to explain this experience because you have already lived it. If you do not recognise yourself in this language, then I ask something different of you. I ask you to imagine yourself in the shoes of someone who inhabits this shadow world. Someone whose daily existence is made up of cumulative, exhausting labour: translating themselves, justifying themselves, softening themselves, so that another person's imagination of who they are can remain intact. This is not an invitation to sympathies, but to imagine. Imagination, I believe, is one of the first acts of care.

***We** - "We" is not used here to erase differences or to suggest that everyone's experiences are the same. Instead, it names a collective responsibility.*

We are the society we currently inhabit. Whether we choose to look or not, there are still people dying beneath bombs that our taxes help fund. Looking away does not remove us from the systems we participate in. At the same time, "we" is also an aspiration. It is the version of ourselves that understands care as something practised rather than proclaimed. It is the part of us that takes the rubbish out of the car, that shows up to a nephew's terrible Friday night piano recital, not because we *have* to, but because we understand that someone's world becomes a little fuller through our presence. These acts of care and the larger political structures we inhabit are not separate. They are both ways of imagining how we might live together. "We" asks us to recognise our responsibility to one another without diminishing our differences. It is not a politics of sameness, but a politics of care.

***I** - "I" is where I locate myself within this research.*

I do not write from a place of neutrality. I write from my own experiences, my own uncertainties, and my own attempts to understand the world around me. As I write, I find myself questioning the language I have inherited. I have tried to use terms that resist colonial ways of naming the place I come from, only to realise that even familiar phrases, such as "Middle Eastern", carry colonial histories that position Europe as the center. Often, I find myself deleting these words and beginning again. "The Middle East" is far more than a geographical location. It is language, ritual, memory, food, poetry, grief, and home. Like my ceramic practice, this writing is an ongoing process of making and remaking. I am still learning. This exegesis does not present certainty but traces the ways my thinking shifts as I search for a language that can hold the complexity of my practice, my community, and myself.

"I" only exists because it speaks to "you." "We" exists because "I" and "you" choose responsibility towards one another." — *M*artin Buber, I and Thou, 1923.[2]

* * *

[2] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 5th ed., translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1950), 4.

Introduction

This research investigates the conditions that allow imagination to exist beyond survival. Through ceramics, poetry, social practice, and the sofreh as both subject and methodology, I explore how acts of care can create spaces of belonging within diaspora contexts. A sofreh means a spread on a cloth.[3] My favourite definition of a sofreh includes one with a beautiful spread of food and people sitting around it. It's a gathering like no other, one that only a heart of someone from Iran can rehearse.

My research began as a way to bridge the gap in the Iranian knowledge I continue to lose in the diaspora. I wanted to learn to cook Iranian food the traditional way, the way my grandmother does. I wanted to record the never-ending knowledge that sits between her ears, rooted in a fear that once she is gone, a lineage of cultural knowledge will disappear with her. I take inspiration from her sofreh—it is a place of resistance and rest. The sofreh is an ongoing performance, an inherited ritual passed through generations of women, and I acknowledge the labour that goes into this daily gesture. In my adult years, I find myself searching for spaces that emulate the feeling of being at my mamani's sofreh. The word itself sits in a language my friends do not understand; instead of explaining an experience, I want to share it with them.

This project and the artworks that emerge are made possible by the foundational pillars of survival laid by those before me. So much of what I have experienced makes me consider the responsibility that comes with inheriting the privilege to imagine. My research asks: how can imagination survive when survival itself is unevenly distributed, and what ethical responsibilities come with having the space to imagine at all?

In my family, creativity was never separate from everyday life; it was a way of surviving. My grandmother is the grandmother of all things creative. Her creativity was born from necessity, but it never felt deprived. Sometimes, I do not even know what I am missing because my grandmother's homemade version is better. She could have simply set the table, but instead, she made a sofreh. When I think of this gesture, I think of her care and love. What I once understood as an ordinary family meal, I now know as an act of labour, generosity, ritual, and devotion. It is this understanding of making—not as the production of objects, but as acts of care—that drives my project.

Through the repeated practice of the sofreh as a space to gather, inherited matriarchal knowledge becomes a form of homecoming for a place I have never set foot in. Learning how to prepare food comes with many stories. The stories I have heard are stories of survival. They leave me grateful and also full of guilt that I am here making pots in Auckland instead of fighting for my basic rights in Iran.

> What happens when knowledge is removed from its geographical context?
>
> When I bring potato salad to a barbecue instead of Salad Olivier?

Modes of survival shift. As a refugee, I am always negotiating assimilation against cultural preservation. Over time, I have found myself thinking less about preservation and more about the conditions that allow imagination and creative labour to exist at all. The women before me were literally dodging bombs and fighting for their human rights. To create, one must have space beyond survival. The sofreh became more than a tradition to preserve; I came to understand it as an infrastructure of care that provides pillars of rest and time. Only when there is plenty can we imagine.

My project shifted from wanting to preserve my cultural continuity to questioning the structures that allow imagination to thrive. I realised I needed a language that embodies survival and care. I began searching for this language, which led me to one of the most influential texts in my research, Omar El Akkad's *One Day, Everyone*

[3] Faegheh Shirazi, "The Sofreh: Comfort and Community among Women in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 2 (2005): 279–96, https://doi.org/10.1080/00210860500096345.

Will Have Always Been Against This (2025).[4] El Akkad's writing gave me a language for what it means to be othered, sharpened my understanding of the hierarchy of survival, and questioned the infrastructure that supports such an inequality for the benefit of a few. Equally, bell hooks offers additional insight into the world of the idea of 'The Other' and emphasises how home is a site of resistance.[5] Their thinking prompted a question that continues throughout this research:



Figure II. Leva Kusari, *The Family Photos*. 2025. Digitised scans of the remnants of my family photos that were ripped out of the photo albums because they took up too much space.

Who gets to survive, and who gets to live?

My work does not answer this very complex question; in fact, my work is my way of surviving. I am lucky enough to be an artist because my survival was paid for by those before me. The women in my family are artists, but they don't see their survival as a form of art. I am able to create because I stand on the backs of the women who fought hard enough for me not only to survive, but to live enough, and imagine enough, to make art.

The definition of survival in its simplest terms involves the state or act of continuing to live, exist, or avoid destruction. Survival is the job of meeting your basic needs: food, water, shelter and sleep. The modes of survival are not fixed; my basic survival needs are met every day, but do I live well? Living well for me includes weekly physiotherapy, acupuncture, and seeing a therapist. These tools are often labelled as "wellbeing". I argue our wellbeing is the baseline. We should not only survive, but live well. However, this notion of "wellbeing" places the responsibility back on the individual: to live beyond survival and to live well is not something that is granted. When I talk about survival, I talk about its bare boned definition of just keeping your heart pumping, but I hope this definition would include living, in all its glory. When I speak of imagination, I am not trying to say my imagination is better than that of someone who is struggling to meet their needs. I am saying that just as there are modes of survival, there are modes of imagination. The modes of imagination are in flux: when you are surviving, you may use your imagination to keep yourself safe, but imagination becomes limited when it becomes a place to

[4] Omar El Akkad, *One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This* (The Text Publishing Company, 2025).
[5] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (South End Press, 1999).

escape to; rather, with an appetite for leisure, it becomes a ritual through which we survive. In gaps of survival, you can imagine, but the mode of imagination I reference is often out of reach. Imagination has modes just like survival does. For the sake of creativity, imagination is a leisurely pursuit. This imbalance is why I reflect deeply on the state of survival and what permits us to live well enough to imagine something purely for the sake of indulging in it.

I have developed *Sobahneh*, an ongoing social practice project that transforms a corner of my studio into a temporary homeplace: a breakfast and chai, where people earn their seat simply by sitting in it. Across my works, this type of care is not only a subject but a methodology.

This methodology is also reflected in this project through my clay work. Clay is a living material; it gets tired, it can tell if you've cheated it. At the end of the day, I could cheat clay, cut corners, but I would know that I didn't put the best of my ability into it. I don't know if I can lie to myself. The beauty of care is not that it is often reciprocated, but that it comes from a surrender to love. Ceramics is full of care, metalwork is full of care, and I see these as acts of service to a creation you bring into this world. A pot is only well-made because you did all the steps correctly; I could do everything right because I was taken care of by the pillars of my inner community.

***

This exegesis opens with a Preface, written from grief, that grounds this project in the unexpected death of my Daie during my research. This exegesis does not behave conventionally because the world it responds to is not conventional. Its structure reflects the fragmented conditions of living within displacement, racism, and class inequality. I write like a translator, attempting to carry ideas, expressions, and ways of knowing whose hearts do not beat quite the same in English. As a result, this exegesis is organised into a series of sections rather than conventional chapters. Some are brief, others wander. There is no set literature review, methodology, or method chapters. Rather, these aspects run across different sections, as fragments. Together they mirror the uneven rhythm of navigating a world in which you are continually required to explain yourself, move quickly, and survive.

The first section, *Imagination as Political Power*, establishes the central argument of this research: imagination is not simply an individual capacity but a political condition. Drawing on writers including Omar El Akkad and bell hooks, I examine who is afforded the conditions to imagine and who is instead imagined by others. Through my own experiences of being othered and through my works such as *Damagh*, I consider how racialised bodies become sites upon which stereotypes, expectations, and political narratives are projected.

The second section, *Imagination in Practice*, asks what artistic practice can do in reimagining public infrastructure, how we as artists can make art that continues to live and help others do the same. Rather than understanding imagination as an abstract idea, I investigate how it can be cultivated through making. Reflecting on *Sobahneh* and the relationships it generated, I consider how art practice can produce moments of care, rest, and collective imagining that temporarily interrupt the conditions of survival.

The final section, *Sofreh as a Site of Resistance*, brings these ideas of survival and imagination together through the sofreh as both subject and methodology. Here I introduce my methodology, *bah-holalse*, and argue that the sofreh operates as an infrastructure of care. Through gathering, nourishment, hospitality, and shared ritual, it becomes a political space where people support one another, sustain cultural memory, and create the conditions necessary for imagination to exist. The sofreh has been one of the pillars that has sustained my own life, and this research asks how it might continue to sustain others.

Within this project, I was able to create a space in which this model of gathering could be practised. Through acts of care, time, and craft, works such as *Sobahneh* became less about producing an artwork than about producing relationships. Feeding one another, sharing stories, sitting together, and grieving together become ways of modelling the kinds of societies we wish to live in. If imagination requires the ability to live beyond survival, then social practice becomes a means of building the conditions that make imagination possible. Spaces of nourishment, ritual, and gathering become rehearsals for a world in which imagination is no longer a luxury

reserved for those unburdened by survival. In these spaces, imagination is returned to its rightful place—not as an individual fantasy, but as a collective political practice of holding one another long enough to dream.

My project argues that care is not supplementary to artistic practice but foundational to it. Care is the infrastructure that allows imagination to emerge. The sofreh offers one model of this infrastructure: a place where nourishment, hospitality, grief, and collective responsibility create the conditions for cultural continuity and creative possibility. If survival constrains imagination, then care expands it. This research ultimately proposes care as infrastructure—not only for art making, but for imagining and sustaining more liveable futures together.

1: Imagination as Political Power

> *Imagination is a methodology, but to practice it, I must live beyond survival — my imagination is what allows me to create, but I can't make pots if I can't afford food.*

This section explores how imagination is weaponised when survival is on the line. The work of imagining is a collective effort, but to do so, you must live beyond survival first. When you are just surviving, there is no time to imagine. This project seeks a collective call to care rather than an extractive imagination.

Imagination holds the power to change the world. To imagine, and to have the space to imagine, is political. Who gets to be imagined as human, and who is framed as a threat? Who is allowed the space to imagine, and who is denied? I believe imagination requires rest, safety, and the ability to exist without constant defence. Imagination can only exist when you are living beyond survival. When we are allowed the space to dream, we wonder. That is why it is political. When harm is committed by someone who looks like me, race becomes the headline. Jeffrey Epstein, Donald Trump, or Jeff Bezos are never made representatives of their race.[6] They are treated as individuals. Some people are treated as patterns. This is not accidental. It is imaginative labour; the repeated framing of some bodies as complex and others as symbolic. Some are exceptions. Others are inevitabilities. Imagination, in this sense, is not neutral. It shapes who is granted innocence, who is afforded complexity, and who must constantly prove their humanity.

Who is placed last in the hierarchy of life?

2: The Other

Imagination is not only shaped by what is possible, but by what is projected onto a body before it speaks. In Chris Hedger's interview with Omar El Akkad, El Akkad describes what he calls "implied otherness."[7] Which he describes as "the quiet, anticipatory bias that precedes an encounter."[8] El Akkad names this encounter a shadow world, a parallel mode of existence, in which some bodies must navigate an entire spectrum of institutional and social calculations that others never have to consider. This shadow world is not spectacular. It is cumulative, exhausting, and largely invisible to those not living inside it. He further describes this condition as "perpetually preparing for which version of my phantom-self someone will latch onto."[9] It is the labour of disarming yourself, not because you are harmful, but because violence has already been imagined onto you. This experience involves code-switching[10]—not as a strategy but as a survival reflex; you learn to monitor your tone, posture, and humour. I know when to soften myself and when to disappear. I code-switch not to scare people away; I perform when asked to occupy white-dominant spaces.

When this context engulfs my garden in shadows, it cannot bloom. It's akin to being put me in a cage and told that art is reserved for those who do not have shadows blocking their living light. Through my research, I found that my garden isn't growing as fast as everyone else's, because you will only see me through the eyes of another.

The spaces I create become "Middle Eastern" spaces, contextualised through the body that holds them. I am constantly asked to bridge otherness, an unpaid and unchosen labour that people of colour perform in proximity to whiteness. I become singular and overburdened, asked to represent an entire people, much like Princess Jasmine

[6] Examples of morally questionable white men.
[7] Omar El Akkad, *One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This* (The Text Publishing Company, 2025).
[8] Chris Hedges, *One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This (w/ Omar El Akkad),* The Chris Hedges Report, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPI0RmTKCYk.
[9] Omar El Akkad, *One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This* (The Text Publishing Company, 2025).
[10] Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile: And Other Literary And Cultural Essays* (Granta Books, 2013).

once did for SWANA[11] children. Flattened. Symbolic. Made to stand in for a complexity I am never allowed to inhabit fully. I am asked to be proof that 'not all of you are like that.'

bell hooks defines the Other in her essay *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance* (1992)[12] as "someone who is not a part of imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy".[13] The Other is welcomed only in recognisable, consumable forms. hooks warns that this apparent inclusion does not dismantle power. If imagination is scaffolded by safety, rest, and the ability to live beyond survival, then those forced to inhabit the shadow world are denied imagination even as they are hyper-imagined by others. Otherness becomes convenient. Distance becomes convenient. Imagination, by contrast, is dangerous; to imagine fully is to humanise, to collapse distance, and undo projection.

When I make work, no matter what it's about, I do the labour of undoing the perception of the other in proximity to whiteness. When I read *One Day Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This*, it felt like I took off a heavy bag. How do you describe a microaggression to someone who's never felt the sting of an assumption? When I first began to devour these texts, I was furious. I had been astonished by how much overexplaining I had to do to make people 'get' my work. The work isn't speaking to you if you have to ask. I cannot escape being labelled as an Other. When I make work about my family or myself, does it automatically become cultural just because I 'have' a culture? Either way, I will be imagined or made into a spectacle by viewers who aren't the audience, but for you/we, this might be a shared memory.

3: Hyper Projection / Damagh

Being hyper-imagined by others has meant that I have not been able to imagine myself until now. I have been surviving for so long, and I am the first woman of my lineage to do something outside of working in care. To be imagined as a threat is to live inside someone else's projection. Entire people become flattened into symbols: refugee, terrorist, migrant, other. The dominant world's imagination relies on these simplifications because they make violence easier to justify. But projection does not stop at borders or politics. Eventually, it reaches the body itself. It settles into physical features, into skin, hair, language, and the architecture of a face.

Certain noses are hyper-visible. Certain brows are politicised. Before I even speak, my body has already been narrated by someone else. To carry that projection daily is to lose the quiet required to imagine anything beyond it. Rest becomes political. The ability to imagine becomes unevenly distributed. The question shifts not only to who controls imagination, but also to who is allowed to inhabit the conditions that enable us to imagine at all. When you live with your identity on your face, you cannot hide. People project onto you, assume things based on the colour of your skin or the arch of your nose. I look like a Middle Eastern person. I have olive skin and thick black eyebrows to match my midnight hair. There is no hiding the genetics of my nose. It comes from my mother and her mother.

One of the first works I made within this project was a series of noses. I cast my nose, my grandmother's nose, and my mother's nose in bronze. Three generations. Three profiles. Placed side by side, they begin to blur into one another. These sculptures are more than likenesses. They exist in confrontation with projection itself. If you cherish this part of me, how can you not recognise the same beauty within yourself? The noses become vessels for inheritance, labour, intimacy, and memory. Features once flattened into stereotypes are returned to the complexity and tenderness of their owners. Iran has the highest rhinoplasty rate in the world. We are taught to hate our own noses.

[11] "Why People Are Calling The Middle East 'SWANA,'" *Human Rights Activists In Iran*, March 9, 2026, https://www.hra-iran.org/why-people-are-calling-the-middle-east-swana/.
[12] bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (South End Press, 1992).
[13] bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (South End Press, 1992).



Figure III. Leva Kusari. *Damagh*, 2025. Bronze cast.

In late 2025, all but one of these noses vanished from my studio. I often think about the person who now has my nose, and whether they are proud to own it. They've stolen a part of me. Not just my physical nose, but my labour. The scan I did with my mamani, the hours spent dipping moulds into ceramic shell, the metal I inhale as I sand bronze into a natural curve. I used to wear them as masks while I worked alone in the studio because they fit perfectly. There is magic in that. When I put on my grandmother's nose, I realised we share almost the same facial structure, as if one day I will grow into her gorgeous nose. The casts hold more than a person's physical identity; they also hold a memory of a loved one attached to an object I won't get back. Our identities are never ours when you are hyper-imagined; as El Akkad talks of the phantom self, you can come from two homes, but you cannot claim either. These noses were my way of unimagining myself within my diasporic identity, as my nose gives me away before I have a chance to say where I am from.

4: Eat the Other

The world we currently live in functions because there is a group of people who are "othered". "The Other" cannot rest and imagine in the same way as someone who isn't labelled as such. El Akkad describes "the other" as "[t]hose whose nonexistence is essential to your privilege."[14] We can find examples of this occurring in how, for example, Israel uses the propaganda of labelling Palestinians as non-native.[15] We can go closer to home and look at Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and see the bills passed that ignore hundreds of years of colonialism towards Māori.[16] All this inequality feeds into who is allowed to imagine, and then, who is allowed to create art from this imagination. Who is granted space in society to dream? The underclass or the upper class? I start to ask how can I dismantle these frameworks within my practice; how do I set fire to the "Other" category?

If my work can act as a bridge across this otherness, if my presence can shift even a single image, so that you think of roses instead of rubble, then this imagining matters. To be seen clearly is not a small thing, it interrupts what El Akkad describes as the "phantom-self".[17] It makes imagination collective rather than extractive.

I look at home without the immediate threat that once made it unliveable. The diasporic euphoria allows me to 'eat the other,'[18] to rebirth it, gently, with care. My understanding stems from an apathy that exists between pain and its absence, informed by a violence I did not witness but cannot escape, and by a freedom paid for by my bloodline. Embodying rituals while preparing a sofreh becomes a way of holding grief without being consumed by it. I learned to make tea. I did so from a place of curiosity while preparing for my sofreh as part of *Sobahneh*, but maybe if I lived in Iran, it would be a ritual I inhabit rather than rehearse. How can I imagine a better world if I am thinking about how to get food on the table for my family? How can we imagine a better world when it's burning?

5: Acts of Care and Support, Survival and Imagination

Survival is the job of staying alive. Is it nothing more than meeting the bare minimum of food, shelter and water?

For people living through war, including Palestinians in Gaza, survival can be the difference between life and death. When you are surviving, imagination becomes limited to imagining how to stop surviving. Surviving for a refugee family is fleeing a country on foot so that they may pray to whomever they choose in peace. If survival is what keeps your heart pumping, then imagination is what makes it skip a beat. If survival is the water you drink to keep you from dying, then imagination is the sip that quenches your thirst. That is why I believe we must first survive before we can imagine.

In my understanding of Farsi, the idea of support often carries the sense of an inanimate structure being held up. Care belongs to living beings. You can support someone by letting them lean on you, but real care is bringing them a chair. Support responds to an immediate need; care changes the conditions that produced that need in the first place. This distinction has become central to my practice. Throughout this research, I have argued that imagination depends on survival: a full belly, a safe place to sleep, enough time to rest, and the stability to imagine tomorrow rather than simply endure today. If these are the conditions that have allowed me to become an artist, then my practice asks what conditions I can create for others. I cannot solve housing insecurity or poverty, but I

[14] Chris Hedges, *One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This (w/ Omar El Akkad),* The Chris Hedges Report, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPI0RmTKCYk.
[15] Laurids Kromand Henriksen et al., "A Post-Millennium Guide to Understanding and Deciphering Propaganda: How Israel Uses Propaganda as a Tool of Communication in the Israel-Palestine Conflict – A Case Study of the Flour Massacre" (2024), chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://rucforsk.ruc.dk/ws/files/104504982/Final_draft_of_project_05062024.pdf.
[16] ActionStation Aotearoa, "What Is the Treaty Principles Bill?" Together for Te Tiriti, 2026, https://togetherfortetiriti.nz/faqs/treaty-principles-bill/.
[17] Omar El Akkad, *One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This.* (The Text Publishing Company, 2025).
[18] bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (South End Press, 1992).

can build temporary infrastructures of care that make rest, conversation, and imagination possible, even if only for an afternoon.

The acts of care within my practice are therefore not separate from the artwork itself. They are the medium through which my social practice operates. My work considers the uneven distribution of survival and asks what kinds of infrastructures I can offer with the resources I already have. My studio becomes a communal sofreh: a place where people are invited to occupy space without having to earn it. There are no expectations attached to entry, nor is there an obligation to buy or produce anything in return. The invitation is simply to arrive.

Small acts of care and larger political structures are not separate. They are both ways of imagining how we might live together. "We" asks us to recognise our responsibility to one another without diminishing our differences. It is not a politics of sameness, but a politics of care. It asks us to continue showing up despite the enormity of everything happening in the world.

6: Living beyond survival

We have learnt that imagination requires rest, and grows in a room of safety. I wonder how you can rest when you are not safe.

If imagination requires rest, and rest requires infrastructure, there is an undeniable privilege in being able to make art as a career. There must be, first, the freedom to exist as you are in your motherland—or, at the very least, not under immediate threat. I am only one generation away from living beyond basic survival. I am only able to pursue a life of education and creativity because of the sacrifices of my family members; because of the women who carried me to a country where I could exist without fear, with a roof over my head, and a belly full of warm food.

> You cannot have the steady hands of a potter if you are weak from starvation.
> You cannot worry about glaze tests when you are worrying about war.
> You cannot write poems about birds chirping when all you hear are bombs.[19]

The work of imagining better social structures is only possible when basic conditions of survival are met. Virginia Woolf writes about this reality in *A Room of One's Own* (1929),[20] where she argues that to pursue creative work, a person needs money and a room with a lock. This position is not an argument for success in a capitalist sense, but the stability required to think, to daydream, to imagine. If survival wasn't the only thing on my grandmother's mind, on my mother's mind, maybe they would've gone to art school, maybe they would be the next Lorde or Kate Sylvester.

My grandmother was raised to be the perfect mother. She has skill and craft coming out of her ears. It is an intuitive, but choreographed, dance of making gormeh sabzi, tending the garden in its various seasons, and knowing how to make a home from scratch. These are ways my grandmother imagines better lives for my family and me. It is easier for me to imagine worlds like this because I am not imagining my basic survival. That distance is what allows me to make work about Iran without the blistering sting that remains for members of my immediate family.

[19] Line is inspired by Noor Hindi, *Fuck Your Lecture on Craft My People Are Dying*, 2020, Poem, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/154658/fuck-your-lecture-on-craft-my-people-are-dying.
[20] Virgina Woolf, *A Room of Ones Own.* (1929).



Figure IV. Leva Kusari, washing, 2025. One of the family photos I digitised. (This image has been removed after examination)

7: Imagination Practice

My work of care, under the influence of social practice, is how I rehearse better ways of being. It is, by definition, optimistic.

For my project, social practice gathers routine human behaviours, meaning activities already embedded within everyday life. Sharing food. Drinking tea. Sitting together. Talking to strangers. It channels my inner understanding of "we" by creating places where people can simply exist. It involves something as simple as giving someone a place to sit, which also acknowledges the collective effort to survive. Pair that with a cup of tea and you have a temporary oasis. The issue, of course, is that not everyone has a rug, a cup, or four walls beneath which they can gather. Social practice, therefore, becomes a way to imagine how communities might live together beyond mere survival. It is inherently anti-capitalist because it asks us to value people over profit, care over extraction, and relationships over productivity. As Angela Davis reminds us, we must imagine new worlds before we can move toward them. The responsibility of artists is not decoration. It is imagination.[21]



Figure V. Leva Kusari, *Mamani age 24(?),* 2025. One of the family photos I digitized. (This image has been removed after examination)

[21] Jen de los Reyes, *Defiantly Optimistic: Turning Up in a World on Fire* (The MACR Papers, 2023).



Figure VI. Leva Kusari*, Canopy, wooden altar*, silk pillow filled with dried damask roses, bronze damask roses, damask tea, samovar, gand. 2025. Image by Camden Jackson

I am constantly reflecting on how I arrived at making ceramics in 2026 while completing my Master's in Visual Arts. When my grandmother was twenty-four, she already had three children. My mother had me at my current age. My family reminds me that making art isn't lucrative, that there is no real money in it. How do I explain to them, whose understanding of success was shaped by survival, that I am not interested in money for its own sake? My interest is in what money affords: rest, housing, healthcare, food, and time. Money matters because it enables living beyond mere survival. I can imagine my worth beyond money because, ultimately, if I had none tomorrow, I could ask my family for help or move back home knowing I would be taken care of. My survival is not immediately at stake if I take breaks from work to make art or to rest. My life is mine to shape because of the geographical luck and privilege I have inherited. I have been given the conditions to imagine another world—my practice becomes one way of extending those conditions to others.

8: Sobahneh

Public Kitchen is a social practice project that pops up in corners around the world for three months at a time.[22] Since 2012, *Public Kitchen* has been co-led by Nohemi Rodgeruz and Mark Araujo. The project engages with specific communities by directly asking how they want to use the infrastructure they have set up. They hold "Community Chop Challenges", food poetry slams, hot sauce and canning workshops, "decolonise your diet" discussions, grandmas making pupusas, youth-led jollof rice and smoothie sessions, and so much more. Public Kitchen describes their work as an "imagination project".[23] Their mission is to make people imagine what they wouldn't have imagined before: infrastructures that don't yet exist, systems of care that might hold us, feed us, protect us. [24]Imagination, here, becomes a rehearsal for survival.

Offering a space to imagine can serve as a form of public infrastructure. My work *Sobahneh* has a similar goal to Public Kitchen in the practice of an imagining ways to live with one another. *Sobahneh* offers a space free of the stain of capitalist coffee culture, a place to rest, and a sofreh. Imagine a simple social structure, like free breakfast or chai, and how these simple spaces can change how we engage with our direct community. Have a seat, you can have a hot drink and somewhere to rest without the expectation of spending money to earn a place to sit. *Sobahneh* doesn't ask you to earn your place via money or labour; they ask you to "earn" your seat simply by sitting in it.



Figure VII. *Public Kitchen*, Social Practice, 2024. Image from Public Kitchen. This image has been removed because it lacks a copyright notice.

[22] *Social Practice*, Season 5 Episode 7, "Art Bound," PBS, November 12, 2014, 58, https://www.pbs.org/video/social-practice-fqq2lp/.
[23] *Social Practice*, "Art Bound."
[24] Design Studio for Social Intervention, *Public Kitchen*, 2012–2024, social practice, https://www.ds4si.org/creativity-labs/public-kitchen.



Figure VIII. Leva Kusari, *Sobahneh* social practice, 2025. various materials, some delicious. Image by Camden Jackson

My grandmother made the gand (saffron sugar cubes) that we put in our *Sobahneh* tea. I can say I helped her make it, but I was also gracefully allowed to observe a woman from my lineage make something for me simply because I had asked. My studio crew helped me out, taking photos of the event so I could remain present; they helped me bring my rugs into the studio, and they showed people it was okay to engage and eat the work. They embodied a sofreh; they now know the feeling behind the syllables that float from their mouths: “sofreh.” That is the work of showing up: you engage.

Most social practice is done with other people, not just to divide the labour, but to enjoy time together, to be there for your community. What I was making was not just an event, but a form of creative labour—one that already exists beyond the gallery. The ability to continue working in this way, to host, to gather, and to care comes directly from the kindness, time, and shared creative labour of my community.



Figure IX. Leva Kusari, *Sobahneh* social practice, 2025. various materials, some delicious. Image by Camden Jackson



Figure X. Leva Kusari, *Sobahneh's* Ephemera frontside, 2025. Risograph print.



Figure XI. Leva Kusari, *Sobahneh's* Ephemera backside, 2025. Risograph print.

9: The Diaspora

The diaspora does not paralyse me. Instead, it creates a strange permission: because I did not experience the fight for survival directly, I can imagine. My pillars were built as I grew up. My making happens in the space my family never had, where survival is no longer the only priority. I create with deep reflection on my privilege. Because of space and time, I am able to expand my world through language and knowledge. Knowledge gives me the ability to understand what my prison was made out of, and my work is the key that releases me. That said, my work cannot encapsulate the mountains moved within my body, to understand myself as an other. I keep pushing, making it through all that I experience. But I have more gas in my tank. The inner work of survival is generational and still moving.

My works, the *sofreh* and its birth at *Sobahneh*, were opportunities allowing methods involving ritual, homecoming, and diaspora, and engaging with one another to come together. The community that showed up to Sobahneh was mostly SWANA diaspora; they were so excited to see rituals from their home, a samovar (definition) from my grandmother's, my aunties' tablecloth, and bread from our bakery, the Pita House.[25] The work offered a place to shed the 'phantom self.' Conversations about diasporic identities emerged because my work gave people literal space to sit down and eat. In these conversations, I realised that my intention wasn't just for everyone to have a good breakfast; it was for someone to find something familiar in their everyday. The broken lines of diaspora in your 'western life' and hearing something in your mother tongue that perks your ears when you walk down the street were given space. The work of *Sobahneh* and the *sofreh* it held at first offered ways to imagine how we would slow down together. Through the motion of living, the work devoured a hyper-imagining of the other for white audiences and provided a return home for me and others who know what the scent of heaven is. I don't want to claim I made a pillar for someone that day, but I did build one for myself.

I am painfully aware of how the pillars needed for survival involve not only things experienced, but also things inherited. I carry an absence of fear in my body that exists only because my mother and my family have already consumed it. Their generational survival through language, faith, and heritage is real, embodied, and historical. It stains their nostalgia for home. Mine is different. It is a grief without firsthand terror, a mourning for a place I did not flee but have lost anyway. This is the diaspora I make my work within, which is both absent and palpable. The work does not live in a single memory or injury, but exists generationally, passed down to me through stories, silences, and domestic rituals. I try to embody these domestic rituals for future diasporic kids. Preserving these stories is important for them, and I aim to uphold this through my practice. I do this by preserving rituals, whether it be clay's rituals of wedging and throwing, or the rituals that stem from cultural preservation in the diaspora.

[25] Popular SWANA grocer in Pakuranga.

10: The Canopy

Like most things I make, the canopy begins with my grandmother's house. She sews her own lace curtains, and I remember lying beneath them as a child, watching the light filter through embroidered flowers while I fell asleep. When we moved to Aotearoa, one of our first cultural shocks was that nobody seemed to have lace curtains. She makes an unfamiliar place feel like home.

I don't know how to sew in the way she does. I can mend a hole or replace a button because she taught me; she made almost all of my clothes until I was eleven. At the time, I desperately wanted clothes from Pumpkin Patch because having your grandmother make your clothes felt embarrassing. We were poor, which is why she sewed everything, but what I understood then as embarrassment I now recognise as care. Her sewing was never simply about clothing. It was an infrastructure of survival.

The idea of a canopy extends that inheritance into my own practice. I sewed it as a temporary architecture of rest, inspired by the spaces my grandmother built with fabric, thread and light. It creates a place where bodies can slow down, conversations can unfold, and imagination can emerge. The canopy is not simply an artwork. It is my attempt to build, with the resources available to me, an infrastructure of care. A place to pause. A place to gather. A place where survival loosens its grip, even momentarily, so imagination has somewhere to exist.



Figure XII. Leva Kusari, *canopy*. Wooden alter, silk pillow filled with dried damask roses, bronze damask roses, damask tea, samovar, gand. 2025. Image by Camden Jackson

My works do not claim to solve the conditions of survival. Rather, they rehearse another way of living together. Whether through a bowl, a shared meal, a cup of tea, a place to sit, or a canopy overhead, each work asks what an artist can offer with the materials already at hand. These gestures are necessarily small, but they insist that care begins by making room for one another. If imagination depends upon the conditions that allow us to live beyond survival, then my practice is an ongoing attempt to build those conditions, one gathering at a time.

I find myself creating canopies in most of my works. It's one of my ways of holding my community of *others*. I want them to shed their phantom self. I want to offer the other a place to rest, to let someone sit down for a little bit; they don't need to give anything. By engaging with my community in this way, I am indirectly bridging the gap of otherness.

11. After Sobahneh

The aftermath of Sobahneh marked the moment I felt the research come to life. The work was now suddenly bigger than what I intended it to be. The initial start was a warm welcome into the space, but over time the space my studio provided became a place where my studio community gathered and rested after a long day at uni. The studio's lights had fabric draped over them to soften the harsh light, and the steel beams I made and installed were hung with lace curtains, providing a sort of privacy and shelter from the fast pace of a shared studio, while a beautiful, big rug lay in the middle of this strange oasis. The place was decked out; we had backgammon, tea, pillows, and a Tupperware full of Strogen. Not to mention a tape deck, with a very good (if I do say so myself) collection of tapes. When bell hooks talks about a site of resistance, it's not always a loud gesture; sometimes it's as simple as giving someone a place to imagine. This time, when the initial intended artwork had ended, but the space remained, I became friends with Camden, who would often have "floor" time in my studio. He would bring people to show them the space and treated it as a place to rest. I am always in the labs at university, but when this space was open, people wanted to be in it, linger, and rest. Experiences like those that *Sobahneh* enabled helped me recognise that what I was making was not just an event, but a form of creative labour—one that already exists beyond the gallery. The ability to continue working in this way to host, to gather, and to care comes directly from the kindness, time, and shared creative labour of my community.

In *Defiantly Optimistic: Turning Up in a World on Fire, Collected Writings 2007–2022* (2023), Jen Delos Reyes describes herself as a "creative labourer".[26] Her work is typically not hung on gallery walls, but diffuses through pockets of society, transforming it from the inside out. In her life and work, Delos Reyes passionately supports the power of art to engage society—moving us from the canvas to the collective and reminding artists and non-artists alike that we are more powerful than we imagine. She reminds me of a lecturer during the first part of my MVA who always brought cookies and fruit to critiques. The answer is as simple as cookies, but the question holds so much power: how can the institution not only educate me, but also nourish me? How can this space take care of me beyond survival?

In one of her lectures, Delos Reyes asks students to write down fifty things they notice while walking through a grocery store. Something shifts. Expectations break. Art materials appear where students were never taught to look. Delos Reyes's goal is not to produce artists, but to produce better, more empathetic humans. As she states, "Making the best art isn't about making the best artist. It's about making the best human".[27] When we disengage from what is institutionally recognised as "art," we begin to find great artists everywhere. We find my mamani, a woman with a PhD in homemaking, long before Martha Stewart told the world to care about it. We find carefully executed labour filled with craftsmanship and love: traditions passed down through each daughter in the family, secrets of Iranian homemaking held and carried quietly.

Delos Reyes is a firm believer in not separating the art from the artist. She writes, "I want the work I make to be in no way disconnected from who I am as a person."[28] This mode of methodological thinking resonates deeply with my own practice, where making, hosting, and caring are not separate gestures but extensions of how I move through the world. Delos Reyes emphasises living out one's practice, no matter its shape, encouraging collective ways of working and believing strongly in the power of numbers, group effort, and a lifelong commitment to shared labour. Shifting this mindset towards art as a way of being, caring, and participating opens space for more people to see themselves as artists.

[26] Jen de los Reyes, *Defiantly Optimistic: Turning Up in a World on Fire* (The MACR Papers, 2023), 258.
[27] de los Reyes, *Defiantly Optimistic*
[28] de los Reyes, *Defiantly Optimistic,* 260.



Figure XIII. Leva Kusari, *Friends on Floor After Sobahneh*, 2025. Photograph. (This image has been removed after examination)

I used to think my main method of making was with clay, but through this research, I have realised that bringing communities together is a kind of making too. As discussed through *Sobahneh*, my studio became a space to rest, meet, and share time together. I came to know my cohort because of the space *Sobahneh* afforded—we could gather in a space, and as a result, we became friends. Everything has a cost these days, even simply gathering or providing space for people to relax and be together. For me, it is being hospitable, thinking we are too shy to love people aloud, but when we show up for one another, that speaks volumes. I am surrounded by love and care. Providing a space to rest, a meal, or hot tea are acts of care. My world is made not only liveable but also beautiful by the care put into it, a kind of gesture that extends beyond the individual. My grandmother set the standard for care; the standard of care in Iran keeps us close to home. How we show up for each other is in our mother tongues.

Throughout my Master's, I have been sustained by my community. Because of this community, I have had the rare privilege of living beyond mere survival. That privilege has given me access to language, ideas, and conversations that have expanded my world and helped me understand what it means to be othered, and what it might mean to live beyond that. Not as a martyr, nor as someone who has transcended these experiences, but as someone who is living well enough to lend a pillar, a hand, or even a meal. Sometimes caring for a human is as simple as cooking for them. Sometimes care looks remarkably ordinary.

This research has not made me a "better human".[29] so much as a more accountable one. It has made me more aware of the immense sacrifices that have allowed me to live this deeply privileged life. It has also sharpened my understanding of the cumulative and often invisible labour that brown people, migrants, and displaced communities perform simply to prove they belong in spaces that were never built with them in mind. I want my creative labour to bridge this gap, to make people feel held, to offer hope to another Iranian in the diaspora.

[29] de los Reyes, *Defiantly Optimistic,* 261.



Figure XIV. Leva Kusari, *Nawruz Sofreh*, 2025. Digitised photograph.

The work does this by using familiar vessels from Iran as a cultural conduit. When I see these objects from home out of context, I know someone who I culturally relate to is close by. This is what I want: to make art to understand the world and the people in it. In doing so, I find myself questioning the infrastructures I live within, and how they continue to oppress and disregard the people I love, all of whom happen to be minorities. Delos Reyes's book reinforces this position. She argues that the way we administer our small, private realms can become public declarations of what we believe in. The way we structure our days, our homes, our relationships, and our labour can be statements about the kind of world we want to inhabit. In this sense, creative practice is not separate from daily life.

Our sofreh is the heart of our home. It's creative labour; it's where we nourish ourselves in body and soul—a private realm that speaks volumes about the social structures we wish to change, but are not always able to rehearse publicly. The philosophy of *Sobahneh* extends beyond the confines of the studio. I have taken the samovar to market days, movie nights, and offered free tea. People can never believe it's free, and most of the time, they come back for more. I serve something as simple as tea; I do it the way I've always done it, but because it smells like roses instead of Earl Grey, I become the other. It's a complicated crown to wear, but it is where so much of my thinking dismantles—being able to survive enough to study, to learn languages that describe the prison of which imagined reality you have to perform to, and being full enough to make a sofreh for someone else.

12: Sofreh: Site of resistance.

The sofreh, when made outside of its usual site at home, becomes a temporary homeplace that I see as a site of resistance. Sofreh reflects on the idea that your inner world can become a way we publicly reflect what we believe in. This ritual is born out of care, and is the true meaning of a labour of love. Breakfast in an Iranian household is no joke. It is a ritual that begins the moment you wake. Chai is brewed in the samovar. The sofreh is laid out. Jams appear in small, beautiful ramekins: fig, carrot, and sour cherry jams. Whatever my mamani can turn into jam, she will. The yoghurt is hers. Full fat, full flavour, full of love. Now everything is laid out. Our table. Our sofreh. An altar of love and nourishment. We sit together, eating small loghmehs, modest bites of simple fillings, drinking hot, saffron-red tea to wash the butter from our tongues. The sofreh is a daily ritual, a fire we feed, a tradition we keep alive. It is what it means to be at home with your family.

bell hooks offers a crucial framework for understanding this gesture of a sofreh in her essay 'Homeplace: A Site of Resistance'.[30] Writing about black women living under white supremacist, patriarchal domination, hooks argues that the making of a home, however it may look or be, has historically been a radical political act. Women, due to sexism, have been tasked with the labour of care. These homeplaces were not sentimental refuges; they were sites where Black people could reclaim dignity, humanity, and subjecthood in a world that continually denied them. hooks insists that this labour must be honoured without romanticising it, and without accepting the sexist belief that care is women's "natural" role. The radical potential of a homeplace lies not in domesticity itself, but in its capacity to heal, affirm, and resist. My grandmother provided a site of rest for me, and therefore, I can go out into the world rested. Now I feel a moral obligation to provide whatever pillar or site of resistance I can to my community. Home has always been a place of care, and I am very lucky to say that has been the case for most of my life.



Figure XV. Leva Kusari, *Sofreh* made by my grandmother, 2025. Photograph

[30]hooks, *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance*.

13: Bah-holslae and clay

My grandmother says “bah-holslae,” which roughly translates to “with patience, but with a good attitude.” She does everything this way: with love, with grace, and with energy to do a task well. I have never seen my grandma slapdash anything; she does it once, does it well, and gets it done. This approach is also the secret to her practice of living: she shows up in everything she does, 100%, not because she wants to, but because she knows that a job done well is more satisfying than one done haphazardly.

My philosophy of working with clay moves in parallel with “bah-holslae.” I think of clay as a living material: if I speak goodness into it, if I am hopeful that a pot will be glorious, I need to make sure it’s taken care of, and then it will exude the energy that I've put into it. The work of clay is one done out of care.

I take great care in everything I do, which is something ceramics and bah-holslae have taught me. If I ‘cheat’, wedging [31]then throwing becomes harder; if I don’t wedge enough, my bowl could combust in the kiln. It’s easier to start again than to fix mistakes; doing it well and properly once is better than doing it poorly twice. It’s done, “Bah-holslae”. Most of the work involves quiet repetition. I stand on a block of wood, so my back lasts. I use bats (wooden circle plates) so pieces release cleanly. Small choices save the day. Over time, these choices turn into muscle memory. That is where the work lives; many of the potters I know are ritualistic people, and their works are the ritual’s centre stage. The wheel teaches feeling. I pay attention to speed, water, and pressure. A millimeter more on the base can change the whole form. The angle of my fingers decides the lift. A steady wrist keeps the line clean. When the clay tells me to stop, I stop. If I push past that point, it shows up as slumping or tearing. Clay is honest like that; cutting corners of care is the difference between an average pot and a pot that makes you blush.

Clay and humans are similar; each needs a foundation to be strong. A sofreh, like my ceramics, is a labour of love; it is always an act of devotion. It’s a gesture that embodies all three. Preparing a sofreh is an act of deep intention, each item placed with thought, from the cloth that lays the foundation to the food that nourishes body and soul. The labour involved is an expression of affection, much like making ceramics or preparing Persian dishes; both require patience, skill, and time. These acts of care become infrastructure when repeated. I am reflecting this idea of homeplace in the infrastructures of care I am building, which is making people “Comeback to themselves”. Homeplace is a rehearsal space, a place where people can “return to themselves”,[32] where wholeness can be recovered amid constant assault.[33] This understanding in relation to the sofreh reframes *Sobahneh* not as an event, but as a temporary homeplace: a public rehearsal for another way of being together. It is akin to the homeplaces that hooks describes; it is quiet, cumulative, and sustained by repetition. It resists not through spectacle, but through nourishment.[34] It asks: what happens when rest is offered without transaction? When is care extended without extraction?

[31] Don’t wedge enough, until the clay is soft no air bubbles.
[32] hooks, *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,* 76.
[33] hooks, *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance*.
[34] hooks, *Black Looks, Race and Representation* (1999), *375*.

In my displacement, the sofreh takes on an added significance. Away from Iran, it becomes a ritual of remembrance, a way to anchor oneself to a homeland that exists in memory, stories, and gestures. It is a living altar, where food and objects hold cultural meaning. By creating a sofreh in Aotearoa, I'm not just replicating a tradition; I am actively preserving and transforming the idea of what a sofreh recalls, meaning to show up at a table. This mode of showing up is how I learned to taste, to pause, and to be present. These rituals shaped not only my body and senses, but the way I make and the way I show up in the world. These rituals shaped not only my body and senses, but the way I make and the way I show up in the world, and at home, with bah-holslae. When I came to Aotearoa, I found myself translating these gestures into new spaces, new objects, and new gatherings. Sometimes I don't have to translate my home, sometimes my work serves as a homecoming to those who feel like an other. This is what my project and works do, they provide a pillar to a participant who just wants to rest, but sometimes it's a homecoming that smells like heaven.

14: 47 Roses

The Scent of Heaven comes from my personal experiences of diaspora and grief, where there is always something new to mourn. Home has never existed as something fixed for me. I do not want a home so I can plant a stick into the ground and claim the earth beneath it as mine. I simply want to live above ground and call somewhere home.

Forty-seven cast damask roses resting at the bottom of a series of bowls I made, each trying to become the perfect vessel for a basin filled with rosewater. I collected those roses while visiting my mother in Turkey. One rose for every year the Islamic Republic has remained in power. Casting a rose preserves its beauty, but it strips away the very thing that gives it life: its scent. I displaced the rose just as I have been displaced. Preservation comes at a cost. The rose gives up its fragrance in exchange for permanence. I give up certainty in exchange for safety. I have become othered in the only place I have ever known as home, while continuing to long for a culture that might one day embrace me. Perhaps that is what diaspora asks of us: to preserve what we can, while mourning everything that cannot survive the journey intact.



Figure XVI. Leva Kusari, *47 gol*, 2025. Bronze casts, handmade cloth.

15: Gathering as care

Gathering is not simply something that happens within my work; it is my methodology. The sofreh has taught me that gathering is already a form of care. Before anything is eaten, before conversations begin, a space has been prepared for people to exist together.

Bringing people together feels like an antidote to being too shy to love aloud or making conversation with people you don't know. People are often amazed that the tea is free. They ask where the catch is. There isn't one, except that maybe you'll talk to me for a while. Maybe people gather because they want another cup of tea. Maybe they gather because they believe in "we". Maybe that hope is what keeps us going. Care rarely announces itself through grand gestures. It arrives quietly. You see your snotty nephew's face light up at his Friday night piano recital. You forget your Hop Card, and someone tags you on. You lose your wallet/phone/keys and we post a photo in the Mount Albert community Facebook group hoping they'll find their way back to you. You are sick, so we cooked you dinner. None of these acts dismantle the systems that make survival uneven, but together they create the social infrastructure that allows us to keep living. They remind us that care is not abstract; it is something we practise together.



Figure XVII. Leva Kusari, *Sobahneh* in action. 2025 (This image has been removed after examination)

Afterword

This research is ongoing and will probably remain the philosophy that has most profoundly changed my understanding of my practice and my place in the world. As such, a conclusion feels incomplete because otherness does not end when these pages do. It continues to hyper-imagine me, flattening my humanity into something easier to understand than my complexity. I am grieving many things at once. I mourn a home I have never lived in while watching it be bombed. I watch members of the Iranian diaspora celebrate, mourn, argue, and contradict one another. For almost three years, I have watched a genocide unfold through the screen of my phone, carrying the confusing guilt of surviving while others cannot. It has taught me to see art not simply as an object or an exhibition, but as an infrastructure of care.

The work I make will always be political because my imagination relies on conditions and policies that often seem beyond my control. What is within my control is how I proceed. I can cook *you* dinner. I can tag *you* onto the bus. Sometimes *you* return the favour. There is power in collective care, even if it feels like yelling into a world that refuses to listen. The power of being an *"other"* is that you are always underestimated.

I am still moving towards an equilibrium; there is never an "even surface" when you are living in your phantom self. You cannot occupy two people in one body, but you can be two halves of a whole diaspora. When I am behind the potter's wheel, I become a whole person; I am not judged by the architecture of my face or the arched bridge of my nose. Clay holds me in the way, I hold it. I reciprocate; it is my unconditional love channelled into an object. Its creation is born out of my living.

When grief formed a face, every pillar holding me upright collapsed. I could no longer show up for myself, let alone for my work. For days, I stared into a future I did not recognise, hoping this new reality was only a nightmare. Within seventy-two hours, I was in Sydney, standing at the burial of the man who helped raise me, and Rosewater was poured over my family and me. At the end of the ceremony, each of us was given a bottle to pour onto his grave. Two nights later I was back on a plane to Aotearoa, returning to a world that had continued turning without him.

While my family remained in Australia, my friend Carmel stayed at my house to look after my kitten, Sabzi, who had been hit by a car and had his hip removed. The kitten needed medication three times a day. When I came home, the house had been vacuumed. My sheets had been changed, my laundry folded and Carmel had dinner ready for when I came home. Sabzi was/is a happy kitten.

Carmel's work changed my life. It changed Sabzi's too. Her work will never hang on a gallery wall. It will never be reviewed or collected. It was not spectacular in colour or contrast, but it was foundational. It was the quiet labour that allowed me to remain above ground when I no longer knew how to hold myself there.

This research began by asking what becomes impossible when imagination is held hostage by survival. I leave it understanding something else. Imagination does not emerge despite care; it emerges because of it.

Every artwork in my project exists because someone, somewhere, made survival possible for me.

My practice is not evidence that I endured alone. It is evidence that I am carried. If there is anything I hope remains after these pages, it is this: care is never supplementary to art. It is the condition that allows it to exist at all.



Figure XVIII. Leva Kusari, *"Anar"* - Solid Bronze Ceramic Shell Cast. Part of *"The Scent of Heaven"* 2026

After *the afterword.*

The Scent of Heaven is evidence that I have not endured grief alone. I want to properly thank my pillars, who have held me up during my master's and survival. The first acknowledgement is to my grandmother, Shamsi Asadi and my mother, Azita Kusari. I live this life, and I see its beauty because you have taught me where to look.

To my friends who are more like family, to my chosen sisters, Natalia Knox, Carmel Salmanzadeh and Nina-Rose Campbell. Who support me with all their mana and embody "bah-holshale" in times when I wanted to give up and settle for less, but they helped me get to this, and I couldn't have crawled over the finish line if it weren't for them, changing my bandages, sewing and spell-checking what felt like a manifesto. At the end of the day, it needs to be done; that's the beauty in women's work. They don't question why you are doing it, come up with ways to help you.

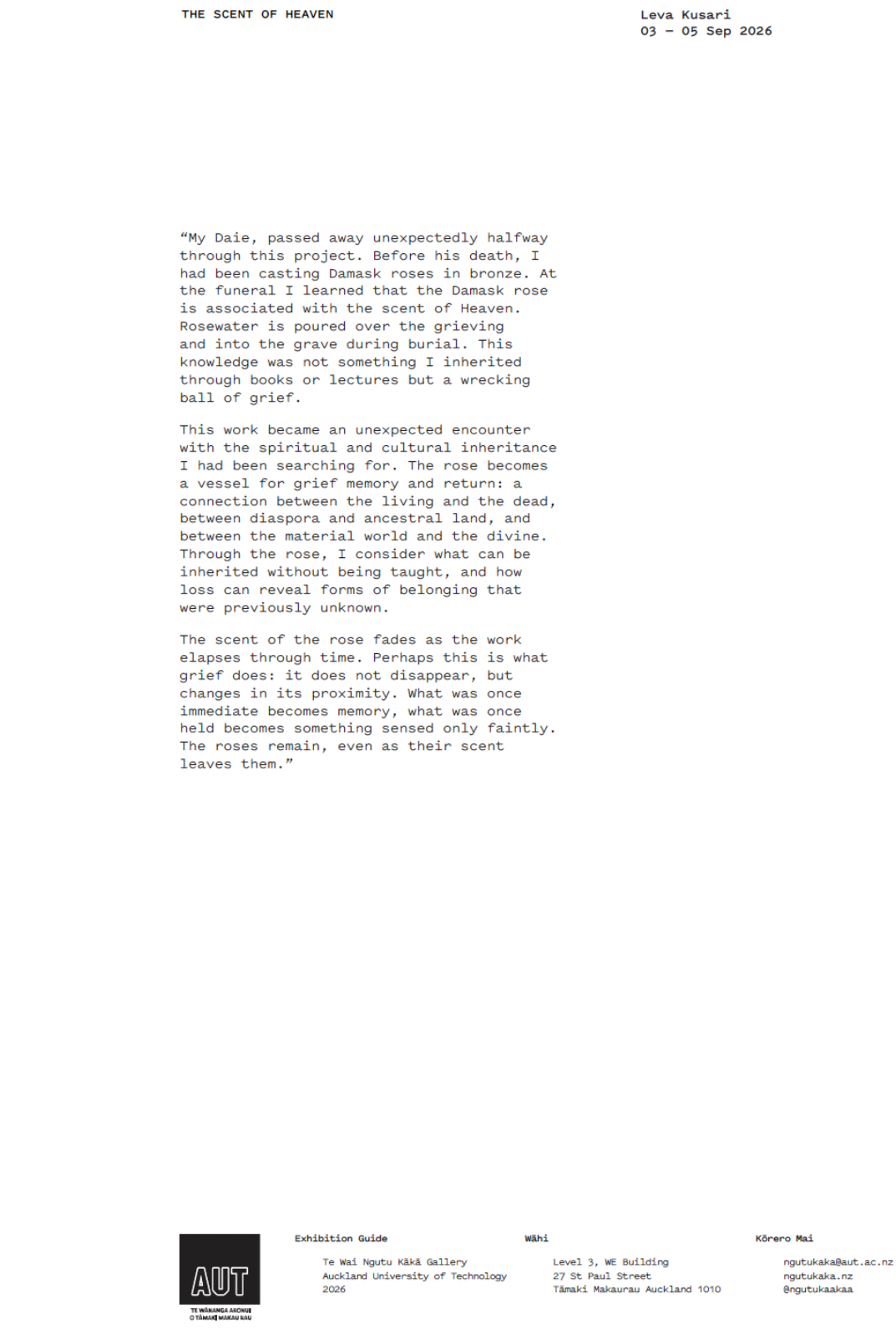
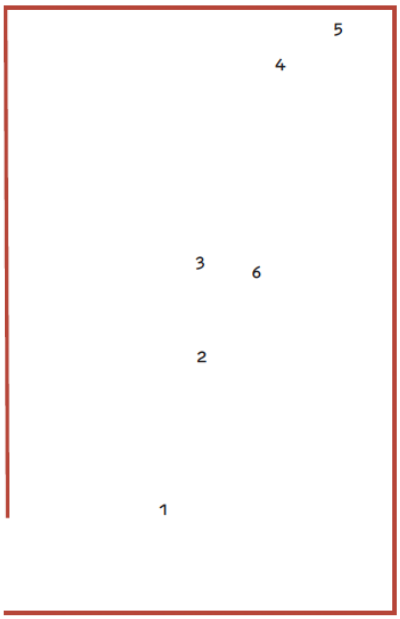


Figure XIX. Leva Kusari, Room sheet side A *Part of "The Scent of Heaven"* 2026

LIST OF WORKS

GALLERY THREE



1 ANAR 2026, Bronze

2 TAPESTRY, 2026,
various found fabrics, beetroot juice,
machine-sewn,hand-sewn,
dimensions variable

3 BASIN, 2026,
Bronze matte glaze, scorched Rimu,
1000 × 650mm

4 FRAME, 2026,
lace, scorched Totora hand-milled and
chiselled,
500 × 2000mm

5 DAMAGH, 2026,
bronze

5 DAMAGH, 2026,
bronze

5 GOL, 2026,
47 Damask roses cast in bronze

Figure XX. Leva Kusari, Room sheet side B *Part of "The Scent of Heaven"* 2026 *Typo two number five's



Figure XXI. Leva Kusari, *"Anar" and "tapestry"* - Solid Bronze Ceramic Shell Cast. Part of "*The Scent of Heaven"* 2026



Figure XXII- Leva Kusari, "*Anar" and "tapestry*" - Part of "*The Scent of Heaven"* 2026



Figure XXIII. Leva Kusari *"The Scent of Heaven"* Various materials 2026



Figure XXIV. Leva Kusari*, "frame" and "damagh"* - Part of *"The Scent of Heaven"* 2026

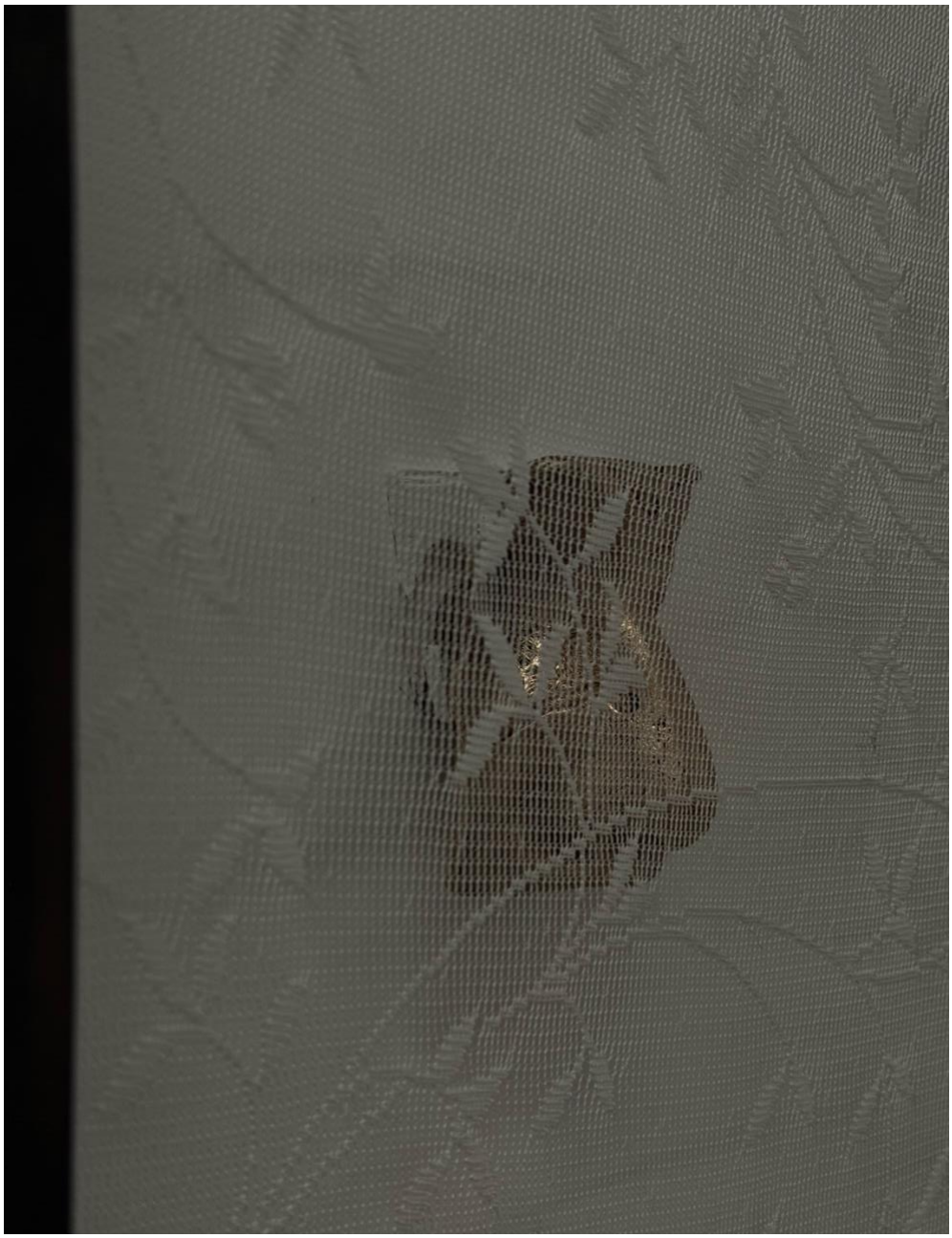


Figure XXV. Leva Kusari, Close up of "*frame" and "damagh*" - Part of "*The Scent of Heaven*" 2026



Figure XXVI. Leva Kusari, *"tapestry"* - Part of *"The Scent of Heaven"*, 2026



Figure XXVII. Leva Kusari, Entry point into "*tapestry*" - Part of "*The Scent of Heaven*" 2026



Figure XXVIII. Leva Kusari, *"Basin" and "tapestry"* - Part of *"The Scent of Heaven"* 2026



Figure XXIX. Leva Kusari, "*Basin*","*47 gol" and "tapestry"* - Part of "*The Scent of Heaven*" 2026



Figure XXX. Leva Kusari*, "Basin","47 gol" and "tapestry"* - Part of *"The Scent of Heaven"* 2026



Figure XXXI. Leva Kusari, Close-up of "*Basin*" - Part of "*The Scent of Heaven*" 2026



Figure XXXII. Leva Kusari, Close-up of "*Basin*" and "*47 gol*" - Part of "*The Scent of Heaven*" 2026



Figure XXXIII. Leva Kusari, Close-up of "*tapestry*" - Part of "*The Scent of Heaven*" 2026



Figure XXXIV. Leva Kusari, Close-up *of "tapestry"* - Part of *"The Scent of Heaven"* 2026



Figure XXXV. Leva Kusari, *"The Scent of Heaven"* 2026

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