



*darshan*

*memories of a performance installation*

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los angeles  
2010*

*Dear Rasika,*

*I would like to extend a warm invitation to you to be my personal audience member: the witness to whom I dedicate and address my performance of “darshan.” Rather than directing my performance to everyone, I will largely be offering my performance to an audience of one -- you. I’d like to tell you beforehand that this could feel rather intimate, and I ask that you stay with me throughout the course of the performance. Also, because most of the other audience members will be free to move about the site, you might feel as if they are sometimes looking at you during the performance.*

*If any of this does not appeal to you, please give this invitation to someone who would welcome the experience. However, if you would like to take me up on this invitation, please obtain a container of water and bring it out to the performance site. Find one of the dancers, pour the water into the metal bowl on the ground in front of her, and then take a seat in front of the bowl.*

*I look forward to dancing for you soon.*

**time 1 site 1. invitation.**

The audience gathers at the designated meeting spot and is greeted by a guide. Several randomly selected audience members receive a letter from one of the dancers inviting him or her to be that dancer's personal audience member. The rest of the audience is told that they may move around the performance site as they wish throughout the course of the performance. After gathering the containers of water, the guide leads the audience outside to a wooded area. It is the cusp of spring, buds emerging on dormant branches, dead leaves carpeting the ground.



**time 1 site 2. installation.**

The dancers and musician are situated throughout the site: sitting under the canopy of a tree, lying in a patch of dead sticks that resemble a dry skeletal marsh. Sunlight, the sparse sound of Japanese bells played in chanchar tala, wind and the occasional bird song filter through spreading branches. A passerby walks through and glances, curiously, at the performers.

*I am a plant among plants. The insides of my body parched, I reach, gently crumbling, longing for water. Sun-drenched and wind-blown, lying on my side breathing, I feel the environment in 360 degrees, allow its shifting textures and forms to inform my dance of thirst and longing.*



**time 2 site 2. convergence.**

The audience arrives and fans throughout the site, three of them carrying cups of water. Each of them finds a dancer and winds their way towards her individual alcove, one moving in straight purposeful lines, another irregularly side-stepping the scrabbly foliage. They discover the bronze singing bowl half masked by leaves on the ground, and pour water into it. Sit on the ground, settling down to watch.

*I feel you approaching, the sound of footsteps crunching leaves.*

*Then the pour of liquid hitting metal: WATER.*

*Hearing the trickle, I become more active in my longing for water,  
and my performative focus contracts slightly, orienting itself to your gaze.*



*Your gaze is the gaze of the sun. We do the dance of seeing. I drink in your gaze, memorize your face. Head cocked a little. The delicate crinkle between your eyebrows, the irregular texture of skin starting to age, the bloom of dark hair and your curious black eyes. Closing my eyes, keeping your image in my mind's eye, my*



*body traces my remembering. Open my eyes again as a plant opens its leaves to the sun, to find you in another position, leaning towards me, cheek resting in hand. I see, simultaneously, you in the present and your previous image. I see you and see beyond you, near and far: your face, the back-lit weave of tree branches, the endless sky beyond. And I feel how you notice me seeing you.*



*Light shines off the water in the bronze bowl. Tentatively, wordlessly asking your permission, I reach towards the water. The cool pierce of liquid entering fingertips, dripping onto the palm of my hand. Water enters hungrily through pores, sucked into my dry salt creature plant body, dries out again. My hand reaches, traces a trail of water up my arm to my neck. I imagine the liquid penetrating through my skin, loosening the dry twist of muscle fibers as water rushes through my body, stilling in an eddy, dripping and squeezing out through pores.*

**time 3 site 2. Nana Buruku.**

The audience continues to wander through the site, focusing in on a single dancer splashing dripping water, pausing to notice the tiny yellow buds emerging on a tree branch, moving back to take in the scene as a whole. One dancer picks up her bowl and drinks. A quavering vibratone replaces the sound of the gongs as she begins to sing, in Yoruba, a Candomblé song for the orixá, Nana Buruku.

*ji nana ewa      ewa ewa e                      The other side of her face is beautiful too.*  
*ji nana ewa      ewa ewa e*

A few audience members sing the response to the song, and the movement of the three dancers starts to diverge further. One sits upright, accompanying her singing by the gestural storytelling of Indian dance. Another slowly pounds and grips the earth, while the third opens and closes the soft parts of her body.



*As I drink I become Nana, oldest of the female orixás; I start to sing. You draw nearer, curiously, as I speak with my hands and face, telling you of my domain of still waters and muck, my radiance and diseased old age. Dipping my hands in the water, in the rotting leaves and dirt beneath us, I describe how life emerges from and returns to me; how man was molded from the mud at the bottom of my waters; of my son Omolu, god of death and smallpox; of my other son Oxumaré, the shining rainbow after a storm.*



*Flowers bloom in my pores, giddily fast or reluctantly, then shrivel up. You watch as I show you the spots on my body where this is happening.*



*Mud fills my pores, veins. I grip the old earth, mixing it with water, smearing it on my skin before your quiet, open gaze.*

**time 4 site 2. procession.**

The song dies away as the singing dancer stands up with her bronze bowl and a mallet, asking her personal audience member to follow her. Together, they walk slowly toward the musician, the performer playing chanchar tala on her bowl with the mallet. The other dancers also leave their sites with their audience members, dripping water from their bowls onto the earth.



Meeting in front of the musician, they acknowledge him and turn towards the audience, which has gathered in front of them on the path. Slowly, the performers pour the water onto the ground and kneel with the bowls in front of them.



They steadily meet the gaze of the audience, who joins them in the collective act of listening to the quiet, densely intricate sounds of a kaida, a North Indian rhythmic composition, played on a ceramic double-headed drum. The piece ends with the performers closing their eyes to a single resonant strike of a low Japanese bell.

## Notes

The Sanskrit word *darshan* refers to a fluid, tactile, and reciprocal mode of seeing: an exchange of gazes that does not allow one to be a passive spectator, but transforms both the looker and the looked at.

This book consists of bodily memories, performance score, and visual documentation of “darshan,” a site-specific performance installation conceived and directed by Cynthia Lee that took place on 5 April 2009 at Swarthmore College, PA. Lenny Seidman provided a live sound score on Japanese bells, tabla, and hadjini; movement performances were by Liza Clark, Rebecca Patek, and Cynthia Lee.

Material for “darshan” was developed at The Swarthmore Project, a residency program for choreographers and dancers sponsored by Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA.