



## Preface

*This essay is written from a location that has been, and continuously is, subject to colonializing practices. The land on which the author's office sits, is Nonotuck land, with the Nipmuc and the Wampanoag to the east, the Mohegan and Pequot to the south, the Mohican to the west and the Abenaki to the north.*

# Time to fly

von Ninette Rothmüller

This is the third and last essay in a series of autobiographical, ethnographic comedies published in this journal.<sup>1</sup> Here we are again – grand finale this time – excuse my appearance, I have lost the ground under my feet. Under one foot to be honest; the right one that is. Yeah, that's right, good that I have a second one.

Before you ask "What happened?" let's just agree to fly high today, not just because changing ones' perspective is a healthy, yet rarely practiced, exercise. No, I know, we are trying to understand others' perspectives from time to time, but I am talking about practicing it. Over and

over again, let's say from 7:00 to 8:00 every morning. That's right, when you try to get the kids ready for school, your mom calls with questions about a recipe, the coffee jar is empty and the love of your life can't find their charging cable – primetime for practicing taking another perspective. Sounds good? Well, I am proud of you.

Back to our task, as I suggested, let's fly high, not only to change our perspectives on things, but because if ya don't fly, I ain't comin' – not because I am stubborn, but because I can't. Period.

### Paving the Path

As I write these lines, road workers are paving the road in front of our house. It is loud, the walls vibrate from the steamroller and the workers recommend that we carry the dogs across the street, so that they don't get stuck

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<sup>1</sup> The first two essays, which include further information on the writing approach can be accessed here <https://budrich.de/en/news/part-i-essay-series-ninette-rothmuller/> and <https://budrich.de/en/news/part-ii-essay-series-ninette-rothmuller/>.

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in the hot asphalt. Ehm, yes thank you, this sounds like a plausible request, except that I can't carry anyone reliably, not even myself. Thus therefore, let's get our wings out. Yes, I know, you might not have used them for a while, who knows where they are and when you finally find them, they are dusty and wrinkled. Not my fault! I can't help you here, keep your stuff in order, I mean at least the essentials, wings, dreams, mirrored sunglasses, and such.

Anyhow, the road work is loud, yet the workers are paving the road only for me, my husband assures me, reminding me that I had complained about the bumps in the road whenever we bike over it; if you want to call it biking that is; we will get to that later. My husband is a single child, every fiber of himself is, things either happen for him and only for him or for the sake of one of his loved ones. Never for any other reason. So, that's why the road is paved for my convenience only. Sounds lovely in a chilling way. I can't write when it's noisy, I think, as the smell of the asphalt hits my forehead. I am a sensitive writer, I am, let's just face it, it's hard enough to write comedy when one is in pain. But that's the score, that's the condition we are in, so are you coming or not?

### **Come on in – wobble along**

Come on in – close your eyes (and yes, continue reading) and imagine that your right foot is on fire, it is burning, yet, at the same time it feels like you are wearing a tight wet sock that is plugged into a socket, waves of electricity are crawling up your leg, making every light touch unbearable. To add some fun, your foot changes colors like a disco ball (age check: are you with me? If yes, you are, just as much as I am: old). The foot is shiny and recently it grows hair where hair has never grown before. Disgusting, I think – “oh, yes”, my neurologist palpitates with satisfaction rubbing his palms in delight, “that's exactly the thing damaged nerves do.” Well, I am glad to hear that the damaged nerves in my foot do exactly what they are supposed to do: going berserk.

What happened, your wrinkled forehead still asks with polite insistence. Well, for those of us who are linear time lovers, let's start from the beginning. Meaning, let's start from where we left it last time. Remember, when we last

met, I got against all odds, married, with a cast on my right foot, after breaking the navicular bone two days prior to my wedding slipping in the kitchen. At urgent care, a doctor's assistant read the x-ray, explaining that it is unusual to break this bone, and that part of the bone broke off completely and is hovering a respectable distance from the rest of the bone. The nurse who we get to see next, has muscular, fantastically colorful tattooed arms and explains in a monotonous voice, as he puts on a tight air cast, that this will hurt for a while, that we should come back in seven weeks and ... bye.

Fast forward, during the weeks after the fracture my foot burns at night as if on fire. I have never broken a bone before and think that this might be normal. One week into wearing the cast, I share with my husband that some movement practitioners believe that taking casts off after a week and introducing movement is best. Something deep inside of me tells me that I should do just that. I don't. After five years, I am finally health insured, I feel obliged and bow my head passively to the medical instructions imparted on me. Great, guess what I got out of it? A semi-chronic disability; the nerves in my foot are damaged.

### **Soaring**

Let's pause. Or even better, let's look at it all from high above. Are you soaring yet; wings all unwrinkled? Now draw tight circles in the air, and look at the scenario from some distance. I broke my foot in a place that has a long history of limiting women's mobility. A women's place is in the kitchen I can still hear my grandmother sigh. Next, as if what happened had no feminist learning effect on me, I oblige to the male doctor's assistant treatment plan: squeeze this foot (including the calf – for no reason) into a tight plastic cast and suck it up. Then, I do not follow my instinct to take the cast off and throw it into a corner. Yep, you might think, I didn't deserve any better – how could I have been so stupid? I mean, I hold a degree in Gender Studies, so really one should think that I should have known better. But nope, regardless of how well I have published in Gender Studies, it turns out that I am totally nonsense at applying what I am writing about in my everyday life. Same with you?

### Cowards to the left of me – Jokers to the right<sup>2</sup>

Six weeks after breaking my foot, I finally buy into one of my mother-in-law's emoji-fueled texts, forcing me to see a famous pediatricist one state over, whose father is a friend of the family and who, at the age of eight or so, once went skiing with my husband during a joint family vacation – so really, he is qualified.

The pediatricist looks tired, pretends to be in denial of a joint family vacation forty years ago, and with eyes wide open, he stares at my shiny, black-yellow, swollen, stiff foot. "The fracture is not your problem. You have complex regional pain syndrome<sup>3</sup>", he says and leaves the room hastily, reassuring us that he will be right back. We never see him again. Instead a nurse appears, reassuring us that there is nothing Doctor S. can do for us.

On the drive home, I check the Internet for complex regional pain syndrome – CRPS. The first page that opens informs the reader that one of the nick names for this rare condition is suicide disease. Now, take a guess why. Yeah, it's getting chilly here, isn't it? Doesn't that make us feel good, first the doctor runs away, then we learn the telling nickname that my new companion goes by. From here nothing is the same and that's why, just in case you haven't done so yet, I urge you to get your wings out. NOW! Did you hear me!?!

The morning after the diagnosis, I call a physiotherapist – PT. My condition is rare, she has no idea what I am talking about, and since that is so, she puts a smile into her voice and declares with confidence, "you will get through this, I can see you at 2 today". As if getting out one of the yellow UHU Alleskleber tubes of adhesive that my mother sends in likewise yellow DHL packages from time to time, I glue myself to her sentence: "You will get through this." Ok, I think, I am on it. She's my joker. You can guess who the coward is, can you?

### How to speed-wobble

I call specialists for a month. No one is as brave as my PT, no one wants to see me. Makes ya feel good, doesn't it? I, for my part, do every exercise assigned from my PT. With a mirror between my legs, staring at the mirrored image of my left foot moving back and forth, I speak to myself "I am moving my right foot forward and I am moving my right foot back." Just kidding myself, I can neither move nor feel my right foot, but my brain is liking the joy ride and rolls right with it. And don't we forget this all the time – our brains get fooled so easily, willing to believe almost everything we, a politician or salesman tells it. Scary, right?

My daughter, a very solution oriented 9-year-old, suggests that I don't bother with all this limping, but use wings instead. Would love to, except that I am a grown-up and like most grown-ups, I can't fly (anymore). Sighing at my inability to fly, she sets up movement parcours for us. I am supposed to pick up pencils and feathers with my foot. VERY FUNNY, I think, beads of sweat forming on my forehead, hands clenching into fists.

I want to walk. It's hell.

Weeks later, my husband can't drive me to one of my physio appointments. I decide to walk instead. The ground is icy, the road next to me busy – perfect conditions to fail. I am wearing sexy orthopedic boots and Google maps promises that I'll make it in 17 minutes to the physio office. It takes me close to 2 hours. I can't walk; I speed-wobble. My hurting foot can't sense the ground. I decide that my only chance to make it is to not walk with my foot, but with my will. I am walking; I am will-walking. Just in case you hadn't fathomed yet, I come from a long line of stubborn women.

Did you ever realize that the word born is in stub-born – as in the ability to create new beginnings? And what about stub, I hear you say. Stub originates from middle English and means tree stump – a stump that's cut off. Very telling! My foot is certainly cut off from any conversations with my central nervous system. Like Major Tom (if you are still with me, you are not only old, but have doubtful taste when it comes to which music to dance to

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2 This is a paraphrasing of lyrics from the song "Stuck in the Middle with You" written by Gerry Rafferty and Joe Egan (1972).

3 For information on complex regional pain syndrome please visit <https://med.stanford.edu/pain/about/chronic-pain/crps.html>.

under our disco balls – just like me) we can think of my foot as perhaps, I mean just maybe, still hovering somewhere out there on the outskirts of my body-system. “Back at ground control, there is a problem.”<sup>4</sup> Grounding through my foot is impossible. I finally agree with my daughter - time to fly.

Next, a 35-year-old wish comes true. WOW! First, I don't even realize, that my wish was granted. Hobble-speeding over the icy side-walk towards the PT office, eyes fixed to the ground, one step, one more, swaying left and right, dangerously out of control like a ship in a storm, I suddenly realize that not a single car had honked at me from behind and no man had yelled at me, uninvited, “and how are we doing today, honey?” There we go, are you done with chauvinistic remarks yelled at you from the cabin of a truck? Don't spend your life waiting for a change. Be the change, start wobbling down the road and I promise, no-one will bother to honk. Because wobbling ain't sexy.

#### **Ain't no mountain high enough<sup>5</sup>**

Today my diagnosis is 6 months, dozens of specialist visits, mounting medical bills and hundreds of miles of driving in the passenger seat next to my husband old. Stairs I best take on all fours side by side with our dog, who is wagging her tail into my face with excitement. Walking is easiest holding someone's hand, and mobility beyond the edge of our yard, let alone driving, a dream. The nerves in my foot are injured. Nerves heal slowly, if at all. I am in a hurry. Never mind, pack up your wings and get your bike helmet out, will you?

Generally speaking, my husband and I have little in common. Sounds familiar? I recommend you roll with it. At least I do, rolling with my husband that is; on the tandem bike – only recently of course, since I can't bike by myself anymore. My gaze fixed to my husband's duck-butt (he is wearing padded bike pants), I am trying to love and laugh, as pain rages in my foot. And so, we pedal, I sit up straight, as I can't lean forward to grip the handlebar. Like with walking, I balance through my will, free handling,

like an acrobat. Got your tutu out? I also can't push the pedals, but I am moving my foot up and down with them.

My husband is good at running away – now, finally, who would have thought, this feature comes in handy. He is pedaling as if our life depends on it. However, much he pedals on the tandem, I am keeping up with him. Yeah man, go, go, go. Ain't escape this woman.

In February, every edge of a carpet was a canyon, my foot could not cope with any uneven surface, now my husband and I are climbing up washed out trails on a tandem that isn't built for such adventures.

Turns out that what we have in common, is that we are movers and doers. Not a bad combination when hit with a condition that has the potential to make you stop moving altogether because it is too painful to do otherwise. What did I learn from this? To never stop looking for what we might have in common with others. I know you didn't ask me my opinion, never mind.

#### **Landing somewhere on lost land**

What's next? I don't know. What I do know, is that I am an expert at being in limbo. My immigration status is not yet finalized, I have no travel card and thus the option to travel to Germany to see my family, from which my daughter and I have been separated for many years now, is suspended, last month my latest employment project ended, I am married (which seems to just be another word for hovering in the sense that the path we chose to walk together is subject to daily negotiations), and I have lost the ground under my feet; hanging above it on bouncy suspenders so it feels. How does one live like that?

To be able to control one's life by making informed choices as an individual or as a community is a privilege. It is a concept taken for granted. However, isn't it that the majority of people in this world, this includes children, elders, people with various abilities and immigration statuses, imprisoned persons and so on, live without the chance to control their lives and make informed decisions for themselves. And here I am, after years during which I experienced food insecurity, I am now ordering baked goods from a local, artisanal bakery, complaining

4 See: “Major Tom, völlig losgelöst” by Peter Schilling (1983).

5 See: “Ain't No Mountain High Enough” by Nickolas Ashford and Valerie Simpson (1966).

about the wait time of the phone loop. Have I lost my mind? Is that what I actually lost? Do you know where yours is? Stored away with your wings? Get your mind out of the closet!

Two weeks ago, I was listening to a talk presented by a citizen of the Nipmuk nation, Andre Strongbearheart Gaines Jr.<sup>6</sup>. No land under his feet. The land under his nations' citizens feet, not lost, but taken. The land under his neighboring tribes' feet: taken; stolen. Thousands betrayed. The house I currently live in was built in approximately 1760. Who was the land taken from and how? I am immigrating. Andre invites all audience members, who are predominately white, to dance with him. I can hardly walk, but there are invitations to dance one cannot decline. I dance and my pain is just a splinter of a fraction of the pain the world is in. Who do you decide to dance with? What are you dancing for? Finally found your mind?

What's next? Perhaps, I will never be able to drive again, never play soccer with my child again, never... So what? I mean, really! So what!

### Stand Firm

One week ago, I listened to a yoga teacher of mine. Like my daughter's grandparents on Skype, my yoga teacher has shrunk to the size of my laptop screen. She reads poetry by Kabir:

*Be strong then, and enter into your own body; there you have a solid place for your feet. Think about it carefully! Don't go off somewhere else! Kabir says this: just throw away all thoughts of imaginary things, and stand firm in that which you are.*

That's next. Stand firm in that which you are. Not in solitude, not for your own cause. The world needs you. Find your place. Stand up. Invite others. Reach out.

Sounds cheesy? I hope you laughed reading the trilogy I promised to write, not knowing what I got myself into. I hope you laughed reading about my pain and giggled at my daughter's phantasy. During these three essays I lend you my life. I invited you to crack up laughing about it. In the first essay I promised that I will harvest stories from my life in the form of anecdotal comedy as a means of developing socially critical questions from the 'place' of self-reflective humor. In this and in the last two essays I have asked undisciplined questions. How will you answer them? Will you?

Now, it's time to look up from these pages. Take any keyword this trilogy served you with: immobility, forced separation, immigration, colonialization, or love. Take any, I don't care – and do something with it that has the potential to better the world around you. I really don't care what. I am done – my word count is over succeeded. I may be dismissed. You are on your own now – or not, if you decide to be with others, how ever inconvenient it may be.

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6 For more information about Andre's work please visit <https://www.andrestrongbearheart.com/> and <https://www.ohketeau.org/about-us>.

**The author**

Dr. Phil. Ninette Rothmüller is currently based at the Orfalea Center for Global and International Studies at the University of California in Santa Barbara, USA. With a background in Cultural Studies, Social Work and Arts, her work is concerned with who humans are to, and with, each other under various circumstances, such as severe crises. Her work applies a gender perspective to the thematic areas of trauma, fear, and social solidarity. In 2021, Ninette Rothmüller published her book “Women, Bio-medical Research and Art” (Verlag Barbara Budrich).



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