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An advocate for women's rights, LGBT rights and freedom of speech, Shafak is an inspiring public speaker and twice a TED Global speaker. Shafak contributes to major publications around the world and she was awarded the medal of Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. In 2017 she was chosen by Politico as one of the twelve people 'who will give you a much needed lift of the heart'. Shafak has judged numerous literary prizes, chaired the Wellcome Prize and is presently judging the Orwell Prize. *www.elifshafak.com*

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IT WAS MY FIRST DAY in Istanbul, a breezy evening in September, many moons ago now. Young, and aspiring to become a writer, I had moved to the city without knowing anyone, following an instinct I could neither identify nor betray, and rented a tiny flat in one of its most cramped, chaotic and cosmopolitan quarters, close to Taksim Square. From the teahouse across the narrow street I could hear the roll of backgammon dice over wooden board, the cries of seagulls darting and diving to snatch a sandwich from the hand of an unsuspecting passerby. But now it was late into the night, and the teahouse was closed, the seagulls roosting on rooftops. There were no curtains or blinds on my windows and bathed in the pale light from a street lamp outside I sat on a cardboard box full of books and papers, listening to the sounds of the unsleeping city. I must have dozed off for I woke up to the clamour of shouting.

I looked out and there she was, walking down the street, limping furiously as she carried a shoe with a broken heel in one hand while doggedly keeping on the other shoe. Clad in a short skirt, a silk blouse. A tall transgender woman. I knew the neighbourhood was home to sexual minorities, this being one of the relatively liberal quarters of the city, although their lives and livelihoods were constantly overshadowed by social prejudice and systematic discrimination. With no other job opportunities available, many within the local transgender community were either sex workers walking the streets or employed in the bars, clubs and taverns that formed Istanbul's night-time economy. In areas a stone's throw away undergoing rapid gentrification they had been driven out by police brutality but there was still a considerable close knit and proud community on my street, namely the *Street of Cauldron Makers*.

As she passed under my window, I could hear her talking to herself, and I was able to catch some of the words in her soliloquy. Someone – perhaps a lover, perhaps the whole city – had treated

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her badly, unfairly. She was sad, but more than that she was angry.

It started to rain, and the drops quickened, drip drip drip.
A single heel echoed against the cobblestones, tap tap tap.

I watched her until she turned the corner at the end of the street. I had never before seen a woman so visibly broken, and yet stubbornly carrying on. I felt guilty for not opening the window and talking to her, asking if she was all right. I also felt ashamed because my first reaction had been to retreat into the safety of my flat as though I feared her melancholy might be contagious. It remained etched in my brain, the similarities and the contrasts. Her loneliness, which I sensed was no different from my loneliness. Yet my timidity as opposed to her boldness. She had had enough of Istanbul, I hadn't even begun to discover it. But more importantly, she was a strong fighter, I was just an observer.

Many years have passed since then. I no longer live in Istanbul. But today, as I sit at my desk in London to write about our polarised and troubled world, I find myself remembering that moment, remembering her, and I find myself thinking about anger and loneliness and hurt.

*

The pandemic. As the coronavirus swept round the globe killing hundreds of thousands, putting millions out of work and shattering life as we knew it, board signs appeared randomly in public parks across London. 'When all this is over, how do you want the world to be different?' the signs asked. What *all this* meant was not explicit in the question; passersby were expected to work out for themselves what it implied – this sudden disruption of our daily routine, this sense of being caught in the swell of uncertainty and the fear of what is to come, this major global health crisis with long-term economic, social and possibly political consequences, this tunnel that we, as humanity, must go through without any easy guesses as to how or when it would end or

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whether another outbreak of a viral disease might happen again in the near future.

The boards were deliberately left blank so that underneath the question people could write their own answers, and many had. Of all the comments scribbled hastily there, one in particular stayed with me. Somebody had etched out in bold letters, 'I want to be heard.'

When all this is over I want to live in a different world where I can be heard.

It was a personal cry. But, in many ways, it felt like a collective cry too.

'Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' hierarchies?' asked the poet and novelist Rainer Maria Rilke in his *Duino Elegies*, written and published in the earlier part of the twentieth century. It was a different time back then. Today, in the twenty-first century, in a deeply divided and increasingly tangled world, craving dignity and equality, overwhelmed by the speed of change and the acceleration of technology, our shared feeling is, 'Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the humans' hierarchies?'

People who have much to say, a distinctive story to tell, often do not do so because they fear their words will fall on deaf ears. They feel excluded from political power and, to a large extent, from political and civic participation. Even if they were to shout their grievances from the rooftops of Westminster – or Brussels or Washington or New Delhi – they doubt it would have the slightest impact on public policy. Not only management and authority, power and wealth, but also data and knowledge are increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few – and a growing number of citizens feel left out, not so much forgotten as never noticed in the first place. As their disillusionment deepens, so does distrust even

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