



Source: Elaine Sciolino, 'Iran backs Hezbollah in Lebanon', *New York Times* in *International Herald Tribune* online, 19/07/06.

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I knew the ceiling as I knew a body that lay beside me constantly, pressed close so I could feel its every contour. I watched the light pass over the cracks in the plaster so often that I could determine the time by the shadows.

I had been told that my illness had no definite duration. It could last for a couple of months or the rest of my life or anywhere in between. At home I lay in bed to wait it out. It was me and the ceiling, indefinitely.

I used my time to imagine what everyone else in the world was doing. There was no need to rush because potentially I had the rest of my life to devote to this task. Light came through my window at sunrise and began to creep across the ceiling and I fixed my eyes on it and picked up my thoughts where I had finished at sunset the day before.

My family watching television at the other end of the house.

The neighbours eating sausages.

The sour-faced woman who worked in the pharmacy rubbing foot lotion in between her toes.

Couples in houseboats on the Hawkesbury River, organising stamp collections or cutting up onions.

There were three million people in my city and it was taking a long time to get through them. Already a year had passed and I was still stuck in the outer suburbs, among AA meetings, fixing lawnmowers, crying over jazz records. I had barely moved from my bed and had yet experienced many mundane and strange things. The thought that this could continue with no foreseeable end was terrifying. The world was so full of people doing and feeling that surely at any moment the globe would drop out of orbit from the heaviness of it all.

By now my ceiling had morphed into a new map of the world. Each crack and spot indicated a psychic category. These reflected everything I had felt vicariously over the past year: loneliness, frisson, pride, bliss, melancholy...and the rest. It was a map of possibilities. Every morning, the light unveiled it and I felt the weight of all I had imagined so far. I began to long for night, when I could switch on the lamp and dissolve the ceiling in murky dark. At night I listened to the radio and imagined

the voices on it to be the voices of the dead. No longer in the world and therefore uncharted. I fell asleep to their voices and my dreams were blank.

Come morning, I continued to embroider the map:

A skinny woman leading a cow by a rope.

A man running down a flight of stairs, taking three at a time.

A girl complaining to her father that he is driving too fast.

A woman thinking about waves splashing over the sea wall in Havana.

A man wearing only underpants.

A girl wincing as her hair is brushed.

The ceiling became heavier and heavier.

By the time the house was sold, despite years of lying in bed thinking, I had not even been through one million people. I photographed the ceiling before leaving my room for the final time, but nothing of the map showed up on the print. Just white paint and a bare light bulb, the kind of photograph you might pick out of a gutter then drop again—boring. Soon the house was demolished and replaced by a six bedroom monster with Corinthian columns.

In my new house, my room was so dark that it always seemed to be night. I slept and slept until one day I woke craving sunlight. I walked outside and the blue sky stretched above me, clear and infinite, empty of anything human.

Now, the times when I wake up under an unfamiliar ceiling, I keep my eyes fixed on it. For a moment, I imagine myself to be anywhere. And because anywhere is too vast, I have the feeling that my life has been paused in this second of non-recognition.

For the second that I do not know where I am, I am as blank as an empty coffee cup. But, with a blink, everything I once mapped floods back in.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Vanessa Berry.*