

Harbour

An Anarchist Literary Journal

*a harbour is a place
from which to venture out*



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Prose

Lemonade	3
The Sound of Rushing Water	5
The Passenger	7
Red Clay	12
athena	18
Something Atavistic	21
I Was There	25
Willington's Overlook	28
Die Freiheit des Äthers	29

Poems

survival	6
light	24

Art

Our Lady of the Barricades	17
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To avoid spoilers or prematurely triggering readers, content notices are all on the final page of this journal instead of at the start of each work.

Bios

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Hex is a hacker and anarchist agitator. He organized under the first Trump administration. He was the first protestor shot under the Trump administration. More of his content can found on the Fediverse at kolektiva.social/@Hex.

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Jon O'Mercy (they/them) is an anarchist writer living in Berlin. When they're not writing stories or watching horror movies, they're often found petting dogs and watching birds. They can sometimes be found on kolektiva.social/@sv.

Juan Tramontina (er/ihm) wuchs auf verschiedenen Kontinenten auf und landete schließlich wieder in Deutschland. Frühe Schreibexperimente zerschellten zunächst am hereinbrechenden Leben. Heute verdingt er sich als Übersetzer. Und nebenher schreibt er auch. Er ist manchmal auf Mastodon unter literatur.social/@JuanTramontina zu finden.

Juniper C. Rhodes (they/them) is an anarchist living somewhere on the European continent. They are ensnared by the melancholy of the world, and sometimes they try to cope with it using words.

Kimera (he/him) is a southern European queer anarchist currently living in Berlin. He writes poetry and fiction and makes digital art and comics. He recently published the zine *In the Heart of the Beast — Overcoming the Problems of the Anarchist and Radical Leftist Scene and Striving towards Revolution*.

Yv is born and raised in the cracks of the Balkan diaspora between Greece and Bulgaria after the fall of the iron curtain. They found their place under the warmth of the anarchist thought and praxis across different cities in Europe, currently dwelling in the concrete jungle of Berlin.

Content Notices

The Passenger: Body horror.

The Sound of Rushing Water: Death, war, and body horror.

Call for Submissions

For those who are interested, our Fall 2025 issue will be on the theme of "Defiance," whatever that might be. Defying authority, expectation, or social constructs. Full details about the nature of the submissions and the guidelines can be found on our website. In addition to prose, poetry, and art, we'll also be accepting literary and artistic reviews of fiction, non-fiction, and other media such as films or artworks. Submissions will be accepted from **September 1st until the 30th** in both English and German. We hope to hear from you.

<https://en.scrappycapydistro.info/submissions>
<https://de.scrappycapydistro.info/beiträge>

Lemonade

Juniper C. Rhodes

Darren skipped a stone across the brown floodwaters that were still pooled in the underpass. After eight hops, it tumbled to a stop and sunk below the surface with a plop, not quite reaching the far concrete wall.

“Told ya, you couldn’t do it,” quipped Shamar as AJ slowly clapped.

“What, you think you can do better?”

“Oh no. Not at all. I’m just telling you that you can’t.”

Darren grinned. He had one stone left, carried from Courier’s Park down to the highway behind their shared flat in The Blight. It was round, smooth, flat, and not quite so big as the palm of his hand, seemingly nothing special, but it was imbued with the magic of a last chance. It had all the properties necessary for a perfect throw. “Watch me.”

He wound up, too a long step, and planted his left foot. Bending low, he slung his arm around and released it. It sailed a third of the way across, skipped, skipped again, but already it was losing too much speed. Shamar and AJ were already oooing as they saw the inevitable, and Darren dropped to his knees in mock shame as the stone, like all the others, disappeared, having failed bring him sweet victory.

“Gaydies and gentlethems, we regret to inform you that Darren Eiferson is a talentless hack with no skill whatsoever,” announced AJ to their audience of none, the inflection just as it was in childhood when they’d get up to the same antics.

Darren walked back up the off-ramp to where they were sitting, behind the barricades that said *Danger! Do Not Enter*, and dropped down beside the others. “And now that the entertainment’s come to an anticlimactic conclusion, we’ve naught to do but wait for the end times to consume the world,” he said.

Shamar and AJ forced out chuckles, but even though Darren had meant it lightheartedly, such jokes, habitual at this point, fell consistently flat. During the first flood it had been funny, a bit of playful hyperbole. If there hadn’t been another flood the year after, two after that, then six the year past, maybe they’d still be funny. As it was, they were just a bit too real. No one wanted to be told exactly how fast their ship was sinking.

The three of them sat in silence and stared at the filthy waters. Darren picked up his bottle of Penny Pint and took a swig. He wondered how many cars — surely there were several — were completely hidden under the water. Maybe one

of the dozens of people the news was reporting as missing was still strapped into a driver’s seat after crashing in the early flood waters and having never been pulled out.

The glass of his bottle making contact with the asphalt as he set it down was startlingly loud in the absence of the usual hum of city life. He had disturbed some sacred silence, and now they had to fill it. Shamar looked over at him and asked “What are you gonna miss most when all of this goes completely to shit?”

“What do you mean?”

“This. All this. One day it’s gonna be one too many fuck-ups and things are never gonna go back to normal. And when it does, what are you gonna miss?”

AJ took a sip from his beer and looked at him. Darren stretched his legs out and leaned back.

“Can I say the internet? Is that too big of a thing?”

“Nah, ’course not. But you gotta give us a bit more. What about it? Why?”

“Chat. Entertainment. Knowledge. I dunno.”

He tried to look at the reflection of the sky in the water, but couldn’t really make it out. It was just brown. Dull, uninteresting brown.

“I’m gonna miss being able to keep in touch with people who are far away,” Darren continued. “My ma ’n pa are still out in the north coast, and I’d like be able to talk sometimes, but not so much that I’d want to move near them. My sister is still in West Vredis, and she’s not coming back any time soon. The whole Iellic Federation closed their borders, remember that? Yeah. Friends from first-school, ex-girlfriends, ex-boyfriends, all the types I’ve met.

“And yeah. New movies and music and geek shit like Encyclopedia Universum. I like being able to look up things like were all the Hysperellic kings in the ur 5th century? Real important shit like that.”

Shamar nodded and sipped his beer. “Word.”

Darren laughed. “Buddy, ‘word’ is a wildly insufficient response here. You gotta answer too.”

Shamar picked at the asphalt. “I should probably have had an answer lined up before I flapped my yap.”

“Probably.”

“I guess hope? Or maybe not really hope, but opportunity. You know how when we were kids our parents, or well, my parents, and I’m guessing yours too, you know how they would tell us the world was some blank page and all we have

to do is make our mark. Yeah, that’s long gone. I’m just trying to save up enough so I can get out head south where maybe I can find a way to ride this out into old age. I had hoped I could be someone or something. I had opportunities laid out, tons of ’em. Now I just see some boring cottage and farming as the only future where I survive to old age. It’s — ahh — not exactly the fulfilling and thrilling life I was told I would have.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Shamar threw a pebble at the *Wrong Way* sign and missed. It plinked into the water. He returned to picking at the asphalt.

“Lemons,” said AJ, unprompted.

“What?” replied Darren.

“I’m gonna miss lemons. Like. So much.”

“Seriously, lemons?”

“What? Have you never noticed that there are always lemons in the fruit basket in the kitchen?”

“We know you like lemons,” Shamar replied, “but that’s the thing you’re going to miss the *most*?”

“Yeah, probably. You need a good acid when you cook, and I don’t care much for vinegar. And my dads used to make the best lemonades growing up. That was our whole thing, back in Coettah, I tell ya. Mint lemonade, fermented lemonade, darkberry lemonade. We made all the kinds.

“And you can’t grow lemons where it gets too cold. Most don’t even come from around here. So what, weather gets more erratic and unpredictable, and no one’s gonna be building galleons to haul lemons across newly dangerous seas. Strange rains and droughts too. I think we’re going to be doing a lot of potato farming for a long time. Lemons, though, those will be hard to come by, I expect. Maybe I’ll be lucky if I can snag one per year.”

Shamar laughed. “Okay, so Darren here says ‘communication, culture, knowledge,’ and I say ‘hope and opportunity,’ and you say ‘lemons?’ Is that right?”

AJ inhaled. “Yes. And no, too. I really like lemons, but like... they’re just one instance of simple pleasure. I think there’s going to be a lot of things you can adapt to. You can make your own music, collect books, learn things from smart people. In a community, you build new connections locally where you don’t have them now, and they take the place of everyone you still talk to online. Or in your case, when you get that farm, you’ll just have a different set of opportunities. You don’t have the money now to make much of these so-called opportunities. But when money’s gone? There’s a lot you can do.”

Darren and Shamar looked at each other and laughed. “AJ”, Darren started, “you stupid idiot. I don’t get how you can say we’ll adapt to no internet by talking to more people but you won’t be able to adapt to not having lemons.”

AJ grinned. “Yeah but—”

Shamar cut him off. “You’ll learn to make lemonade out of flowers or find some weird bugs to cook with.”

“I know. Just... I’m really gonna miss lemons.”

They all laughed, and Darren threw an asphalt pebble at AJ. “Okay then, who wants to head home,” said Shamar as he stood, AJ and Darren following suit.

AJ said, as he brushed off his ass, “I’m actually going down to one of the displacement camps to help out tonight.”

“Really? Now?” said Darren.

“Yeah. I signed up for a shift. Six to midnight. I don’t know why I didn’t say anything, so yeah, late notice, but you two should come too. There’s still unfilled slots.”

Darren and Shamar looked at each other with uncertainty. AJ pointed at Darren. “You can get your fix of human contact.” He pointed at Shamar. “And you can get your fix of brave new opportunities.” He started walking up the off-ramp. “My boys, there are still futures to be had. Come along now.”

If Darren said yes, Shamar would too. If Shamar said yes, so would Darren. The next step was clear.

Darren hooked his thumbs through his belt loops and spat dramatically. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Wie von Ulla vorgeschlagen, hatte Mario die Leute für den nächsten Tag an einem anderen Ort eingeladen. Nachdem Ulla alle begrüßt hatte, überreichte er ihnen einen Ausdruck mit allen erforderlichen Daten und erläuterte die relevanten Parts seines Plans. Alle waren einverstanden.

Der Tag war gekommen. Pepe übersetzte im Kopf noch einmal Marios verschlüsselte Nachricht: Er sollte ab heute, dem 21. April (30 Tage im April plus 1 minus 10), einen Musiksender einstellen, der auf derselben Frequenz ausgestrahlt wurde wie Radio Lucha Silvestre in Mexiko-Stadt, nämlich UKW 106,8. Das war in Berlin der Jazz-Sender. Die für ihn interessante Sendung sollte jeweils um 22 Uhr (15 Uhr Ortszeit in Mexiko-Stadt plus Zeitverschiebung) ausgestrahlt werden. Und der Inhalt der Sendung sei auch für die anderen Gefangenen von Interesse.

Zum Glück hatte er mit Mario bereits in Mexiko über die damals keineswegs abwegige Gefahr eines Gefängnisauenthalts gesprochen und die dortige Methode erlernt, mit der verschlüsselte Daten vor den Augen des Gefängnispersonals ausgebreitet werden konnten. Jetzt hatte Mario sie einfach auf die hiesigen Verhältnisse angewandt. Um 22 Uhr war Einschluss. Normalerweise wäre da auch Nachtruhe gewesen, aber Licht und Strom blieben Corona-bedingt eine weitere Stunde eingeschaltet, am Wochenende sogar bis um Mitternacht. Cleveres Kerlchen, dieser Mario. Das Personal ließ sich ab da nicht mehr blicken. Pepe schaltete das Radio ein.

Als UKW-Sendeanlage bediente sich Mario einer selbstgebastelten Yagi-Richtantenne, die er auf dem Dach eines alten, umgebauten Unimog 404er installiert hatte. Sie war stark genug, die Frequenz des Jazz-Radios in der Umgebung der JVA zu überstrahlen. Den Unimog hatte er sich wiederum von einer Freundin geborgt, die damit im Februar eine Reise nach Usbekistan angetreten hatte, aber schließlich angesichts des Corona-Trubels von Tschechien aus nach Berlin zurückgekehrt war.

Gemeinsam mit Ulla und Inga, die Mario als einzige über diesen Teil des Plans eingeweiht hatte, wartete er im Unimog auf den Beginn der Aktion. Kurz vor 22 Uhr startete er die BigBlueButton-Konferenz. Das war wie Zoom, nur dass niemand eine Software installieren musste. Es reichte, eine Adresse im Netz aufzurufen, und, was ihm besonders gefiel, es war deutlich anonym als die sonstigen Plattformen. Ein befreundetes Technikkollektiv hatte auf einem isländischen Server Platz für diese Konferenzvariante zur Verfügung gestellt. Jede Gruppe von Angehörigen oder Freund:innen kam nacheinander in einen sogenannten Breakout-Room, der automatisch auf 30 Minuten eingestellt war und sich nach

Ablauf des Countdowns einfach schloss. Das Audio aus der Konferenz wurde unterdessen über einen Mischpult im Fahrzeug in die Sendeanlage eingespeist.

Um Punkt 22 Uhr startete Mario ein bereits vorher zusammengeschchnittenes Audio, das mit einem Jazz-Stück begann und dann erklärte, worum es gehen sollte. Zehn Minuten später knisterte es auf den Kopfhörern, als die ersten Stimmen aus dem Konferenzraum den Äther erreichten. „Was ist das denn für ein Zungenschlag?“, fragte Inga verwundert. „Das ist Arabisch“, antwortete er. „Von heute an werden, die hinter den Mauern einsitzen, jeden Tag andere Sprachen zu hören bekommen. Alle Familien und Freunde werden ihren Liebsten in ihrer eigenen Sprache Zuversicht spenden und ihnen Nachricht zukommen lassen können. Und solange die Wärter keinen plötzlichen Heißhunger auf nächtlichen Jazz verspüren, gibt es auch keinen Grund, warum das Ganze auffliegen sollte.“

In derselben Nacht, die Sendung für die Gefangenen war gerade zu Ende gegangen, hörte Pepe plötzlich Jubelgeschrei aus den Nachbarzellen. Dann hörte und sah er, worum es sich handelte: Draußen, vor den Toren der Anstalt, hatten Leute ein Feuerwerk gezündet. Genauso, wie er es bereits zu Silvester erlebt hatte, antworteten die Gefangenen mit Kloppapierrollen, die sie in Brand steckten und aus dem Fenster warfen.

trotzdem so lange gebraucht hatte, dass er einen Termin dafür bekam, währte nur kurz: Von den vier Rechnern im Raum war nur einer in der Lage, eine Skype-Verbindung aufzubauen. Tolle Wurst! Vor ihm war noch ein relativ junger Mann am Rechner, die Hände hatte er vor dem Gesicht zusammengeslagen. Seine halbe Stunde war offenbar gleich um. Voller Verzweiflung wandte er sich vom Rechner ab, um seinen Gesprächspartner:innen gegenüber die Tränen zu verbergen. Dabei riss er das Kopfhörerkabel aus der Buchse, und Pepe konnte noch die letzten Worte hören, bevor die Verbindung automatisch beendet wurde: „Papa, wann kann ich dich endlich wieder sehen??“

Pepe fühlte sich wie in Watte gepackt, als ob er von allem losgelöst war, ohne Kontakt mit der Realität, mit der Außenwelt. Wobei, war das draußen wirklich die Realität? Alles verschwamm. Insbesondere abends, aber auch tagsüber ließ ihn seine Wahrnehmung im Stich. Er meinte, im Augenwinkel Gestalten zu erkennen, hörte die Stimmen der Arbeitskollegen, als ob sie von weit her zu ihm durchdringen würden. Selbst im Gespräch mit seiner Familie gelang es ihm nicht, dieses Gefühl abzuschütteln. Er war von allem abgeschnitten, das ihm etwas bedeutete. Verdammte, wo blieb Mario?

Ulla war die erste, die sich bei Marios neuer Facebook-Gruppe meldete. Normalerweise wäre er nicht so aufgeregt gewesen, aber irgendwie war es dieses Mal anders. Denn Ulla hatte gleich ein persönliches Treffen vorgeschlagen. „Mit Maske natürlich. Und falls jemand fragt: Wir sind jetzt ja alle Familie, oder?“ , hatte sie ihm geschrieben. Mario gefiel ihre freche Art auf Anhieb. Ihrem Facebook-Profil hatte er bereits entnommen, dass sie um die 50 sein musste. Als er Ulla dann leibhaftig zu Gesicht bekam, war er ob ihrer Energie dennoch ziemlich überrascht. Sie war auch nicht alleine gekommen. Im Schlepptau hatte sie eine kleine Frau Mitte 40. Ulla stellte sie als Inga vor. Sie sprach nicht viel, aber das machte Ulla mehr als wett. „Ich mach’s kurz“, sagte sie. „Mein Mann hat unsere Kohle verzockt, dann den Staat beschissen und schließlich versucht, das Loch in der Haushaltskasse mit gefälschten Konzertkarten zu stopfen. Hat natürlich nicht gefunzt. Also sitzt er jetzt für ein Weilchen ein. Bei Inga ist es ihr Sohn. Und du siehst so aus, als ob du was im Schilde führst, wa?“

Es war der 12. April. Eine halbe Woche war seit dem Skype-Gespräch vergangen, drei Wochen seit Marios Besuch. Pepe erledigte seine Arbeit immer mehr in Robotermanier, den Blick starr geradeaus. Mehr als Grußfloskeln kamen ihm nicht über die Lippen. Auf dem Weg zurück in seine Zelle sprach ihn eine

Wärterin an und überreichte ihm einen Umschlag. Es war ein Brief von Mario. Endlich! Natürlich wurde er offen geborgenen Gefühl, und in der Folge profitieren auch deine Mitgefangenen. Ich glaube, es gibt ab dem 10. April eine besonders eingängige Sendung um 15:00 Uhr, wie damals bei Radio Lucha Silvestre. Also, bloß nicht verpassen!

Pepe schmunzelte. Endlich wusste er, was er zu tun hatte.

„Also, ich habe einen Treffpunkt, nämlich eine Ecke im Park, einige Hygienetipps zu Corona und natürlich die Uhrzeit rumgeschickt. Habe ich noch was vergessen?“, fragte Mario. Er spazierte gerade mit Ulla und Inga an der Spree entlang.

„An wen hast du das geschickt?“, wollte Ulla wissen. Mario zählte fünf Personen auf.

„Auweia“, entfuhr es Ulla.

„Wieso, was ist los?“, fragte Mario besorgt.

„Du hast den Vater von Moritz Schmidt eingeladen. Der ist leider alles andere als vertrauenswürdig und wird die ganze Sache ruinieren. Mein Vorschlag: Du lädst alle anderen zu einem neuen Termin ein, und wir schauen, was am ursprünglichen Termin passiert.“

Zum Ende der Arbeitsschicht in der Werkstatt passte Pepe ein paar Kollegen ab und überreichte ihnen eigens für sie getippte Anträge. Pepe kam es jedoch nur auf den kleinen Zettel an, der mit Tesafilm hinter dem Antrag klebte. Jedem einzelnen schärfte er ein, den Zettel nach dem Lesen sofort zu vernichten. Auf dem Zettel selbst stand das auch nochmal. Es war ein riskantes Vorgehen, aber er hatte keine Wahl. Anders ließ sich aktuell nicht unbeobachtet kommunizieren. Selbst die Besuche in den Zellen der Mitgefangenen, die sie normalerweise bis 21 Uhr in machen konnten, waren bis auf Weiteres ausgesetzt.

Mario musste zugeben, dass Ulla einen richtig guten Einblick ins Innenleben der JVA hatte. Da ihr Mann bereits lange eingesperrt war, sie ihn sehr regelmäßig besuchte und es sich zudem nicht nehmen ließ, den Kontakt zu den anderen Besucher:innen zu suchen, kannte sie fast alle, die dort ein- und ausgingen. Mario hatte versteckt hinter einem Baum im Park darauf gewartet, was passieren würde. Etwa eine halbe Stunde vor dem verabredeten Zeitpunkt tauchte eine Polizeistreife auf, die in einer gewissen Entfernung, aber mit Blick auf den Ort parkte. Ullas Tipp hatte sich ausgezahlt: Offenbar war die Streife mit dem Plan angerückt, bei einer illegalen Menschenansammlung Corona-Strafzettel zu verteilen. Doch außer Mario tauchte niemand auf.

The Sound of Rushing Water

Hex

As I write this, in 3 weeks it will have been four years since an intoxicated Trump supporter shot me. After my third surgery, my surgeon told me how close the bullet had been to the artery that runs in to my heart.

“Most people shot there just bleed out on the spot. The blood just dumps out like rushing water. There’s nothing anyone can do.”

His ability to repair a tattoo was top notch. His human skills were perhaps not quite as adept at times. This seems to be how surgeons are, in my experience, but I still enjoyed chatting with him.

This injury was not unfamiliar to me. In general, my dad didn’t really tell stories about Vietnam. So on the rare occasions he did, I listened. He only told this story once, but I paid close attention.

No one expected the Tet Offensive, since Tet is Vietnamese New Year. An offensive in asymmetric warfare isn’t always what one would think of as a military action. Though most of the offensive involved soldiers fighting each other, other things happened as well.

American soldiers were having dinner in the mess hall when the bomb went off. Apparently putting a landmine under a stack of plates in a mess hall wasn’t an uncommon way to carry out such an attack. Aside from the shrapnel from the mine, the plates shattered and plate fragments became projectiles.

There was a tiny hole in the man’s chest. My dad never talked about the blood, just that the hole was tiny and that there was no time. This man died in my dad’s arms in minutes. There was no time to operate, no time to act. My dad, who was a medic, was completely powerless in the situation. There was just a tiny hole, the sound of rushing water, and then a dead man in his arms.

I saw my dad cry once, at my grand father’s funeral. The war took away pieces of him one by one. He tore a ligament in his knee chasing a fellow soldier who’d just snapped and run off in to the jungle. There were no other medics in his unit, so he stayed until he could be relieved. By that time there was nothing anyone could do for his knee. After decades of pain, he’s now in a wheel chair.

Growing up I remember how often he had knee or back pain. This body was permanently scarred by the war. I knew that story. When he told the story about the mess hall, I started to understand the other scars.

Now I have my own.

I couldn’t convey the emotion. I still can’t. There are simply cold facts. I stare off, after reading this, to some distant place with a gaze that lacks focus. I can feel it. It’s the same stare, same cold recounting of facts, I recognize in the memory of my dad telling me about the Tet offensive.

He couldn’t have seen this coming. I expected to leave his trauma in the past, not to see it revisited on us for another generation. I look at my daughter, who’s six now, playing happily in the water.

There’s a strange continuity to history, one that doesn’t come through the stories of wars told from the perspective of nobles and presidents.

She asked me once, “Papa, when will I get my scars like you?”

survival

yv

survival of the fittest
 who wins
 when you eat yourself
 alive
 compete
 against your own
 to die
 to starve
 no choice
 but death
 a vicious game
 the loss in certain
 but we play along
 we operate
 we function
 under false assumptions
 under old opinions
 under declared states
 under lies
 upon lies
 upon lies
 upon lies
 open these gates
 burn the papers
 leave the states
 call their names
 pour the tears
 don't self-operate
 cooperate
 open your eyes
 and you'll see
 the closeness that you fear
 will set you free

So antwortete er: „Das war so: Ich war in einem großen Supermarkt einkaufen, hatte meinen Wagen mit unterschiedlichsten Lebensmitteln vollgeladen, hatte an der Kasse bezahlt und den Kassenbon eingesteckt. Dann bin ich wieder in den Supermarkt hineingegangen, hatte mir noch eine Packung Toilettenpapier untern Arm geklemmt und war mit Wagen und Klopapier wieder zur Kasse gegangen. Ich zeigte den Kassenbon für die Sachen im Wagen vor und bezahlte das Klopapier. Am Ausgang wurde ich jedoch von einem Detektiven aufgehalten. Scheinbar hatte dieser spitz gekriegt, dass ich den Inhalt meines ersten Einkaufswagens bereits in mein Auto geladen hatte.“ Ali und Mahmud blickten sich verwirrt an und unterhielten sich dann auf Arabisch weiter.

Es war nicht das erste Mal, dass Pepe auf diese Weise doppelte Einkäufe erledigt hatte, nur das erste Mal, dass er erwischt worden war. Dass die Lebensmittel für ein Solidaritätsevent gegen die staatliche Repression in Chile gedacht waren, hatte die RichterIn nicht weiter beeindruckt. Schließlich war er – aufgrund einer vorherigen Verurteilung wegen Landfriedensbruchs nach der Blockade eines Naziaufmarsches – bereits auf Bewährung.

An dem Nachmittag, als er Pepe besuchte, hatte Mario einen Arbeitsauftrag verschieben müssen. Das war mittlerweile eine halbe Woche her. Seine Auftraggeber:innen, eine Baugruppe, die am Stadtrand bei Strausberg ihren Traum vom schöner Wohnen im Grünen verwirklichte, hatten ihn für den Sonntag einbestellt, um den Termin nachzuholen. Eine „Baugruppe“ war für Mario einfach nur eine Baugemeinschaft, die grün-links-alternativ war oder sich so gab. In diesem Fall hatten sie jemanden eingestellt für kleinere Arbeiten, die noch anfielen, nachdem das Haus gebaut und die Aufteilung der Eigentumswohnungen vorgenommen worden war. Mario verdiente den Großteil seines weiteren Lebensunterhalts, indem er in solchen Projekten vornehmlich Maurerarbeiten durchführte, manchmal auch kleine Elektrikerarbeiten. Alles super alternativ, ohne Vertrag natürlich. An diesem Tag legte er in einem kleinen Bad die Fliesen. In einer der Pausen sah er endlich die Person, die er ansprechen wollte: ein Mitglied des Baukollektivs, der in einer Bezirksverordnetenversammlung im Innenstadtring saß.

„Hey, Olaf, du bist doch bei der Linkspartei...“, setzte Mario an.

„Ja, bei ‚Die Linke‘“, gab Olaf zurück.

„Ok, sei's drum. Könnt ihr inmitten dieses Corona-Wahnsinns nicht was tun zur Situation in den Knästen? Ihr seid doch Teil von R2G in Berlin...“

„Hmm. Woran denkst du?“

„Ich weiß nicht. Wie wär's damit, die Leute einfach rauszulassen?“ Als er bemerkte, wie Olaf die Augenbrauen zusammenzog, fügte Mario hastig hinzu: „Oder sie zumindest

solange unter Hausarrest zu stellen, bis die Epidemie vorbei ist?“

„Schwierig. Aber denk bitte nicht, dass wir untätig seien. Die Mühlen mahlen langsam, aber sie mahlen.“

Innerlich verdrehte Mario die Augen. Corona war doch vor einem Monat zur Pandemie erklärt worden und wütete bereits jetzt unter den Gefangenen. Worauf wollten sie denn noch warten?

An diesem Tag trat der erste Lockdown in Kraft.

Seine Schreibmaschine hatte Pepe tatsächlich zu einer ganzen Reihe von Kontakten verholfen. Echte Vertrauensverhältnisse ergaben sich daraus aber noch lange nicht. Das spürte er allzu deutlich, als er versuchte, die Leute in seiner Werkstatt zu organisieren. Er selbst hatte sich zu Beginn seiner Inhaftierung der Gefangenengewerkschaft angeschlossen. Im Gegensatz zu anderen Berliner JVs war er an seiner damit alleine. Die allermeisten Insassen wussten nicht einmal, dass es so etwas gab. Jetzt, in der Lockdown-Situation, in der sich die Gefangenen nur noch zum Arbeitseinsatz trafen, sprach er vorsichtig einzelne Leute darauf an.

Mahmud, der Libanese, winkte ab: „Ich komme in sechs Monaten raus. Was soll mir das jetzt bringen, außer Schere-reien?“

Pepe entgegnete: „Ja, aber so wie die Arbeit hier läuft, ist das nichts als Sklaverei. Dagegen müssen wir uns doch wehren. Mindestlohn wäre das Mindeste!“

Mahmud schüttelte nur den Kopf. Besser erging es Pepe mit anderen Werkstattkollegen auch nicht. Niemand wollte „unnötig Wellen machen“.

Mario hatte noch nie Facebook benutzt. Ihm war der Internetreise stets suspekt gewesen, aber in seiner Familie in Mexiko spielte sich das halbe Leben darüber ab. Alle hatten ein eigenes Profil und kommunizierten munter mit aller Welt über die Plattform. Letzten Endes war das auch der Grund, warum er auf diese Idee kam. Egal, was er darüber denken mochte, ganz normale Leute, insbesondere ältere Jahrgänge, setzten auf Facebook.

Als erstes meldete er sich bei Facebook an, allerdings unter Zuhilfenahme einer anonymen Handynummer von Freund:innen in Mexiko. Dann machte er sich eine eigene Facebook-Seite und erstellte eine Facebook-Gruppe unter dem Motto „Corona-Selbsthilfe für Angehörige und Freunde von Gefangenen“ für die JVA, in der Pepe einsaß.

Heute war Pepe dran, mit seiner Familie zu sprechen. Seit zwei Wochen gab es keine Besuche mehr, aber die Gefängnisleitung hatte auf den vier Rechnern im Informatikraum Skype installiert. Pepes Verwunderung darüber, warum es

Pepe im vergangenen halben Jahr natürlich mehrmals besucht, nämlich immer dann, wenn dessen Familie noch ein wenig Besuchskontingent übriggelassen hatte. Dabei hatte er nie sonderlich auf die Gefängnisanlage oder deren Umgebung geachtet, sondern lediglich auf den Besuchereingang. Doch bei der Recherche mittels Street View bei Google Earth musste er enttäuscht feststellen, dass im Gegensatz zur ungehinderten Außensicht auf mexikanische Gefängnisse von der Straße aus hier nur eine gräulich-verschwommene Wand zu sehen war, die einen Blick auf das Gebäude von seinem Bildschirm aus verunmöglichte. Er nahm sich vor, in den kommenden Tagen einen kleinen Spaziergang rund um den Knast zu unternehmen.

Pepe war bereits seit einem halben Jahr im Gefängnis, als die ersten Zeitungen über den neuartigen Coronavirus zu schreiben begannen. Jetzt war es Mitte März, das Virus war in aller Munde.

„Herr Schmitz, Ihnen ist sehr wohl bekannt, dass die Vermittlung von unbefugten Nachrichten während der Besuchszeiten untersagt ist“, sagte der Beamte, der soeben den Besuch abgebrochen hatte. Pepe versuchte den Spruch zu ignorieren, in der Hoffnung, der Typ würde den Vorfall nicht weiter aufblasen. Er hatte Glück, denn der Beamte ließ von ihm ab, als er auf dem Gang von einer anderen Person angesprochen wurde.

Pepe schnaufte durch. Er hatte sich beim Personal bereits unbeliebt gemacht. In der Folge hatten sie versucht, bei ihm „Querulantenwahn“ diagnostizieren zu lassen. Hätte er es nicht am eigenen Leib erlebt, hätte er das für eine reine Erfindung abgetan. Aber in gewisser Weise hatten sie Recht: Er hatte kein großes Einsehen darin, dass sein Handeln „falsch“ gewesen war, dass seine „Rechtsposition“ falsch war. Aber sei's drum, es war im Grunde nur eine Reaktion darauf, dass er ihnen mehr Arbeit verursachte, als sie es gewohnt waren oder es ihnen lieb war.

Pepe hatte sich für seinen Aufenthalt hinter Gittern vorbereitet. Eines der Objekte, die er mit in die Haft genommen hatte, war eine Schreibmaschine. Und wer eine Schreibmaschine hatte, konnte hinter Gittern auch Anträge schreiben. Nicht nur für sich selbst. Im Gefängnis brauchte man für alles Mögliche einen Antrag. Sich den Arsch abzuwischen, war eines der wenigen Dinge, für die man keinen solchen Wisch brauchte. Entsprechend schnell kam er in Kontakt mit anderen Gefangenen – und in Konflikt mit der Anstaltsleitung.

Er konnte es nicht belegen, aber er hatte eine sehr starke Vermutung, dass dies eine Rolle gespielt hatte, als es darum ging, in die sogenannten Arbeitsgruppen zu kommen. Arbeitsgruppen waren Möglichkeiten, sich nach dem Arbeits-einsatz die Zeit mit anderen Gefangenen zu vertreiben, egal,

ob es sich um Sport oder Basteln handelte. Die Gruppen waren begehrt, und natürlich gab es nicht genug davon. Pepe hätte theoretisch an vier teilnehmen dürfen, und er hatte sich auch bei vier verschiedenen angemeldet. Doch nach einem halben Jahr war er erst in einer aufgenommen worden.

Seit dem Besuch im Gefängnis waren bereits ein paar Tage vergangen, doch Mario war trotz des Spaziergangs in dessen Umgebung bislang kein Geistesblitz gekommen. Zudem verkomplizierte sich auch seine eigene Lage mit dem drohenden Lockdown. Die Innenstädte begannen sich bereits zu leeren, das Leben, wenn man es so nennen wollte, verlagerte sich zusehends ins Netz. Er versuchte nachzudenken, ließ sich jedoch von automatischen YouTube-Playlists in Beschlag nehmen, die kein Ende nehmen wollten. Dann schaffte er es auf eine Nachrichtenseite, nur um dort zu lesen, dass es tatsächlich zu ersten Corona-Ausbrüchen in deutschen Gefängnissen gekommen war. Anfang März war es aus diesem Grund in Italien bereits zu Knastaufständen gekommen, bei denen mehrere Menschen bei einem Fluchtversuch gestorben waren. Sollte er Pepe zur Flucht verhelfen? 2018 hatte es aus einem Berliner Gefängnis innerhalb von nur sechs Wochen gleich zehn zunächst erfolgreiche Fluchtversuche gegeben. Oder doch die chilenische Variante? 1996 waren vier Mitglieder der linken Untergrundorganisation Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez per Hubschrauber aus dem Gefängnis entkommen. Mario fühlte sich ohnmächtig. Eine Petition bei change.org war nun mal nicht der Bringer – und wurde der Dringlichkeit von Pepes Bitte überhaupt nicht gerecht. Das Einzige, das ihm noch einfiel, war die Schaffung einer Untergrundzeitung im Gefängnis selbst. Aber dieser Idee machte Corona wohl ebenfalls einen Strich durch die Rechnung. Wichtig war ihm vor allem, dass es etwas sein sollte, das möglichst vielen Leuten hinter den Mauern zugutekam.

Warum jemand einsaß, war kein Thema, das normalerweise einfach so zur Sprache kam. Daher war Pepe umso verwunderter, als ihn jemand in der Bastelgruppe darauf ansprach. Ali, ein Palästinenser, und Mahmud, ein Libanese, die beide wegen Drogendelikten eingesperrt waren, saßen mit ihm am Tisch. Ali wollte seinen Kindern Geschenke basteln, Mahmud einfach nur Zeit totschiessen. Ali, der neben Arabisch auch fließend Deutsch sprach, immerhin war er in Berlin geboren und aufgewachsen, sagte: „Sag mal, Pepe, was bist du eigentlich für einer? Du rauchst nicht, du trinkst nicht. Du sprichst mehrere Sprachen. Was machst du überhaupt hier drin?“

Pepe gehörte zu der Sorte Gefangener, die keinen Sinn darin sahen, mit ihren Taten groß hinter dem Berg zu halten.

The Passenger

Jon O'Mercy

This is a meeting in the White House. He doesn't really understand what's going on but he's been given the power to not be questioned so when one of the Secretaries looks to him, expecting an answer, he's momentarily confused.

Put your hands together in front of you, says The Passenger. Make yourself look intelligent.

Trusk does and feels his confidence returning. The Secretary (of... what? The State, the Interior? He doesn't have enough clout for Trusk to remember his name and besides, everyone in this big room looks the same) clears his throat. "Mr. Trusk..."

The President shifts in his seat.

"Sir," the Republican corrects himself. "About some of these questions that you've attached in the email... I think you may have been hacked, sir."

Trusk puffs up in his chair and narrows his eyes. "Are you really accusing me of being hacked?"

The Secretary clears his throat. "Of course not. It's just that, uh, some of the questions seem a little... *unorthodox*, to come from a governmental entity." He cuts his eyes at the President again and hastily adds, "*Sir*." He opens up the folder on the table and passes around a piece of paper.

Trusk looks down at the sheet when it reaches him. He reads the questions.

1. What five things did you accomplish last week?
2. What things did you accomplish at work that went above and beyond?
3. How many bathroom breaks did you take today? (Please round up to the nearest 5 minutes.)

"What's the problem?" Trusk squints at the man. "Is it because you'd have issues answering these questions? How long does it take you to push one out?"

The man looks around the room for support but he's greeted either with bored expressions or downward glances, which saddens Trusk, as he'd expected a chuckle at least. The Secretary of Health and Human Services coughs wetly into the back of his hand, which are spotted with red bumps.

The Secretary who questioned him blushes. "I... Sir, we are in the White House."

"More than a few minutes then, I guess!" Trusk laughs loudly but nobody else follows his lead. He makes a mental note to talk to the President about this the next time they

have a private meeting. He's *funny*, goddamn it. He turns to the man. "And by the way," says Trusk, narrowing his eyes. "Don't print this out again. This is a *massive* waste of paper."

Tell them your idea, says the Passenger, giving the back of his neck a little encouraging nibble. Now they know you're in charge.

He turns to the rest of them. "While I'm here, I want to track anyone who talks negatively about Tesla or our cars," he says. "I can give you home addresses, social security, immigration and vaccination status, the works. Talking about our cars should be treated as murder because they're murdering our industry."

"Yes!" says the Vice President, slapping the table in excitement, then pointing at the rest of the people on the table. "This is what I'm talking about!"

The President nods slowly. He narrows his eyes. His subjects lean in, waiting for some kind of proclamation, but instead he releases a long and wet-sounding fart that makes his neighbour's eyes water.

"If that's not a sound of agreement I don't know what is!" says Vander, the Vice President. Trusk's Passenger wriggles in delight and Trusk feels a moment of appreciation. The Passenger always knows what's best.

He's had the Passenger for a long time, since he was thirteen. He'd been bullied horribly by a classmate called Jan. Jan called him conceited and weird; made fun of his family's wealth as though it were something to be ashamed of.

"My family makes more than your family ever will," Trusk had told him once.

Jan had just rolled his eyes. "You could be the richest kid in the world and you'd still be a fucking loser," he said. "Nothing will ever change that."

A year after this, Jan had just come back to school after a two-week absence. News was that his father had killed himself; the teacher had told them to be sensitive. Trusk watched Jan the whole day. He could *feel* it, this shift in power, that there was a small opening.

He waited until they were in the school courtyard at the end of the day. Jan was sitting by himself, quite unusual for him. Trusk walked up to him, his palms sweaty in the warm afternoon, steeling himself. "Hey, stupid. Is your dad coming to pick you up today?"

The beating had been worse than usual. He hadn't seen Jan's friends approaching him from behind. They'd frog-marched him into some bushes and taken turns on him. Afterwards, he lay on the ground on his back, looking up at the hot sun, and there he'd felt it: a small pinch at the back of his neck; then numbness; then a very, very strange feeling. He'd tried to slap the spot but something stopped his arms from moving, even as he felt something being inserted into himself, the idea of it more than the sensation made him feel ill.

He'd raced back home to see what was wrong but from the vantage point, couldn't see anything on his neck, and neither could his brother, once he'd asked him. By the time Trusk, and only Trusk, could see what it was, it'd begun to speak to him.

Later, he's in the process of impregnating a woman when he realises that he can't quite remember her name. He can't see her face, preferring to take women from behind. This is partly so they can't see the scars on his Very Large Penis™, but also because it's almost impossible for him to come when a woman is looking at him. He doesn't even really like to look women in the eyes at all, a trait that he's managed to pass off as being neurodivergent, like he's passed off all of his right-wing tendencies.

He used to have to pretend to care more about women when he was younger, what with his receding hairline and jokes that people didn't understand, but now the women come to him, because of his wealth and the good looks that he'd purchased.

And, of course, thanks to his Passenger, who at the moment seems to be sleeping, its tail wriggling against the back of Trusk's neck as it lets out small noises, as though dreaming.

The woman is moaning unconvincingly and Trusk is having trouble staying erect.

"A little help?" whispers Trusk.

The Passenger jerks suddenly and does — *something*, Trusk isn't entirely sure except that he feels it more in his head than his dick — and Trusk ejaculates suddenly into the woman. She continues to buck into him and he pulls out of her, grimacing. He walks into the bathroom and wipes himself clean, tucks himself back into his trousers, and looks around the bathroom. There's a framed poster on the wall next to the mirror, a pop-art looking woman with *She is clothed with strength and dignity, Proverbs 31:25a* written underneath to it. He smirks, and says to the Passenger, *More like clothed in cum and...*

He can't quite think of how to finish the joke so he decides to mull on it a bit more and text her it later. He splashes some

water on his face and uses a little of her expensive-looking eye cream, considers, and puts it in his pocket.

The woman is waiting for him outside of the bathroom. "Would you like something to drink?" She's wearing a high-necked silky dressing gown. She's quite striking, about 15 years younger than Trusk. She's not blonde, unfortunately — he likes blonde children — but the brown hair falling over her shoulders is light and her skin is very pale, her body slim and athletic. She's touched up her make-up while he was in the bathroom, she must have a secret stash somewhere.

"Nope, business is booming, I've got to make tracks..." he pauses, hoping that the Passenger will perhaps supply him with her name, but it remains silent. "Uh... honey," he finishes, without looking at her. He takes out his phone to text his driver.

She calls his name at the door and he turns around. "Text me if it takes," he says before she can say anything, and then, at the Passenger's insistence, he turns, clamps his feet together and does — according to his lawyers — a Heart Greeting. Her eyes widen slightly in shock and he leaves before she can say anything, chortling slightly. Even before he's reached the lift he's checking his notifications, his mind somewhere else.

As he enters his hotel suite he sees that one of the maids is still cleaning. She's a young white woman, quite attractive. She has blonde hair that's slipped a little from her bun, and he sees — with a rush that the broodmare from earlier didn't elicit from him — that there's a blue streak in it.

"Excuse me," she says. "I'll be done in a few minutes." Is there a hole in her nose from a current piercing? Trusk thinks there might be. She carries on saying something about the time, the sign outside. He interrupts her.

"Do you like your job?"

She frowns slightly, then attempts to smooth out her expression. He sees that she's perhaps a little older than he thought she was initially, maybe even in her early thirties. "Excuse me?" she repeats again, this time in an entirely different tone, bordering on impertinence.

"What do you earn from this? It's a nice hotel, so like, forty dollars an hour?"

She blinks at him in a way that makes him know he's got the number wrong, but too low or too high? It's impossible to tell. He goes on. "Enough to pay the bills and enough to know you'll never earn more?"

Her eyes widen in shock now and her hands go to her trouser pockets (of course she's wearing trousers rather than a skirt). He thinks she's probably going for a phone to record him so he flashes her a dazzling smile instead.

"Thanks so much for your work here. I can take care of the rest."

Die Freiheit des Äthers

Juan Tramontina

„Radio Reloj. Son las 3 en punto de la mañana.“ Mit einer Wischbewegung machte Mario den Wecker seines Handys aus. Kurz vergewisserte er sich, wie viel Uhr es wirklich war: 5 Uhr. Ok, Zeit aufzustehen. *Radio Reloj*, diesen kubanischen Kultsender, der seit 1947 pünktlich zu jeder vollen Minute die aktuelle Uhrzeit ansagt, hatte er seit seiner Jugend im Gedächtnis behalten. Damals hatte seine Geographielehrerin in Mexiko-Stadt zum ersten Mal den Sound vorgespielt. Während seines Studiums war er dann beim Surfen zufällig über den Livestream des Radiosenders gestolpert und hatte kurzerhand die Ansage für 3 Uhr morgens zu seinem Weckton gemacht.

Mittlerweile lebte Mario in Deutschland. Und obwohl er sich in den letzten fünf Jahren ein relativ anständiges Deutschniveau erarbeitet hatte, gab es Legionen von Leuten wie ihn – Migrant:innen aus Lateinamerika, Afrika oder Asien –, die um die wenigen offenen Stellen im Berliner Dienstleistungssektor konkurrierten. Das führte dazu, dass Mario im Laufe der Woche, zuweilen auch innerhalb desselben Tages, verschiedenen Jobs nachging, um über die Runden zu kommen. Heute begann sein Tag in diversen Yuppie-Kneipen in Kreuzberg, wo er früh morgens die Toiletten putzte, damit sich Leute mit deutlich mehr Kohle als er nach dem Latte Macchiato im edlen Ambiente erleichtern konnten.

Er wollte sich gerade auf dem Weg machen, da klingelte sein Festnetzanschluss. Es war Pepe. Eigentlich hieß er Joseph, aber in seinem Freundeskreis hatte sich mit Pepe der spanische Name durchgesetzt, den er 2013 verpasst bekommen hatte. Damals war er ein Jahr lang als Menschenrechtsbeobachter im süd mexikanischen Chiapas gewesen, bevor er ein weiteres Jahr im *Distrito Federal* dran gehängt hatte, um auch die Hauptstadt kennenzulernen. Das war natürlich auch die Zeit, in der Mario ihn kennengelernt hatte.

„Hey, leg bloß nicht auf“, erklang es aus dem Hörer. „Keine Sorge! *¿Qué pasa?*“, gab Mario zurück, der mit diesem Anruf nicht zu einer solchen Uhrzeit gerechnet hatte. „Ja, shit. Streich deine Nachmittagstermine, *hombre*, du musst unbedingt hier aufschlagen.“ Mario runzelte die Stirn. „Ich hab heute einen Auftrag“, antwortete er vorsichtig. „Scheiß egal, Mann! Dem Flurfunk zufolge machen die hier nächste Woche dicht – vielleicht sogar schon morgen. Wegen Corona wird es auf absehbare Zeit keine Besuche mehr geben.“ Da endete das Gespräch auch schon. Anrufe aus dem Knast waren teuer, wie Mario sehr wohl wusste. Und den Gefängnisregeln

zufolge hatte Pepe genau eine Nummer angeben können, die er über den Fernsprecher im Flur erreichen konnte: Marios Festnetz. Nach seinem Abstecher in die Welt der piekfeinen Pisssoirs im hippen Bergmannkiez und einem Anruf zur Anmeldung des Besuchs machte sich Mario auf dem Weg zum Knast.

Nach dem Telefongespräch war es für Pepe an der Zeit, seinen Arbeitsdienst in der Werkstatt aufzunehmen. Vielen Leuten außerhalb des Gefängnisses schien das nicht bewusst zu sein, aber Gefangene mussten in den meisten Bundesländern hinter Gittern arbeiten, und zwar für einen Hungerlohn, wie er fand. Ironie des Schicksals war es, dass ihre Werkstatt damit beauftragt worden war, Mund-Nasen-Schutz für die Polizei zu nähen. Zuerst sperrten sie ihn ein, dann sollte er ihnen das Leben retten. Aber so spielte eben das Leben. Gegen 16 Uhr wurde er in den Besuchsbereich geführt, wo tatsächlich Mario auf ihn wartete.

Zunächst hatten sie sich nur relativ entspannt über dies und das in der aktuellen Weltpolitik unterhalten und Pepe hatte ein wenig von seinem Alltag erzählt, doch dann wurde er zunehmend aufgewühlter. „Hör zu“, sagte er schließlich und wechselte auf schnelleres Spanisch. „Die Leute hier drehen bereits jetzt richtig am Rad. Die Situation ist ultra belastend, das Personal kümmert sich einen Dreck um Hygienevorschriften: Umarmungen, Küsschen, das ganze Programm. Wer sich beschwert, bekommt die Privilegien gestrichen. Wir sind uns sicher, dass das Virus hier bald Einzug hält – zusätzlich zu Überwachung, Gängelung und Freiheitsberaubung.“ Pepe drehte sich um, weil hinter ihm hektische Bewegungen auszumachen waren. „Also, du musst irgendwas organisieren. Ohne Besuchsmöglichkeiten und nix wird das Ganze hier ein Debakel.“ In dem Moment schritt ein Beamter ein und beendete den Besuch. Pepe bekam nur noch ein paar letzte Abschiedsworte heraus: „Schreib mir – und bleib gesund!“

Mario hatte seine Nachmittagsschicht absagen müssen. So ging er nach dem Besuch direkt nach Hause. Pepe setzte also sehr große Hoffnungen in ihn. Er hoffte, ihn nicht zu enttäuschen. Aber dazu brauchte er eine zündende Idee. Mario setzte sich vor den Rechner und überlegte. Er hatte

Willington's Overlook

Juniper C. Rhodes

It was the last Sunday of summer, and Avery sat with their back against the trunk of a willow. The colorful tapestry of the branches was reverting to simple greens as their high wore off. With the sun dropping below the hills, it had grown cool, and hunger after the day's mild nausea was compelling them to leave.

These human needs, the basics of survival, that had been held back by the pyschotropic entertainment, were bubbling up from the ancient parts of their brain and driving them to abandon where they'd been sitting. How long has it been, two hours now? Find food, find drink, find shelter. They were edicts from a reality Avery couldn't yet face. Supper, restless sleep, and then waking to part-time work that had, with the stoke of midnight, turned to full-time work. To leave the tree, to leave the park, to return to their house meant the end of childhood.

Slowly, over the last month, their friends had shipped off to start new chapters in their lives. Universities had welcomed them all and their stellar marks, and the wealth of their families had granted them this escape. Soo Min was the first to go, far off to the West, to study biochemistry. Daniel next, to the West, but not so far, to become a filmmaker. And another, and another, until one by one, they were gone, leaving Avery to herself in dead-end Willington's Overlook.

Avery had been excited for each to go, truly joyful to see them reach for their dreams, but they'd gone home and cried after each goodbye. Longing for the company that would no longer be there. Sad for the new memories that wouldn't be made. Hurt by the ePost that would eventually stop arriving as their new lives developed.

The insight they'd hoped to find on today's journey had been elusive, and despite all the strong emotions tugging Avery about, none could be turned into words. Avery replayed the day, looking for that critical moment that would bring everything in to clarity.

It had started with a goodbye to their father as he set off early for work. Avery'd popped a vial of tremolo before breakfast with their aunt. She'd known Avery was down and had prepped favorite meal, crisp-bread and mixed melons, and after they'd finished given Avery a sweet kiss goodbye. They'd gone out through the back and followed a creek toward the old rail yard as the world changed into something not-quite-real. Among the stacks of old railway ties, a family of quail had ducked and bobbed as it made its way from trees

to brush. From there, they'd taken a quiet stroll through the woods and slowly returned to civilization as the day peaked. Warm, longing for humans, they'd crossed through the flea market. Michaela had waved from her tingfruit stand, and Avery had smiled back but kept going, unsure she could form words or even manage human thoughts. Shops were closing up, and families congregated and compared purchases, gabbing about, what? Their plans for the evening, what to eat, what to watch? Indecipherable. Avery'd walked past their old secondary school, still decorated with "Welcome Back" banners and chalk messages of encouragement to the incoming greenlings. Finally, they'd hiked up to Morning's Bluff Park where they sat now, under their favorite tree.

This had brought nothing. It was just a day, wholly without revelation. But then again, it was pleasant. It was home. There were no new places to discover, but there was family here. Avery liked the hills and the streams and meadows that turned green in the spring. The quiet contentedness they felt in Willington's Overlook, was often, well, overlooked.

Their friends chased big dreams in big cities, but every one of them had also left everything behind. Avery's father and aunt loved them, and they were a family who took care of one another. Pish-posh to all the rich folk who looked down on them and told them they were stuck here. Avery wasn't stuck. They chose to be here, somewhat at least, and while they may never join the upper class, they were happy, or happy enough. And that was a start.

Where the ripples of their visions had been, only the rustling of the leaves in the wind remained. Uncertainty, despair, washed away, for now. This new place-of-view Avery was adopting might fade as the last of the tremolo metabolized away, and in the next morning they might be just as distraught as they were in the previous, but that was a worry for tomorrow.

Avery stood, uplifted in spirits and placed a hand on their willow. It meant goodbye, but also, I'll be back soon. Home was calling, and it was time to go.

Her eyes narrow and she takes the dirty towels from the bathroom and moves to the door.

"For your hard work," he says, and he offers her a few bills from his wallet. She rolls her eyes at him, as if to say *Yeah right mister, my dignity can't be bought* — and then her eyes go down to the money, three crisp hundred dollar bills. His dick starts pulsing as he sees her internal struggle, her hand reaching out to take it — *the slight pull back* that makes his cock fucking THROB — and then the inevitability of her taking it. His hand is on his dick even before she's closes the door behind her and even if he'd wanted to he'd have been unable to stop himself from moaning as a thick stream of semen splatters on the door. The Passenger shivers in delight.

For a moment, in post-orgasm shame, he wonders what life would have been like otherwise, before he started to listen to the Passenger. He knew that many, *many* people hated him; that the ones who did like him were sycophants or inbred morons. Would he more loved? Could he live-stream without being ridiculed?

He banishes the thought and has a quick shower. Afterwards, he stands naked in front of the mirror. He's a tall man, and big — barrel-chested, wide in the shoulders. His arms are quite thin. In his youth, he went to the gym, and then bought himself a home gym, but he doesn't have time to go anymore, and he has other physical highs to be chased.

He sucks in his gut and puffs up his chest a little more. Steels himself, and turns, ever so slightly, to look over his shoulder to the back of his neck.

For a second, he can see it — the milky skin of it not quite hiding the squirming innards, the connection between its mouth and Trusk's neck hard to discern, and god, the *size* of it now, what is it? — but the Passenger gives him one of the hardest pinches he's ever received and Trusk turns back to the mirror.

You know I'm sensitive, darling.

After he's dressed and the Passenger is concealed behind his baggy shirt he's back in the bathroom, considering the bottles of aftershave provided by the hotel. No cheap stuff here — there are sample bottles that cost more than the amount he shoved into the maid's hands. He opens a bottle with a label that looks vaguely like a medical bracelet and sniffs. It's woody and leathery and with a slight tinge of something almost... vinegary. Dill pickle?

"I should just wear my own cum, that would really get them going," he says jokingly to the Passenger, but the Passenger doesn't seem to get it.

You should, he says.

"No," says Trusk, and, still offended by the Passenger's bite, he reaches for the medicinal-looking bottle. Before he

can grab it the Passenger squirts something into his brain and he

goes to the door

lifts his hand

smears it on the lukewarm ejaculate

rubbs it behind his ears

on his wrists.

Then his body is his own again and he shudders. *What the fuck was that*, he thinks to himself.

Busy busy, says the Passenger cheerily, and directs him to the closet to get dressed. Wear the TRUMP WAS RIGHT baseball cap, he says. You look great in that.

A few hours later, he's at a dinner celebrating WOMEN in sports. The WOMEN on the banner is in pink lettering, although, looking around, he can't see any athletes. Come to think of it, except for the catering staff, he can't see any women, either.

He snatches a glass of whiskey from the tray next to his but the Passenger bristles, the teeth biting into the back of his neck and he calls for the waiter again and sets the glass back down.

"Cheap," Trusk barks at the caterer. He expects the waiter to jump, but she must've been to a few of these parties but now and she only smiles appeasingly and takes the glass back. Her nostrils flare slightly as she leans forward to take it; does she appreciate his *eau de toilette*? She licks her lips slightly and walks away.

What do you need alcohol for when there's so much deliciousness?

He's never heard the Passenger talk like this before. His tone is positively lascivious. Trusk looks around but he still can't see any women. What is the Passenger looking at?

"Hey, Elon!"

The Vice President has spotted him from across the room and is making his way over. At the sight of him, wearing an expensive suit, his beard slightly less grey than Trusk thinks it was last week, the Passenger moans sexually and then tongues the back of Trusk's neck.

Trusk shudders. "What the fuck, dude?" he says, louder than he means to. "Are you gay?"

The senator for Florida, who's standing near him talking to a representative from Disney World, turns to him.

"Are you talking to me?" he asks. "My gun's in my car."

"No, not you, my dude," says Trusk, chuckling. He's starting to sweat. First the cum behind his ears, and now this? He wants a glass of booze, damn the Passenger, but when he reaches for a glass from a passing waiter the Passenger squirts something into him that makes his arms drop by his sides.

It's nearly time, says the Passenger.

Time for what?

The Passenger doesn't answer. He forces Trusk to start moving. Trusk wants to cry out for help, but the Passenger won't let him.

What's happening to me? He can't say this out loud anymore, he has no control.

I'm nearly ready, says the Passenger ecstatically. I am ready to change. I am ready to be born.

The Passenger takes him out of the door as the Vice President shouts behind him.

On the street, Trusk calls for his driver on fingers that don't feel like his own anymore. It's a warm night, and drizzling. He's in turmoil inside but his body nods curtly at the latecomers to the event. His hat protects his face from the rain but he can feel his cum coagulating and moving down the side of his neck. He wants to wipe but it but hands remain stubbornly at his sides, like he's in a K-hole.

What's happening to me?

The driver pulls up and Trusk — or is the Passenger, now? — gets into the car.

I am happening, says the Passenger.

There are no cleaning staff this time. Nobody to help him even if he were able to move. The Passenger tacks on the *Do Not Disturb* sign onto the door and enters the room, maneuvering Trusk's body to the far end of the suite and opens the window. The warm air blows gently in, heavy with the scent of rain, the sound of traffic far below coming up.

It's a sticky evening. The Passenger begins to undress his body until he's totally naked, and then he lies on the bed on his stomach. The muscles in his shoulders cramp fiercely and then, when the pain is too much for him, when he wonders if he'll faint (he wonders *how*, exactly? Like, internally?) they slacken. There's relief, until he slackening continues and he feels the muscles liquefy.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

I am preparing, it says. I will soon leave you.

The muscles in his left forearm and hand are dissolved and sucked enthusiastically through the back of his neck.

Why are you doing this to me? You always helped me. I'm great because you helped me.

No. My species is attracted to the repulsive. The Passenger swallows wetly before it continues. My mother sensed this when you were young and I fed from your insecurity, your ignorance, your stupidity. Now I'm ready, after all of these years, and I will be the biggest the world has ever seen. My children will feed on your evil-kind for generations. We will evolve.

I'm not evil! Trusk is outraged and it feels good, much easier to understand than fear. *Why is it that people always say you have to give up power to be good? You need power to do good.*

My kind feeds on bad thoughts, bad words, bad deeds, the Passenger says. These are not opinions. These are facts. I am fat and happy. You are bad.

The words of Trusk's father come to him, that day when he'd come home from being beaten, when he found out what Trusk had said. *You deserved it.*

Well, what chance did I have! Trusk says. *With you always there, since I was a kid.*

The Passenger's voice is sad the next time. We are few, my species, it says. Many humans fight us. Many humans give up their power to be good. But now, in this landmass, what a resurgence! What a feast. There's a pause and Trusk tries to ignore the slurping sounds. I thought you would empathise with me. Are our goals really so dissimilar?

As the Passenger is starting on his right shoulder and Trusk is thinking this statement over, there's a knock at the door.

"Trusk, it's me! The concierge let me up."

It's the Vice President! Trusk wants to call out but the Passenger won't let him.

"You looked like hell, buddy, so I followed you here. Are you okay?"

The Passenger doesn't answer again. Trusk struggles as hard as he can and manages to let out a strangled groan.

"Trusk?"

Nothing. The Passenger has clamped down on him, pushed some part of his mind.

"If you don't open up I'll ask them to get me a key."

The Passenger swings his/their legs over the side of the bed and stands up. Trusk can sense the bones in his right arm. Free of muscle and ligaments, they collect at the bottom of his arm.

His body moves to the bathroom and puts the dressing gown on one side of his body, holds his limp and spiky arm inside of it. He opens the door and Vander is there, his face bright and shiny, concern all over his chubby cheeks.

"What's going on, man? You're really not looking so good."

"Stomach bug, I think," says the Passenger with Trusk's voice, tickling the back of his neck. Get it?

Vander looks Trusk up and down and then pushes his way into the room. He looks around and breathes deeply.

"You haven't been yourself, Elon," says Vander disapprovingly. "You've been letting yourself slip."

Despite the circumstances, Trusk is crushed. He doesn't particularly *like* the Vice President — he's a little too pious for his own good, and fiercely loyal to his foreign wife — but he is above Trusk, he has more say than Trusk does. He

The corpulent officer nods, then walks out of the room leaving the door half-shut. A few moments later, as Bonifaci puts the pictures back into the folder in a rush, a lady in uniform peeks in. A young rookie perhaps, her eyes still glimmering with the hope of doing something for the people.

"Inspector, may I bother you for a minute?" she calls him in a soft voice, showing him a phone. Bonifaci straightens his loose uniform, looks at her and then at me.

"You are free to go," he instructs me with a pointy finger, as if I was a hot-headed schoolkid just released from his penitence. "Come back here if you happen to remember more details, among your sixty-three horizontals."

"Thank you for your attention," I wave at Bonifaci, then I head with no hesitation to the exit. I walk past the inspector and his assistant, who move to a corner in the corridor. As soon as I'm out, the scorching heat slaps my bald head; she shows him a video on the phone. With the corner of the eye, I can glimpse at Bonifaci's attention being enraptured by the scenes. I turn my ears to them: explosions, sirens, flames.

"Yesterday there was an attack on Torrevadiga's thermoelectric power plant, right outside Rome," the young policewoman says as she puts the video away. She shows a second one right after, with similar sounds and booms: "This was the Sarroch Refinery, east of Cagliari. Three hours ago."

Bonifaci's eyes meet mine, he gestures to get out: "Still here? It's not your business to stick your nose in someone else's job."

But as I take my leave on the searing sidewalk, the most important thing pops in my mind.

Disruptive action. Forty-five horizontal.

My grandparents have made ENI a titan, and Bonifaci's grandparents protected it from mafia and strikes. I did what I could; now it's on you to tear it down.

“Excuse me. What kind of guardian are you?” Bonifaci replies outraged.

“Inspector, night shifts are long and boring. I have been doing this for thirty years. Some things here and there happen to slip.”

“You are inept.”

“With all due respect, inspector, but this judgment concerns ENI or the Refinery’s Director. I am here to provide what little information I have on the sabotage, if you still require them, not to be scolded on my work practices.”

Bonifaci scoffs, laying against the chair’s backrest.

“Look at these pictures, Spadaro. Look at them.”

I lower my stare on the six pictures: I can barely make out some profiles, black-dressed people, some middle fingers. No faces or logos. Bonifaci’s finger frantically taps on the right, in the corner where a black flag sports a white symbol, circled perhaps.

“What is this? Anarchists, activists, thugs? Al Qaeda?” he presses, his nail made white by the persistence of his tapping.

The truth is that I have no idea what that is, that symbol. From the picture one can’t tell, so I buy time, pretend to look more carefully, turn the photo this or that way.

“To me, it looks like a Celtic cross,” I then say, raising my eyes until I meet Bonifaci’s to gauge his beliefs. I need to add more details.

“Yes, I remember that flag very well. They waved it right beside the guardians’ post, together with middle fingers. They sang *Faccetta Nera*.”

Bonifaci places his phone’s screen right next to the photo, with results of a quick browser search of Celtic crosses.

“It’s not really the same.”

“That’s what I have seen. If you prefer doubt, that’s part of your job. Do you have better pictures?”

“It’s the only picture we have. No recordings were found. Are you aware of that?”

That night’s shrewdness has finally paid off: deleting the recordings of the whole last year, almost all empty or meaningless. A desert gate on a cracked road; at times a few trucks and petrol tankers that got in or out by night. Thirty years at the gate, nobody has ever asked me to look at the recordings of outbound vehicles.

“Company policy. Storage space is running out, so I got orders not to save any recording from my gate’s cameras, since I’m at the exit.”

“Mr Spadaro, this might make me think you could be an accomplice.”

My heart skips a beat, I might have pushed it a tad too far. How to get out?

“I can accept being called inept with respect to my tasks, but accusing me of complicity with fascists is intolerable. I

have never had contacts with any of them, nor I knew anything about the sabotage until it happened. I would also like to remind you that the gate at which I was on duty on Saturday 7th is an exit-only gate. Recordings of entry gates are available in the archive.”

“Where can I find this archive?”

“I don’t know. Ask the Director.”

“So they put you on duty at the exit gate without putting anyone at the entry gate?”

“Inspector, turns have been set on the Refinery’s organogram for ten years, if not more. I don’t know where my coworkers at the entry gates were, nor is my duty to know about it. You should really interrogate the Director on this matter, instead of me.”

“Listen now, Mr Spadaro,” Bonifaci picks his phone back with fake caution, biting his lip. “If you too start to question how I do my job, you will not get out of here. Understood!” he shouts.

He even goes for the intimidation. I expected threats to come out way later.

“We can keep you in custody until the case is over. House arrest, even.”

I sigh, pretending to be resigned. I think back to the forty-five horizontal, ‘synonym of obstructionism’, 16 letters. Intimidation? Office abuse? Too short. I’m never going to complete that hellish grid. My attention returns to the interrogation; I have to dissimulate again.

“No need to resort to these extreme measures. I’m just a guardian, and I’m already telling you everything I’ve seen. Ask to whomever ignored the organogram instead. Or to whom isn’t paying enough guardians to watch over a place three times as big as the city center.”

“Let me understand. Your Refinery has guardians at the exits but not at the entrances?” Bonifaci asks once more, halfway between skepticism and disbelief.

“Don’t ask me why, but that’s right. You can check the organogram, you can ask other guardians if you don’t believe me.”

Bonifaci turns to the other carabinieri; the guy raises his eyebrows, as if he saw something obvious: “Looks like smuggling.”

“Smuggling, really? ENI?” he turns to me again, realizing the absurdity the situation is slipping into. “What could ENI need to smuggle even?”

“I can’t know, inspector; again, I’m a night guardian. Gas, crude, unregistered tankers maybe. Find out. It’s your job, after all.”

Bonifaci loses it, smashes his fists on the miserable wooden desk and springs up from his chair: “Alright, so be it! We’ll open a separate investigation. Lo Giudice, get your hands on this damned Refinery organogram, find this Director. Screw these lowly thugs.”

fights as hard as he can to fight against the Passenger’s control, to ask for help. Can’t Vander *see* it? But Vander just stares at him. His disapproving look has changed slightly, to something like a smile.

Trusk expects the Passenger to react as Trusk would to keep up the pretense — defensiveness or feigned obsequiousness would be on brand — but the Passenger doesn’t. Instead, Trusk sniffs the air.

“I should have known,” the Passenger says in his voice, sickening in its flirtatiousness. “I thought you looked especially fetching at the party.”

“I thought you might have sensed it earlier,” says Vander, and it’s hard to tell who is more repulsive. Vander unbuttons his jacket and removes it, then his ties, and starts to unbutton his shirt.

What the fuck? Will the Passenger’s final betrayal be some kind of homosexual act?

The Passenger is tonguing his neck in rapture now; Trusk can feel the threads of saliva collecting on the back of the dressing gown.

But instead Vander turns, and Trusk sees it. A Passenger. Except it’s not a passenger, it’s some kind of... of maggot. Curled around the neck, a slender tail around Vander’s waist. *Pulsating*.

“Oh,” says the Passenger, or whatever the fuck it is, in his voice, but in a loving tone he didn’t know he was capable of making. “You’re so *big*. Male?”

“Yes,” says Vander.

Why does that matter? says Trusk to the Passenger. *Wait — are you female? This whole time?* His stomach drops. Or perhaps it’s just the sensation of his stomach dropping; he’s unsure what is his mind and his body, the two have separated. Of course Vander had to do better than him here, as well; rank higher. He’s sure there’s some part of Vander in there, laughing at Trusk having been ordered around by a *female* this whole time.

Oh, what a last tasty morsel that was for me, says the Passenger. You really have no redeeming parts to you at all. You’ve made this very easy.

Trusk and Vander lay on the bed together on their bellies, positioned them so that they’re staring at each other. He’d have almost preferred some kind of sexual act to this: their Passengers — their *parasites* — eat them at the same pace, dissolving their body parts in unison like some kind of dance. He searches Vander’s face for any kind of expression, even any sense that he’s able to get out of this predicament, but the expression is blank. Only the eyes wander over Trusk’s body.

Trusk thinks about all of his money, all of his power. Who will take over his company, who will fight his crusades if he’s really dying — and how can he die, with all of his *power*? He’s not ready yet, the world isn’t ready yet, the things he was

going to *achieve*, and what is the world, if he’s not in it? Can it even *be* a world if he’s not in it, and—

Hush, says the Passenger, the monster, the *female* eating him. There’s a strange fluid sensation in his brain, like the rush of K, and all of his fear and panic leave him. He’s left with a detachment, able to almost appreciate the sensations of himself becoming lighter, the weight on the back of his neck heavier. When his genitals are liquified he feels a kind of pleasure, and looks at Vander, wondering if he feels it too, wondering what’s going on in that head. It’s perhaps the first time Trusk has ever really felt curiosity about someone else’s inner life, but he’s not alive long to appreciate it. Their bodies collapse into the expensive mattress together, their muscles and organs liquefy. He watches the muscles in Vander’s neck collapse and feel his own, too.

What happens now?

We sleep, says the Passenger. *We hatch. We mate. I look for another host for my babies. You have introduced me to a lot of delicious candidates. I’m proud of you.*

You are?

Yes, my boy.

His neck is weakening, his spine is slipping, his brain perilously loose in his skull.

Tell me again, he says.

Really?

Trusk can’t answer anymore but he hopes that his silence will be answer enough.

I’m pr—

And he’s gone.

Two days later, the Passenger on the back of the corpse’s neck begins to bulge and a wasp emerges, large for her species. She buzzes, shaking out her still-soft wings. She catches sight of herself in the mirror. She is *beautiful*. Her shiny dark green body, bright blue wings. She regards her discarded meal on the floor. She remembers some conversations with him, but mostly the taste of him over the years. She walks over to him and investigates, her chewing mandibles moving over his body. There is nothing more of interest here.

She waits patiently for her mate to hatch, cleaning her wings as she does so. When they have mated she flies out the window. Her childhood had left her with a memory imprinted in her, just as the ability to fly was coded into her, and the ability to mate, and to sting. There is a TRUMP AGAINST TRANS event that evening. An *outdoor* event.

Well, well. What *riches*.

Red Clay

Andrea

The sun has never hurt us. If anything, it's always been our benevolent overseer, endowing its unending warmth for centuries and its energy for decades. It dried our fish and ripened our eggplants, lit up our marketplaces and tanned our skins, day in and day out, for generations. So plentiful was his blessing, that when the Mainland forgot about us, so far among waves and kilometres of ocean, we could endure and live by ourselves.

Not without some sacrifices: pastures had to be turned into vegetable gardens, barns into flat complexes and fisheries into kelp farms. We rediscovered our relationship with matter, both natural and artificial, and before a decade had passed, we found we had no use for money anymore. There was nothing that couldn't be repaid with favours or delayed gifts, after all.

It took effort and patience, indeed – mostly patience, since many felt uneasy while waiting for their debts to be settled – but all of it was possible thanks to the sun.

It appears, however, that its mood has now turned sour.

When summer, no, when *May* comes around, our beaches flock with dead fish, pushed ashore by the rabid currents. The ever-present verdant lushness surrounding our villages dries out season after season, leaving patches of parched earth. Clouds barely watch from above, judging with sorrow but shedding no tears.

It's... unsettling. To tell you the truth, only worse words come to mind, but we *have* to remain optimistic. We have dealt with dry spells here and there, but when our corn shrinks and our tomatoes dwindle, we start worrying.

You know I don't resort to prayers that often, but may God heed our call.

When things are not good to begin with, they tend to become worse if left unchecked.

So it happened at that fateful town meeting. Duarte barged in, covered in sweat and dust, and tossed three unripe yet dried peppers in the middle of the room.

"This is all my garden can do. If we're not doing anything else than waiting and hoping, I'm leaving. I'm going to the Mainland."

Now, 'going to the Mainland' used to be the norm when we were born, as you know better than me. Those with the

most money, unable to use it, went to the Mainland too over the years. But by now it appears to have taken up a much darker meaning. As you can imagine, an islander with no fuel has few chances of sailing across the ocean unscathed.

So Luisa's reply was predictably one of worry: "Duarte, it's not the time for such scenes. We're here to deal with this, to deal with everything," she said as she stood up from her chair.

"I don't mean *that*," he replied, unblinking. "I mean that we should do what Ezequiel said the other week. Someone has to contact the Mainland again. Ask for help. The postal drone works."

Carlos did not take that proposition well: he stood too, and pushed Duarte away with brute force, almost tossing him to the ground. "We ask for help now, huh? Twenty years we haven't heard a word from them, and now you want to beg for help. If your peppers are that thirsty, if you're that desperate, ask Ezequiel to piss on them."

"Carlos! We're in a town meeting. Keep the squabbles for later," Luisa reprimanded the old man. Then she turned to Duarte: "We were just about to discuss that. Trading with the Mainland, yes or no."

"But Carlos is right, even if his hands are faster than his mouth," Gabi spoke, motionless in their wooden chair. "How would we even carry out such trade? We don't know what they would buy from us. No, actually: what would we sell them? Saltwater? Hortensia?"

The town council fell silent, its members muttering something here and there trying to think of something. Wine? Milk? Soy?

"Oh, none of that shit again," Carlos burst out, pointing fingers at Luisa and the other distressed townspeople. "You had me tear down my vineyards to make room for those damn eggplants. Now I'm keeping them! No way in hell I'm switching back, not a chance. I'm too old for all that work and I'm not beating my own arse to see a Mainlander's coins."

Next to Luisa, João raised his eyes from the laptop he was tapping on: "We won't need to bring a single bridge tissue¹ here, no need to worry. We would sell a number of things, whatever they are, and then use that money to buy stuff we need before coming back here."

"Yes. We need water and fuel," Duarte said on the verge

I Was There

Andrea

"So you say you were there that night?" the inspector asks, a slim guy with deep eyebags and dull eyes. The uniform is loose on his body, the dark and curly hair make him look like a chimney-sweeper, put there just to fill a seat. On his left, at attention, corpulent and mustached, another carabinieri looks at me as if I was an ancient relic from the Museum of the Seas.

"Yes, that is the case," I reply as I wipe sweat off my eyebrows. I'm not tense, I know very well what I set out to do at the police headquarters in Messina, but the heatwave has just started and it's relentless.

"Take him there," the inspector whispers not too softly to the cop next to him, then stands up from his chair. "Follow me. We have some questions for you."

I comply, walking behind Laurel and Hardy through the dusty corridor. The 80s style shutters keep the rooms dark and the ugly psych ward tiles don't put me at any more ease. They lead me to a tiny room, two black plastic chairs sit around a minute wooden desk.

"You can get comfortable, Mr Spadaro," the chimney-sweeper points to the chair in front of his; I sit out of pure courtesy, in the hope I can get out as soon as possible.

"So. You're the night guardian at the Milazzo Refinery," he then asks, opening an oily folder from which he extracts various photos. All are blurry, tilted or dark.

"Gate A3 East," I reply. Some details can be said openly, they've been mentioned around ten times on the news during the last six days. "And you're Mr...?"

"Inspector Bonifaci," he corrects me with an irritated glare. "We'll record your statements, if it doesn't bother you."

I nod.

"You must say 'I consent', aloud. Or the microphone won't pick it up."

"I consent."

Now comes the delicate part. Weigh every word, especially the ones to leave out. The Director has always been very clear when it came to information flows outside the Refinery. I'm going to show him I have learned his lesson by heart.

"Thank you. Were you on duty at two fifty-seven, on Friday, July 6th?"

"From 11pm to 6am," I point out with a cough.

"So you are the sole person that has seen the terrorists in action."

Bonifaci lays out before me three, four blurred pictures, flipping them in my direction and pointing to some less deformed details so I can try and identify them.

"Have you by chance seen a dozen individuals dressed in black crossing the gates?"

"Not at two fifty-seven on Friday 6th," a slight smirk escapes my lips; Bonifaci looks miffed and baffled, doesn't notice.

"When have you seen them?" he presses.

"Four thirty-three on Saturday 7th."

"A day later? It can't be. Saturday morning ENI reported the silo damages."

"Four thirty-three on Saturday 7th," I repeat with utmost seriousness looking straight into his eyes, regardless of the pictures.

Bonifaci notices the subterfuge, grits his teeth: "Feeling clever, Mr Spadaro? I would like to remind you that we're talking about sabotage here. A case of national relevance, if you haven't understood."

"I would never dare, inspector," I shake my head with hands raised, feigning innocence, "I'm trying to provide information as accurate as possible. I don't want to cause mistakes in the investigation."

I have to draw this out, bore them, exasperate them. I am their last straw, their last hope to save face after the media coverage the case has received across Italy. Six days on, every news anchor is still showing images of pierced pipes and sundered silos.

"So you've seen them get in at four thirty-three," Bonifaci continues, still pointing at the damn pictures as if he expected me to read out a prepared answer.

"No."

"You have just said you have seen them."

"I haven't seen them get in."

Bonifaci clenches a fist, loaded with frustration. "Mr Spadaro, you're not cooperating."

"Inspector, I'm trying to answer to the questions in the most accurate way I can," I say putting up the best face I can remember. "I think they were going out."

"And you haven't seen them get in at three fifty-three."

"No, inspector. I was playing crosswords," I admit with no shame. I haven't even completed it; forty-five horizontal is still missing.

¹European banknotes, which feature various bridge pictures.

light

yv

i feel the light
inside
clouds of dust
heavy air
push my lungs
in agony
time is counted
in reverse
less than nothing
more than none
i hold my neck
it's burning
ask the story
buried in my cells
memories kept
better than my head
my skin absorbed
the pain the world became
i want the next forgotten
i crave the lost unborn
i ask my fellow being
did terror left you so alone
undone
the ends are bleeding
dreadful light
blindfolded
close the door
open a window
i see
now i see
what i could hear before
i cry
yet of joy
i see the new
it fades unseen
just stay
where light can never seize to be

of tears. "We can't carry on like this another season. The rationing is too tight."

"We don't have any boat big enough to carry that much water, though," Luisa pointed out, looking around to see if any townspeople would raise their hand.

Gabi raised theirs: "No, I don't have one myself, just a small sailboat. But we shouldn't carry water; it's too heavy and it won't last long enough. If we just took water home, we would then need to trade again every time we run out. If we want to trade only once, then we need to buy more materials for saltwater greenhouses. Or a desalinator."

"And we need SSDs and other components to repair the island's server. The repeater too," João added, counting on his fingers. "We don't know what we might need in the future, and staying isolated in this situation can't be of help, Carlos."

Beatriz took his side: "That's all expensive stuff. Do you have any idea how much milk or wine or whatever we would need to sell in order to be able to afford all that? And going back on everything we did in the last two decades, so that we could live without relying on the Mainland... I don't want to do that. Nobody here wants it."

Gabi, again: "Let's say we find something here that is worth selling to the Mainland. I can see two scenarios: either they pay us mere cents, which will mean we won't get the components we need *and* that the crossing would be a waste of time. Or that they pay us a lot, and then get interested in what we sell them. Which means that the Mainlanders will again come here to take it themselves. I say both paths are not worth pursuing."

"I say we give it a try anyway!" Duarte shouted, pointing at everyone in the council. "You can sit on your ass thinking about 'scenarios' while we're on the brink of starvation. These are not the last peppers, thank God, but one day they will be. And what do we do then? Where do we get other seeds? Do we wait for the wind to drop them on our heads? It's fine, you don't have to do anything yourself if you're that afraid of the Mainland. Give me a sailboat and I'll go by myself."

He stormed off; the council went on, but the town was split and no definite conclusion was taken. However, everyone was filled with urgency. Urgency and dread.

Over the last few weeks, Duarte gave up on his vegetable garden; so did Emilia, Maristela, Vitor and many others. They agreed to pick up their shovels and head northwest to try and dig up some of the red clay that lay in the ground. As you might remember, that's the material we use for our tiles and walls, something quite common and uninteresting. Yet they were convinced that the Mainland could buy that at

decent prices, since their clay over there is so different and white.

We tried to tell them it was a wasted effort, that crossing the ocean with packs of stained mud would be mindless at best, but they had no ears for us. Not even Atilio, Duarte's partner, managed to make a dent in their alloy of resolution and desperation. Their shovels were restless, and in no time they loaded Maristela's catamaran with dozens of clay blocks, as much as the poor thing could carry without sinking. Duarte went with her, and they persuaded Iris too, since she could haggle better than anyone in town, and they needed such a skill on the Mainland harbours.

They departed on a scorching morning. The whole town was there, we looked at the white sail fading into the distance with a mix of anguish and hope. Not the kind of hope that you reserve for someone you wish to succeed in their endeavour, no; it was the *other* hope, the one for the very dearest of people, the one you wish they would just be safe and well, and come back again.

It took a whole month before we spotted that sail again. A month of Atilio climbing on top of the highest cliff to look eastward, twice a day, only to walk back in sorrow. Until he rushed to the town meeting in tears, crying that he saw them coming back.

The whole town gathered at the harbour; some were elated and overjoyed, others skeptical and unnerved at their decision. Some hoped for success to be shared, others hoped for failure to prove them wrong, but all agreed on relief in seeing them again.

The catamaran was cracked and battered, but loaded with panes and aluminium pipes in bundles. The three of them came out in much fancier attire than they departed: colourful clothes of fine weave and good-brand shoes.

Iris explained that their hunch was right: the red clay really did indeed sell well, and they gathered enough bridge tissues to afford materials for the seawater greenhouse. She then went on to tell the twists and turns of how to find actual banknotes, since everyone on Mainland insisted on having digital payments, the kind of which we had phased out decades ago. And then how the Mainlanders barely even remembered our island, and showed them postcards from that time when they came as tourists and nothing else.

João asked for the SSDs and repeater components, but the three clay-sellers explained they were squarely out of pocket for the amount of clay they had carried, which is why I'm still sending you these letters. I found a way to make simple paper myself, and it works quite well. Just like your postal drone.

The townspeople did not waste any time discussing success or failure, right or wrong; they had materials, a green-

house to build and an autumn to prepare for. Whoever was not tending to their pumpkins or hiking for pineapples lent their hands to the effort, so that the structure could be built as soon as possible. We agreed to place it on the western side, where the winds are calmer and the cliffs are not so steep.

The sun played its part, and once again we were grateful. Heat made the saltwater evaporate, so that the inside not only was cooler and damper, but also allowed water to condense on the greenhouse panes. Buckets and buckets of freshwater came out of the greenhouse, so many that we did not, in fact, have enough buckets!

We then asked the clay-diggers to dig out some more clay, so that our craftsmen and the sun would cooperate to make it into pots and urns to store the precious water for other uses. An unwieldy, perhaps dated idea to be sure, but we had to work with what we had.

It was a puzzling surprise when Duarte and Maristela turned down our request.

“Look, it’s just pots no? There are other materials you can make them with,” Maristela told everyone who asked her. “This clay, this red one, it’s special. We can’t waste it on mere pots when the Mainlanders pay us so well. After all, one greenhouse won’t be enough for the whole town.”

And since Maristela gave many such answers to most in the town, all while flaunting her new pink dress even while shovelling dirt left and right, it inevitably came up at the town meeting.

“I’m grateful for all the effort they’re putting in, the risks they took and the materials they took home,” it was Beatriz to complain first, “But now we need around a hundred pots, or the water will be wasted. They can’t keep all the clay for themselves!”

“It’s on the island, so anyone should be able to dig it out,” Carlos backed her up, “What right do they have to keep us out?”

Luisa realized the contradiction and agreed to summon the seven clay-diggers. Iris didn’t help with the extraction, but since she volunteered to travel with them to the Mainland she was summoned too.

“Duarte, Maristela, I understand you want the best for our town, and that your endeavour comes from a place of goodwill,” she spoke once the two joined the town meeting. “But deciding what to do with our land without asking anyone else isn’t only against our traditions; it’s also exactly what a Mainlander would do. Do you realize it?”

Maristela and Duarte had no answer. They sat still, flustered and embarrassed, and only after several minutes of heavy stares from the townspeople they uttered some apologies.

“We can leave the clay fields for two weeks. We agreed with some company on the Mainland that we would bring another load by the beginning of winter,” Duarte admitted.

“Wasn’t it agreed to sell only once, to get what we needed and no more?” Gabi asked in a miff.

“It was! But we did not manage to get all we needed. One sale was not enough, and we thought at least another one was necessary. Hence the agreement.”

The meeting was about to heat up, so Luisa cut it short: “It’s enough for the moment. Water storage is the priority, red clay comes later. You can dig it out for your agreement after that.”

It rained again before winter. Not a lot, not enough, just half an hour of moderate drizzle; nothing the pots could help with. Yet, despite the short relief, the town was still tense at the thought of Duarte, Maristela and Iris crossing to the Mainland for the second time.

Not like the first time, though. Back then, our worry was all about their safety; later it became about their integrity. We worried what would happen when they would come back with other materials for the second greenhouse; or perhaps, in the worst scenario, none at all.

It was a harrowing wait, even if many of us were keeping busy by attending to the new greenhouse or by taking water buckets and pots around the town to whoever needed them. There was a feeling of vague mistrust that we all felt but none said, because no one would dare doubt their fellow townsfolk. I bet you wouldn’t, either.

But we were wrong.

Or, to be precise, not *totally* wrong. They did come back, right before Christmas, with all the components and panes to build a second greenhouse and plenty of new buckets. But as we helped them unload the catamaran on that cloudy day, Iris warned us to be careful with one specific bundle of... something.

“Ah, these must be the server components I requested!” said João as he unravelled the creaking folds of the tarp. “Thank you so —” his words cut short when a couple of wine bottles peeked out.

“We said don’t open it!” Duarte whispered too loudly, ripping the bundle out of João’s hands. The bottle spilt out, and he had to awkwardly crouch to prevent them from crashing on the rocky pier.

“What’s with the wine now?” Carlos puffed his chest as he walked up to the clay-sellers. “Weren’t you supposed to buy stuff for the town? Unless that’s a Christmas gift.”

Even Atilio, usually calm and thoughtful, got heated up: “Dudu, what’s the meaning of that? I’ve been waiting for months and you come back a thief? Ezequiel, tell him something!”

“I’m sorry...”

“Oh, don’t be so scrupulous!” Iris put her arms akimbo, looking down on Carlos and Atilio from the catamaran’s bow.

where, is a dry room with beans, and in my furious hunger, I let them pull me towards it, let that civilized allure keep me moving. Or perhaps, there’s something deeply animalistic about that too, and I’m drawn to the food source I know to be there like the birds drawn to a feeder well-stocked with seed.

Finally in the distance I see a cell tower rising up illuminated from the darkness, and know I must be close to Snøheim. A little further, just before midnight, after some 50 kilometers and 17 hours of hiking, the mountain station emerges from the clouds, artificial light piercing through the flurries of snow. As I cross the threshold, my animal side falls away. This mountain is inhospitable to life that adapted to the Savannah, and I will have to sleep within its walls.

But, the interior lights are off, and there’s no signs of other humans present, not even cars parked out front. I try the main entrance thinking that maybe a skeleton of staff is present, but the doors are locked. I walk around the building, then every other building trying the doors. Everything is closed, and there’s no emergency shelter for fools like me. My loop around the station has taken me back to the main entrance. Maybe I missed something in my first quick survey. I have a mental map of the station, and now I methodically walk around every building trying every door. I follow my previous footprints in the snow nearly exactly, and when I again return to the entrance, I know that no doors are unlocked. I start looking for a place to set up my tent, but the ground is frozen and rocky, but there’s no large rocks to use to pitch my tent, at least none I can see. I’d mailed my winter gear home on the assumption that I wouldn’t be camping in the snow again, so I don’t have my snow pegs, but they’d likely be useless here too as the snow isn’t deep or dense enough for them. I wonder if draping my tarp over my sleeping bag in one of entrance’s alcoves would be enough to keep me dry through the night. Were I not so cold, I’d find it easier to laugh at this, that letting myself be drawn to food and shelter has not produced the former and made the latter more complicated.

I do one final loop around the station and notice a protected stairwell to the second story of one of the cabins. I hadn’t gone up the first time assuming that if the lower floor was locked, then the upper floor would be too. There’s one last chance to sleep inside, so I climb it. It’s locked, unsurprisingly. However, it’s just big enough for me to roll out my sleeping pad and stash my gear. It’s protected from the precipitation, and almost no spindrift is fluttering up into the space. Some wind is forcing its way through, but far less than the alcoves. I set up my bed, fetch water, and eat, and as I do, I feel like an opportunistic scavenger seeking shelter in the abandoned ruins of a once great society, finding and using what I can, but not fully, not for its intended purposes. Cold in my sleeping bag, aching against my mat, sleep doesn’t

come easily for this animal.

that I cannot stay and will always be either coming or going. I want what I'm feeling now — is it serenity? — to never end, not when night soon falls, not when my legs carry me somewhere else or give out and force me to camp, not when the weather changes and with it the tenor of the valley, not when, if I never left, repeated circuits through these plains and mountains would end with my last breath decades from now. All the same, only 2 ½ days have passed since I left Otta, but even this morning feels impossibly far away having crossed through so many changes in terrain and weather. The plain here exists outside of my notion of time, in some primordial state.

This separation from “civilization” and “society” makes me feel inhuman as humanity seems tied to the degree to which I abide by the standards of the modern world. Here, I walk where I please, piss and shit nearly as soon as urge strikes, and when summer comes, I will graze on berries plucked from the ground as I move: different kinds of plump and sweet blueberries, the sour yet refreshing and blacker-than-aubergine crowberries that grow by the millions, the ever-sought deep orange buttery cloudberries, and others too, lingon and rowan and black. I sleep just inches from the dirt and listen to the elements and the other inhabitants of the world as I fall into and wake from sleep. When it rains, I breathe in life as the scent of petrichor fills my nose and the healthy rot of the forest fills my lungs.

My identity is shifting to something atavistic, away from that version of myself that only exists in the context of civilization as I know it. I'm forcibly gendered not just by society at large, but also by anarchists, queers, and other radicals who look at my outward presentation and presume to know everything about me and what role I should fill. They see my stature, the hair that grows on my jaw, and the deepness of my voice. From those, presumptions are heaped on me, inescapable. I have no internal feeling of gender, and I never have. On television, in books, and when I'd started school, I'd seen how people were neatly put into two categories, and I could see the delineations and rules quite clearly. I'd strove to mold myself into that form, adhere to those guidelines, not because I'd believed that it was what I should have been but because I'd recognized that I was something slightly different, that if I could pass as being like the others, then they'd tease me a little less. Out here, I have no external feeling of gender either. Every day, I wear the same clothes, ones chosen purely for function. There's not some well-tailored version of myself I'm presenting at all times trying to position myself within my varied social contexts, trying to clearly state that I do or don't have some particular gender and adhere to those roles. I'm not asserting what I want others to see me as. I'm a body, an animal, moving across a landscape. I'm an animal not so much because of a regained connection to the natural world — there is no clean separation between

“the natural” and “the urban/constructed” — but because I'm not squeezed into known human roles. I simply... exist, illegible and beyond categorization. Mountains don't care how I dress or how much money I earn per year. Forests don't impose anything upon me. Animals, apprehensive as they are of my presence, aren't passing judgement on my appearance, and I don't begrudge their heightened alert to seeing a creature that looks so different from them. I might be a predator, after all. All that I am is cobbled together from the societies I was raised in and still live in, but out here, I am something else, something closer to the most purely distilled version of myself. Without all that which forces me to bend, with the time to reflect, to return to the reflections over and over again, I can see shades of myself that have always been there but have escaped previous notice.

My ascent up the base of Snøhetta takes me into darkness. The sun continues to set, and it starts to rain. Wind blows cold water into the gaps of my hood and down my neck. The clouds thicken, deepen their gray, and visibility drops. The world takes on a surreal feeling, like I'm experiencing the faded memory of a previous night's dream. In the distance, I can see a herd of muskoxen with their calves standing around on the road. Advice is to stay 200 meters away due to their aggression, but I feel a great urge pet them, and that I, an animal too, should be welcomed and seen as a friend. Instead, I turn off the road and into the spongy fell and shrubs, and I start working my way parallel to the road. My movement is slow, hindered by the ground I move over, bushes and twigs catching on my shoes, feet sinking into the marsh and muck. The muskoxen start to walk parallel to me, and it takes me half an hour to finally make it ahead of them. The rain turns to sleet then quickly to snow. The clouds thicken further, and visibility drops yet again. I can only see a few dozen meters ahead, and poorly at that in the low light. Some boulders just off the road, hardly more than a dozen meters away and within my small sphere of perception, transform into muskoxen standing still, the inanimate taking life right before me. By the time I realize what they are, there's nothing I can do but keep walking. Without turning my head, I watch them from the corner of my eye. I maintain my pace, and they watch me amble by. The snow cover is no longer a dusting over rock and brush; the ground is solid white, even the road I walk on. In the distance, I see strange fluttering shapes on the snow, undulating rotations that seem more like the flight of a boomerang than anything living. White on white, hard to discern, I first think they're birds, maybe snowy owls flying low, but they disappear too fast for me to make sense of them. I crunch onwards, then see a third, a fourth and realize they're mountain hares springing away when they hear my footsteps.

I'm cold and my exhaustion is mounting, and now, that motivator I didn't want is rearing its head. Up there, some-

“We went all the way to the Mainland to get you all this greenhouse stuff; can't we have some wine for ourselves? Besides, we bought just a couple with the money that was left after buying the parts. There was just not enough left for hardware.”

“Then let us on the boat,” Beatriz dropped the aluminium pipes she had just picked up and waddled to the ladder.

“Help us unload first!” Maristela shoved other panes into her hands, almost pushing her into the water, “We can play your hide-and-seek later if you're so curious.”

“No need for that,” Duarte interrupted the squabble before it started. He took a bag from below deck, pulled out one of many more bottles and poured it into the sea. “I didn't even want this stuff. I only wanted to grow my peppers and my family. I knew money was going to do a number on me, and eventually it did. I'm sorry, everyone.”

Luisa intervened, walking down from the market square as everyone else carried parts the other way. “We need to have a serious talk about this, or it will be the last of such trading trips. You can keep the wine, provided you bring some at the Christmas party.”

A week later, we all gathered at the town hall to discuss what to do. According to many, the money earned from the red clay was entrusted to the wrong people, but some were a bit more forgiving. It could've been anyone, after all; the allure of the Mainland and its wonders, the everyday wealth of fine clothes and good wine that they had denied us long ago, who among us would've resisted?

Like the red clay, all those might look trivial to you, who are surrounded by them every day, but to us are wonderful and unique. Having an ocean between us really changes perspectives, doesn't it?

That town meeting has been one of the most heated that I have memory of.

Carlos and Beatriz, as fiery as always, set out to end the red clay trade with the Mainland: “These bastards are no different from the Mainlanders, I say! So what should we do? Smash their boats and keep them here, or toss them to the ocean they so much want to cross? Maybe they can swim their way to the Mainland, if there's money to be made!”

“None of the two, please,” Luisa said, trying to calm them down. “We're not here to punish them, and some of them already apologized. We're here to understand what to do next.”

Gabi raised their hand, and was allowed to speak. “I admit the trade went better than I expected; the greenhouses do work well, and the Mainlanders are not coming to seize our red clay as long as we do the work for them. I think we should keep it up... as long as we benefit from it, that is.”

“But then how do we make sure nobody uses that money the wrong way?” João asks holding his hand out to Iris. “No, actually, we should first ask ourselves *whose is that money?*”

“It's us that dug out the clay,” Vitor and Emilia replied. “It's only fair that we get something back for our effort. It's not much, a couple bottles of wine. Let us have at least that.”

“But that clay comes from the island. You didn't make yourself, it's not yours,” Gabi pointed out, shaking their head. “You merely transported it from one place to the other.”

Maristela grunted: “*Merely?* We crossed the ocean in order to get you parts. Twice. Where's the gratitude for that?”

“What if we arranged something like this,” Duarte intervened, then asked for pen and paper. “Thank you Ezequiel. What if we agreed on a list of things, stuff we *really* need, in order of priority? For example, if we have a town meeting before the trip, we can vote on what we need the most.”

“And the money earned from selling the clay is used only for the listed things?” asked João. “It could work, yes.”

“But if there are leftovers, can we use them on other stuff?” Iris spoke, attracting a crowd of stern gazes. “After buying the listed stuff, of course!”

“This sucks.” Carlos shouted. “We didn't have to worry about what people an ocean away did with anyone's money! We could settle everything in a town meeting or two, it was so easy. But you wanted to trade, you wanted it so bad, and now we're in this mess. Because we have no way of getting back what they spent on wine! I would beat the shit out of them if they weren't women, and they're not getting punished for doing evil.”

“So then we can send different people every time,” Luisa suggested. “As long as there's one person that knows how to sail and enough volunteers. If someone is caught doing misdeeds, they won't take part in the fruits of what's brought back from the Mainland. Iris, no peppers for you, I'm afraid.”

The meeting dragged on for far longer, going in depth with numbers and priorities and other details. Not everyone was sure we were doing the right thing, but I'm sure everyone had each other in mind, one way or the other.

Eventually we figured out something that worked for everyone, more or less.

The clay-diggers will tap into our island's gift only when something is deemed important to buy for the whole town. Trading trips must be no more than twice a year, and no one should invite Mainlanders to conduct trades here. We trade only on our terms, and only when we deem it necessary. If the town needs no material or tool, no clay is dug; no ship is sent across the ocean. With water plentiful again, Duarte, Vitor and Emilia could go back to their peppers and vegetables, setting the shovel aside only for the direst of times.

So it seems we're finally going to get the server and repeater parts with the next trading trip, and this is the last letter I will send you. Since Iris was not allowed to sail again, I volunteered.

I want to see the Mainland too, if it still looks like when we were there together.

I hope you miss me as much as I do.

Love,
Ezequiel

Something Atavistic

Håkan Geijer

The following is a chapter excerpt from an unpublished book.

Two valleys and 37 kilometers distant from from where I awoke, on the edge of the small settlement Hjerkind, I reach where I'd planned to camp. Signs warn travelers that this area is a former military firing range and that there could be unexploded ordinance off the trails and road, and it's a shame that such a wide-open and peaceful place like this valley should have been used for practicing war. More concerned about lead that's leaching into the water than with making camp on something still lethal, I continue on along the gravel road that terminates at the Snøheim mountain station, the path taking me away from Europavei 6, the main north-south road through Norway. A few minutes later, after passing a sign telling visitors to use the shuttle to avoid disturbing wildlife, one that's certainly not yet in service for the season, I find a good campsite by the river Svone, and I sit down and lean back against a rock. It's been a long day under overcast skies, starting with a climb through a rocky ravine dusted with enough snow that I'd repeatedly stepped into voids and cracked my ankles against their stone sides and then traverses of forested valleys and snowy fell. I'm hungry, and part of me is ready to make camp, eat, and curl up in my sleeping bag, but something draws me to continue even if the sensible thing to do would be to pitch my tent.

It's evening, but the long days leave the sky bright despite persistent clouds. Snøheim is a roughly 4 hour trek through the Hjerkind landskapsvernområde, a distance I might be able to cover before nightfall. The weather might turn, the lighting might change, and this moment — the elusive thing it is — could disappear. I, once again, crave beans, an addition to live up the same instant mashed potatoes that make up my dinner near every night. I doubt Snøheim is open for the season, the last two mountain stations I'd passed today having been closed. I could check, but I don't want beans or warm dormitory to be my motivator, maybe a perk if I make it the full way. The more I think about it, the more I'm pulled to walk on, maybe not to Snøheim, but at least further than here. I can't identify this feeling, can't say why or what causes it. It's not restlessness, no, I'm completely exhausted. Still, something tells me to keep walking. I heat a quick first dinner, scarf it down, then continue on.

The sounds of intermittent traffic fades into those of the wild: the flow of water through a riverbed, birds calling, the

occasional rustling of wind through leaves, and the loudest sound of all, my feet and trekking poles crunching on gravel, their rhythmic *tschk-tschk-tschk* my most faithful companion. The gravel road traverses a large flat plain, and I feel like I'm in a cradle of life, cupped by mountains on all sides. The Svone runs beside the trail, and while there's rocky snow-capped peaks in the distance, around me it's verdant with hardy plants — mosses, shrubs, and trees — all in abundance, just like there has been all day, but now I feel like I'm in it, among it, rather than passing through it only to quickly rise above it. The clouds feel low, like the heavens are weighing down on the Earth. Far off in the distance, the base of Snøhetta, "Snow Hood", rises with only the faintest traces of snow at its base before its top disappears into the clouds. The road is so simple, my movement so uninterrupted that I fall into a meditative state where my walk through this calm and idyllic landscape merges seamlessly with my walk through my inner garden, the sensations of the two blending and becoming inseparable. I lose myself in the journey.

In the twenty-five days since Lindeses, today is the first I've felt like I'm out in the wild, away from civilization, and this feeling is further accentuated here on this plain. Even if I carry it on my back and in my mind, even if I've just passed a village with utilities, even if my phone still has signal, I feel remote, feel part of the great cycles of the natural world. I try to locate where this feeling of the wild comes from. The landscape is just that: the land, the weather, the plants, the animals. Yet my presence here brings my perception of it and the emotions it evokes, adds the human element that allows wild to be separated out from civilization. I can only find it quiet because the urban is so loud, only find it slow and because our digital lives move so fast, only find it calming because there are no adverts and notifications vying for my attention.

It feels old here, ancient beyond humanity, like it has always been this way and always will, like the seasons come and go but the plains and the valley remain. Because of human activity, wild reindeer no longer roam this far south with the exception of the Hardangervidda, but I can conjure the feeling of of watching a herd go by, to be one of them moving across the land following food and favorable climate. It feels melancholic, like the peace it offers is ephemeral,

We woke up one morning and fell a little further
down
For sure as the valley of death
I open up my wallet
And it's full of blood

*/godspeed you! Black emperor — the dead flag
blues/*

Leaving tonight. See you soon, dead painter. You've been a kind host. Back to another inferno. Sleep well in the middle of nowhere.



Our Lady of the Barricades

Kimera

athena

yv

Athens always feels like this elusive place I introduce to strangers as “home”, but never got to experience the way I’d really like to. With all her pitfalls, dark corners, neon haze and trash. I’m always coming back as a thief, experiencing a small bit of hedonism, people, and places, for a short period of time, escaping, passing by and always leaving way too soon. But am I not always leaving?

Getting out of the ferry was faster than expected. Electric feeling in the air and people’s gaze. 7AM. Skyline should be lighter. Gray. Desperately choking the sun. Rays penetrate the ash veil. Nature’s funeral.

Funny that I carry the Neuromancer with me.

“The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel.”

Gibson couldn’t have pictured it better. Piraeus filthy as always. Headless people walking in all directions, like dazed horse flies after dinner. The air feels toxic.

We get into a cab directly heading to D’s house. Cab driver asks what are we up to. Decided to tell him we’re going to a Brian Eno concert, hoping it will halt his enthusiasm. 7:30AM. He got curious, damn it. “What’s kind?”

“Neo-classic, ambient electronic, somewhere in the middle”

“Hm”

He types the name in his phone and plays the first composition he found. Better than expected.

The whole car went silent and we drove through the highways of Athens. Heading north.

Sun keeps getting higher on the horizon. The change of penetration angle gave this sick orange color in the skyline. Small flakes like particles falling from above. Not sure if I’m in Chernobyl or Blade Runner 2. Probably a toxic mix of both.

Red lights. Cars stop next to us. I stare right into the window of our temporary neighbors. Fear and apathy. Dangerous cocktail. Green. Accelerate.

We’re passing by the neighborhoods I grew up. Old hypodrum, now fancy library nobody visits. Planetarium. Olympic stadium. All surrounded by heavy fog.

Not sure how I feel. Maybe I’ll know later or tomorrow. Or never. Yet it feels as if Brian Eno can precisely express how I feel, so I don’t have to look for words. Thanks.

I start liking this taxi driver. He’s silent. Brian’s piano is projecting this city’s desperation into the sky and sets the Athenian highways on fire.

Arrival in front of D’s house. Taxi driver thanks us for introducing him to Eno. Cute. Heading towards the stairs. P’s also there. Almost forgot about his existence. It’s been a while. Gives me a sweaty hug and we talk about the weather.

D is good. Missed the closeness of her eyes. The warm feeling of knowing each other forever. Haven’t seen her for almost a year. Feels like yesterday since I left. She’s happy. A bit sick. Worried about the fire. Constantly checking the air quality index. It’s pretty bad. PM2.5 should be below 150. It’s 400 now. Breathing problems since a kid and fucked up tonsils. All windows closed. Your own house feels like a prison.

Brian Eno tonight. We pass by F’s hotel. Red walls. Fur carpets. Glitter everywhere. Don’t dare to imagine what people do here. I’d like to picture murder scenes. Pimps. Shady clients. Sex workers killed in the jacuzzi. Full package. We have a couple of drinks and head south.

Ancient theatre. Marvellous. Why am I living in this synthetic era? I know, ancient greece was only for the privileged while dicks. Rest of us — slaves. Has much changed? We still pointlessly rebel against space technocrats.

Taking seats. Exciting. The Eno brothers appear. Emotional. Laughing at their british humor. Eno brother says they were rehearsing last night. Ash snow was falling from the sky.

“Western Civilization ending where it started. Are we observing it right now?”

Silence. Most probably.

They open with small but intense compositions. Whole theater fills with projected patterns from behind. Colors and sounds almost synesthetic. If that’s the end of the world, I’m ready to embrace it.

Eno’s niece joins the second session. Red dress. Cosmic voice. The compositions get longer. More emotional. More intense. Unreal. Leaving me breathless. Gasping for air. Almost impossible. Real.

Their connection reminds me of mine with S. I miss him. Glad he’s visiting soon. Tired of explaining my ways to strangers. He knows.

I start thinking of people again.

C is magic. Wish she was here. Hope I see her again. Somewhere. Somehow. Anywhere. Anyhow. I think we will. If we don’t, I’m glad for everything.

What’s V so afraid of? What is there lurking behind?

Keeps me curious. Disappointment is the only sure outcome.

F can’t stop looking at her phone. Talking with the drug dealer during the concert. Life is full of small insignificant disappointments, right?

What’s Y up to? That’s actually interesting. I’ll probably see him somewhere again soon.

The Eno brothers are tripping my head around. Floating in the space-time continuum. No direction or reason. Love it.

Always reminding myself — those are the moments I’m living for. Making me feel more alive. Or just alive. A momentary cloud of pure existence. Dissolving as the sound waves fade. Until they’re gone. Merging with the ambient sound. Clapping. The momentum is gone. Not lost.

Alive in my brain. Love this practice of awareness. Submerging. Diving in the moment itself while the magic is happening. No postponement of life and experiences. No tomorrows. No preparations. No safety. All in. Living life.

Ancient temples are glasses full of white history and red trauma. Feels like home.

A night full of dealer bounty hunting followed. Not very interesting. Slept well.

Inferno continues.

Street techno party. Synthetics evaporate through eyes and nostrils. No need to read sci-fies anymore. We are them. Biohacking ourselves already. Music hits hard. Adrenaline and dopamine rush reaching the brain. Sound waves and muscles sync in. All is one. Is it?

Ecstatic faces. Pupils big as pool balls. Bodies ready to copulate. Words full of compliments. Hands everywhere. Are we safe when we are free among strangers?

Five hours feel like five seconds. Sunrise. Music stops. Stolen electricity fails us again. G talks too much. Works as a photographer for OnlyFans clients. Pathetic or interesting? Too late. Afterparty? I’d rather sleep for three days and nights.

Bed feels good. Still dizzy from the synthetics. Head feels light. Body weight tons. Too heavy to exist right now. Let’s sleep. Shut down.

5PM. Coffee and cigarettes. Mountains look clear for the first time. Or it’s my eyes. Should be the mountains. Fog is gone. Got used to her. Now she’s gone. It suddenly got too bright.

Five days and five nights. All the same. D is still sick. I have to leave. I like leaving. “Nowhere to go but everywhere.” Yes, Jack, but no tickets.

Metro. Back to the balcony. D is worse. Maybe I couldn’t leave for a reason.

Heading south. Walking on endless empty highways. Looking for neon crosses. 1AM crusade. Poetic, my ass. First two are closed. Have to find the shit. She’s decomposing. Israeli embassy. Empty highway. Fuck my life.

Cop guard looking at me. Probably I look lost.

“Any green cross around? Open.”

“Walk ten min up, on your left.”

Good. Still, all cops are bastards.

Entering the cross. 50C. Getting sick just by being here.

“Amoxisilin, Nestatin, and any probiotics you got.”

“Got papers?”

“Will arrange it tomorrow. You got the call?”

“Cool.”

Nylon bag full of pills. Heading back. 3% endurance. Remember the way back. Please.

Doors open. D got her dose. Sound of beers cracking in the balcony. Ready to kill the day.

Eyes and lungs full of ash. Still not sure how I feel. Got a song that knows better than me.

The car’s on fire and there’s no driver at the wheel

And the sewers are all muddied with a thousand lonely suicides

And a dark wind blows

The government is corrupt

And we’re on so many drugs

With the radio on and the curtains drawn

We’re trapped in the belly of this horrible machine

And the machine is bleeding to death

The sun has fallen down

And the billboards are all leering

And the flags are all dead at the top of their poles

It went like this:

The buildings toppled in on themselves

Mothers clutching babies

Picked through the rubble

And pulled out their hair

The skyline was beautiful on fire

All twisted metal stretching upwards

Everything washed in a thin orange haze

I said, “Kiss me, you’re beautiful

These are truly the last days”

You grabbed my hand

And we fell into it

Like a daydream

Or a fever