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# l&tp perspectives | *the public*

creative writing project



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This seventh collection of short stories comprises the work of the students of the Language and Text Production course, MA Programme, in English and American Studies. The stories were written in spring semester 2023 as an exploration of creative writing and part of the **Creative Writing Project, Perspectives**, with a focus on *the public*.

The photographs have been chosen as an incentive to produce divergent and varied texts, with distinct writing styles, on a variety of topics approached from different perspectives.

From a comedian's dressing room to the university library, from temporal and spatial experiences on trains, railway stations or at an airport to unforgettable days by a lake, chance encounters by a busy set of escalators and an unexpectedly familiar midnight ride, glimpses of past and current preoccupations, social issues and simple, everyday scenes come alive with attentive observations, perception and sensitivity.

Somber or playful, matter-of-fact or allegoric, each short story is well thought-out, distinct in style and a treat to the reader!

*violet stathopoulou-vais*

# fit right in

by philomena kremser

photo: violet stathopoulos-vais © 2023

layout: Ansel Kiefer/Ansel Kiefer © 2023

It was quite a luxurious room they offered Allan Drewby this time. Since he was used to rather simple kept dressing rooms, the comedian was positively surprised to even find a small bar with a variety of drinks and refreshments. While Geena, his make-up artist, went to her room to get a new can of hairspray, he opened himself a can and had a sip of Mountain Dew, a drink he would never deliberately order. “What a strange drink,” he thought to himself. Awfully sweet to him, the taste of bitter citrus could be much more dominant. With a slightly distorted face, he put the can back in the small fridge. “A shame that my beloved Tizer is not sold here ...”

The moment all for himself did not last long, as Josh, his manager, entered the room without knocking. “Allan my one and only! How are we tonight?” Not even interested in any kind of reply he kept on talking. “Guess what? The stadium is full. Pieno. Every single seat ...which means that 20,000 people are going to enjoy the show tonight. Isn’t that brilliant? That’s everything and a bit more than we had ever expected! Wait, ...” He dug out a crumpled newspaper from his briefcase. “I really need to read to you what the Guardian wrote about your show today: *‘Drewby’s latest comedy makes audiences cry with laughter’* – No, like honestly, you’re amazing Allan!”

Made up again by Geena who in the meantime had already returned, he tried to smile despite the pinprick on his face. “This tour through the United States is a big thing, you know that, right? And as your manager, I already think bigger, piu grande, like even going to Australia, New Zealand, well anywhere, you name it! What do you think?” Unable to answer since his lips were being painted by Geena, Allan nodded his head slightly in agreement. “Okay, so make this show yours again. As long as you are as funny as you always are, it will be a great success once again! Sei fantastico, Allan!” A shrill sound rang out. The sign for the comedian that there were only ten more minutes left before curtain’s up.

He closed his eyes. A deep breath in, a long breath out through nose and mouth: he was ready. Behind the curtain, he took another deep breath and crossed himself hastily. Three, two, one - the curtain rose. Show time!

Josh greeted Allan with a broad grin. Patting him on the back, he told the almost exhausted artist how adorable his show had been once again. Some colleagues from backstage congratulated him, Geena and the costume designer greeted him with applause. The show was indeed a great success. He could be proud of himself and relieved that the Americans also got involved with his British wit. He walked quickly back to his dressing room. Finally, the room to himself, and a locked door behind him. He needed rest, his ears were still ringing from the extreme noise level during the show. Still in his make-up, he sat down at his desk and opened his laptop.

As soon as he logged in after typing in the correct code, the image of a rather formally dressed man sitting in a dark brown leather chair popped up in front of him. His amicably smiling face was underlined by round sea-blue framed glasses, which accentuated the exact same colour of his eyes even more. In his hands was a well-worn thin black folder. The kind what you cannot miss when you meet a person like him. After checking again that the internet connection was stable, the middle-aged man immediately began to speak: "Mr Drewby, we haven't seen each other for a long time. Can you hear me?" Allan nodded. "Tell me, how is the tour going? Are there any particular hurdles? How do you feel? Maybe you can tell me about your feelings in the last 24 hours?" His voice was calm, but firm. Allan swallowed and tried with all his might to suppress the rising tears. "That bad?" the man in the screen asked knowingly. "Worse," Allan finally managed to say. "Well, the plasma level results from last month don't suggest otherwise. The drug doesn't even show up in the blood. I'm afraid we'll have to increase the dose many times over." Allan wiped a hand over his eyes, which were about to turn black from the kohl pencil Geena had applied on his eyes earlier before the show. He looks like frozen staring at the keyboard in front of him. "It's okay to be helped. You are not the only artist who has to deal with such conditions. The best actors, the least likely to notice, can face similar problems."

A little more composed by now, Allan asked: "And you really think a little pill like that is going to get me out of all this mess?"

The man pressed his glasses back and looked him straight in the eye for a few seconds. "Don't get me wrong, I can see that you're not afraid of taking it, but rather of the reaction of those around you were they to find out. Let's put it this way: If you were in any kind of physical pain, you would also immediately reach for a medicine that relieves the discomfort and you will soon feel better, isn't that so?" Allan turned his eyes to the ceiling. Then he closed his eyes for a millisecond before turning back to the man on the screen. "Okay, you're right. Something has to change; I can see that. Let's try the higher dose, it seems I have no choice anyway. It has to fit right in." The man in the screen nodded at him in agreement. Show must go on.

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# the climb

by tobias unterhofer

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2023

source: amyra kassabkhanian-aka © 2023

The man stood at the window and glanced at his reflection. A bony hand lifted itself towards his face and traced the folds on his forehead, poked the eye bags that were ever growing and ran its fingers through the greying hair. He could have sworn he did not look like that ten months ago. Even though he felt trapped in the shadows, he had to be strong, had to protect her.

The man snapped out of his trance, collected himself and forced the corners of his mouth to a smile. He turned around and approached the child sitting alone in the row of chairs with a pretended spring in his step: "It shouldn't be much longer, Casey." He looked at her. She was always watching, listening, observing.

At that moment the doors swung open, and people started flooding into the room. In a few seconds every seat was occupied. The air was filled with chatter that swept through the hall like thundering waves.

He noticed a sudden movement from his daughter and embraced her in a tight hug. "It is going to be okay; you will be fine." Casey had covered her ears with her palms, pressing them together tightly until she could block the overwhelming sensation. There were too many people here, too many voices, too many sounds. He knew that she needed silence, craved calmness.

The father was aware that the crowd was not the real danger for his daughter. From the corner of his eye, he saw that a side door was opened. A man in an orange jumper, his hands constrained by handcuffs, was led into the room towards the front. The people were just curious spectators, the real threat was up front. All he wanted for her was to have more time, to be more prepared. But all he could do was to gift her these last few seconds of warmth.

Casey looked up to her father with her big, blue, and watery eyes. At the age of eight, the girl could not fully grasp the reasons for his sorrows, but understood that he was a prisoner in a hole

of darkness, from which he could not escape. She knew that, because she was standing beside him, also shying back from the steep incline of dirt that covered the sun.

The child hugged her father back, feeling the warmth and safety of his embrace. She knew that he was trying to protect her from the overwhelming noise and chaos, and she was grateful for it. As her father held her, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw that he was still holding her, but his expression had changed. There was a look of sadness and resignation in his eyes, which were directed to the front, and the girl knew that something was wrong.

The man in the orange jumper placed himself with a loud thud on a chair in front. The father could not hide his emotions anymore, frowning with anger and fear.

He saw his daughter squinting, her eyes darting towards the front of the room. The moment she laid eyes upon the man in handcuffs, she froze. Time stopped. There was no eye contact, but it didn't matter. His mere presence brought back those memories she had buried in the back of her mind. The pit grew bigger, the walls seemingly growing to unconceivable heights.

The father's heart sank. He knew that his efforts to shield the child from the harsh realities of the world had been shattered. He had wanted to protect her innocence, hide her from pain, and give her a chance to grow without the burden of past traumas. But now, all his attempts seemed futile.

As the girl stared at the man in handcuffs, memories of terrible scenes and unimaginable pain flooded her mind. All that she had suppressed, that she had pushed aside, resurfaced with an overwhelming force. A tear ran down her cheek.

In that instant, the father realized the enormity of the mistake he had made. By shielding his daughter from exposure to the truth, he had denied her the opportunity to process what had happened and heal from her traumatic experience.

With an aching sense of loss, he gently released his hold of the girl and knelt before her, meeting her gaze. In a voice filled with remorse, he whispered, "Casey, I'm so sorry. I wanted to protect you from the world." The girl realized that her father could not be strong. He was stuck in that pit.

But at this moment she began her climb, her escape. She took her father's hands and stood up. A flash of surprise was visible in his eyes. "It is alright, daddy," she uttered with a trembling voice. "You do not have to blame yourself; I am a big girl!" With this she motioned her father to sit down next to her, the only empty seat in the room.

As a man in a long black robe entered the room, the crowd's mumbling subsided. His presence dictated the state of the room seemingly with ease. He sat down in the big chair in the middle of the stage, scrolled through some documents and then addressed the audience: "Quiet! This is a courtroom, my courtroom as a matter of fact. We have a delicate case on our hands, and I demand respect and impeccable behaviour from each and every one present. This applies also to the colleagues of the media." With that he shot a telling glance to the left side of the room, where a man with a camera and a woman with a microphone and recorder nervously avoided his piercing eyes.

The girl nodded at her father, who informed her that this was the judge. She knew that. The judge put his glasses down, placed his elbows on the table and said: "We all know why we are

here today. A crime was supposedly committed by the man of the name XXXXX XXXXX, who is sitting to my right.” He did not look at the man in orange; just swiftly motioned his hands towards him “He stands trial today and will then be evaluated by the jury. He has a defendant provided by the state by the name of XXXX XXXX.” The scrawny, balding lawyer was hunched nervously over his documents. “But without further ado,” the judge declared, “let us begin with our most important witness, the victim herself.”

The eyes of the old man searched the crowd.

Casey swiftly stood up and raised her hand, “I am here!” Her father was flustered and put a hand on his daughter’s shoulder. Casey turned around, looked her father into the eyes and smiled: “Dad, it is fine, I can do this, trust me!”

The judge smiled at the girl and asked: “Are you ready, my dear?”

With a firm voice Casey answered: “I am!”

She calmly walked to the front, leaving her father behind. To her, he was visible from the edge of the pit, rocks crumbling and tumbling downwards under her step. She turned towards the sun, embracing the hug of radiant light.

This had to be done.

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# whispers from beyond

by lisa terzer

photo: violet stathopoulou-vait © 2023

source: amyra kassabkanyan-ara © 2023

Emma had been through a lot in her life. From a difficult childhood to a series of failed relationships, she had to face numerous challenges that had left her guarded and wary of trusting people again. Despite often putting herself in public settings in an attempt to belong among the crowd, she found it difficult to connect with others and often felt even lonelier when surrounded by people. Her whole heart felt like a room of empty chairs waiting to be filled out. She refused to give up though. Determined not to let her personal weaknesses define her, she decided to take a fresh start, leave the hustle and bustle of the city behind and move to the countryside to heal her wounded soul.

In the midst of nowhere, surrounded by trees and flowers, stood her new home, a tiny, picturesque cottage. She spent her days gardening, baking bread, along with taking long walks in the woods. Emma had finally found her peace, yet still tried to avoid the presence of others whenever possible, preferring the company of trees and animals to that of people. But fate had another plan in store. It was during this time of solitude that she met her neighbor Jack. He was a kind man, but he carried a sadness in his eyes. He had lost his beloved little sister, Lily, in a tragic accident a year ago and was struggling to find meaning in life after such a loss. Emma felt an instant connection to him, though she was still on guard, having had her heart broken too many times in the past. Although she tried to keep her distance from him, her heart seemed to have a mind of its own, pushing her towards him. The more time she spent with Jack, gardening, baking bread, and taking long walks in the woods, the more she was drawn to him, discovering parts of herself she had never noticed before. Still, she held back, resisting the temptation to open her heart to him completely, cautious of the pain that had haunted her in the past.

One day at the local farmer's market, she met a woman named Sarah. She was warm, friendly and had a mysterious aura that fascinated her. They struck up a conversation, resulting in them

spending the whole afternoon together, chatting and laughing. Emma was surprised by how at ease she felt in Sarah's company. Feeling as if they had known each other for years, a deep friendship quickly developed between them. In the weeks that followed, Sarah and Emma spent a lot of time together, visiting exhibitions and museums, trying out new recipes, or simply chatting for hours in their favorite café. Sarah's contagious energy and enthusiasm for life inspired Emma to step out of her comfort zone. With Sarah by her side, Emma felt more confident and less reserved. The walls that had once separated her from the world slowly crumbled down, allowing her to experience the joys of human relationships once again. She also told her about Jack, about her feelings for him. She liked him, yet she was hesitant to build a relationship with him because she was afraid of being hurt once again. However, Sarah encouraged her friend to give love a chance. Reminding her that life is too short to let her fear hold her back.

Encouraged by Sarah's words, Emma decided to follow her heart. Hence, she mustered up all her courage to speak to Jack, to see whether there's a chance for them, whether he feels the same, whether fate was in their favor. And indeed, it was. Their love story began. Finally, being able to build a deep relationship with each other based on trust and understanding. They were there for each other through the good times and the bad, always finding a way to make each other happy. With each passing day, they grew closer, and while she and Jack flourished together, Sarah always stayed discreetly by her side. Emma was grateful that she was part of her life. That she had met her on that day on the farmer's market. That she was her friend. That Sarah had played a crucial role in bringing her and Jack together.

One day, while helping Jack organize his belongings, Emma stumbled upon a photo of him and Sarah. Confused, she asked him about it. Jack hesitated at first, his heart still heavy with grief, but then he revealed to her that the woman whose memory was forever captured in the photograph was his beloved little sister Lily, who had passed away a year ago. His answer struck Emma like a lightning bolt. How could it be that he knew Sarah? No. How could it be that she knew Lily? Then it was clear as day. At that moment, as the boundaries between life and death blurred in her consciousness, the pieces of the puzzle came together, and the realization swept over her like a tidal wave. Sarah, or rather Lily, had been watching over the two of them all along, guiding them to each other, encouraging Emma to give love a chance. She was eager to confront her friend, but when she went to look for her, she was nowhere to be found. So, she realized that the stranger's job was done – she had helped both Jack and herself to find joy in life again. Emma felt a sense of bittersweet acceptance, knowing that this young woman, whoever she was, in a way, would always remain with them. Although she hadn't met Lily during her lifetime, she was grateful that she had at least met her spirit.

With Lily's memory in their hearts, Emma and Jack continued their journey together, building a future filled with love and happiness. They knew life was unpredictable, but they were determined to enjoy every moment together. Thus, they went beyond the limits of their loneliness, leaving their past worries behind and accepting the unpredictability of life. They made new friendships that enriched their lives and their happiness radiated to others as well. One special evening, Emma found herself surrounded by her friends at a concert that was very special to her – it was Lily's favorite band. As the lights dimmed and the band took the stage, she felt her presence. The band began to play. Emma's heart, once a room of empty chairs, now brimmed with a sense of completeness. She was grateful for the second chance at happiness and knew that she had experienced something truly magical – a love that had transcended life and death, and a friendship that had truly touched her soul.

# filling the seats, fulfilling the minds

photo: violet stathopoulos-vais © 2023

by sonja rieß

layout: Anja Kerschbaum-Art © 2023

The rows of empty chairs stretched out before the podium like a vast sea of possibility. The stage lights were shining brightly, illuminating the way for me, the speaker, who had yet to step on the stage. A hush had fallen over the room, broken only by the occasional cough or shuffle of feet. The audience had yet to arrive, but one could already feel their presence in the air.

I stopped midway, surveying the scene before me, and I could not help but feel the excitement, the surge of adrenaline, waking up every fibre of my body. Adrenaline was flowing through my veins as I looked at the number of chairs before me. I asked myself: “Why do we need so many chairs?” Though I knew it was because so many people had signed up for my workshop. My research was my heart and soul. A passion that burned within me. All these years of researching, striving to be the best version of myself, better than I could have ever imagined.

Concealing a smile, a cautious curve graced my lips as I contemplated the chairs with eager anticipation. In that moment, purpose and fulfilment swelled within me. It was destined to be a full house, and I was determined to deliver an impactful message. However, nerves gripped me, and doubts crept in: “Can I truly provide them what they seek? Will I fulfil their minds? Can I forge a genuine connection?” These thoughts swirled like a tempest within me, leaving me momentarily shaken. Above all, the fear of an unresponsive audience sent shivers down my spine. Their participation was crucial for me to convey my point effectively.

Gradually, attendees filed into the room, and I reminded myself of my mission—to make a difference in people's lives. The impact of my research and workshop weighed heavily on me, and I couldn't allow negativity to distract me now. As the final attendees settled into their seats, I made my way to the podium. The excitement in the room was palpable, and with each passing second, my nervousness heightened, amplified by the expectant faces gazing back at me.

I commenced my workshop, and the crowd met me with intrigued looks. As I progressed, nods

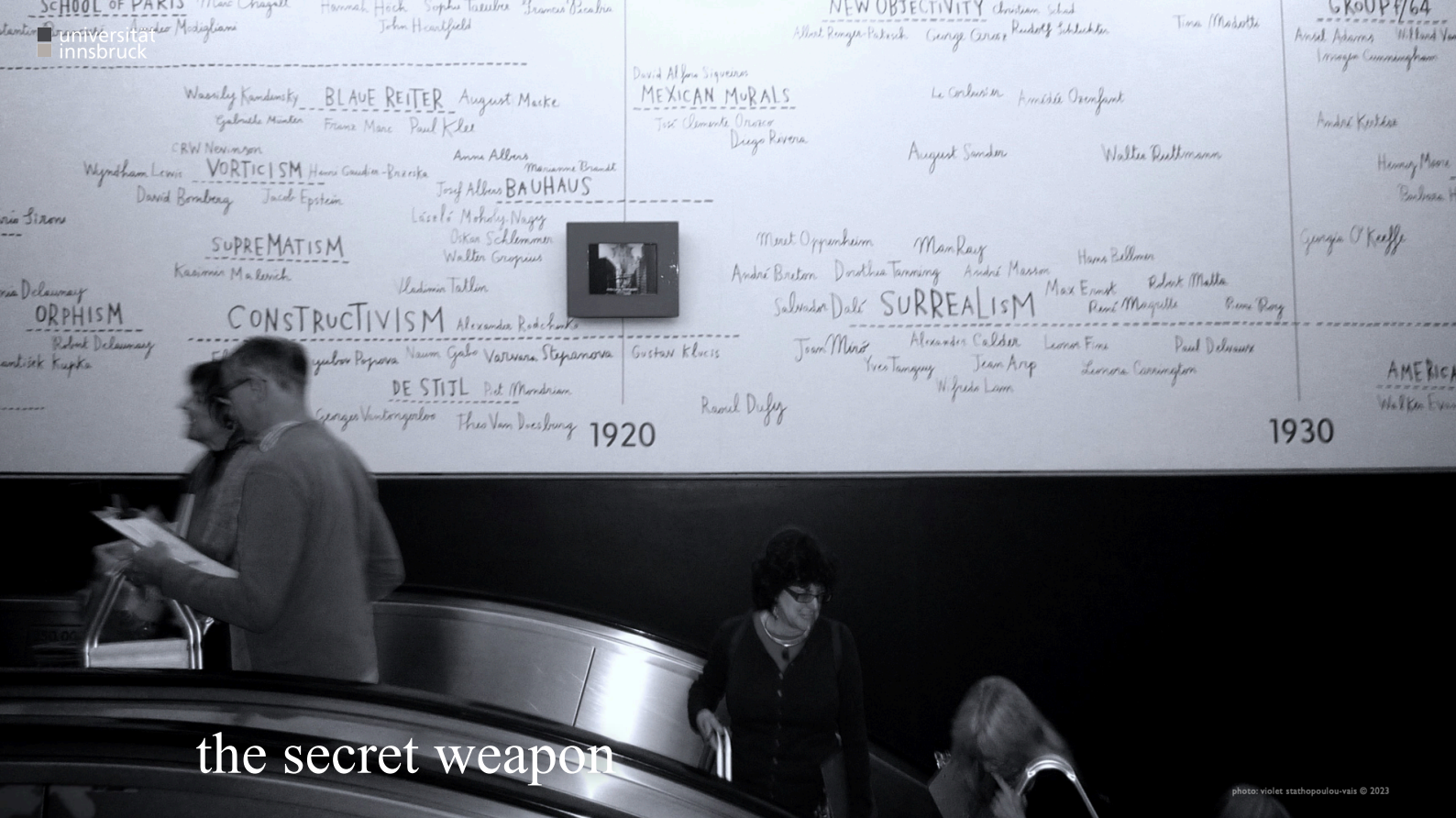
of agreement began to accompany my words. Yet, as I transitioned from the introduction to explaining their active participation, a young man in the front row expressed his discontent loudly, his murmurs filled with resentment: “Wait, we have to actively participate?!” The confusion on the faces around him mirrored his dissatisfaction, leaving me panicked and uncertain of how to respond. I chose to ignore his comment, pushing forward in an attempt to rally their engagement.

As the hours passed, I delved deeper into the subject matter, sharing relatable stories. Contrary to my initial fears, the audience grew increasingly engaged and responsive, offering thoughtful questions and sharing their perspectives. However, a subtle hesitance lingered among them. Then, unexpectedly, the young man from the front row raised his hand. In that moment, a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions consumed me: “What would he say? A critique that unravels our progress? Or perhaps a profound perspective that enriches our discussions?”

With bated breath, I awaited his voice, and his unexpected words took me by surprise. “I would like to apologize for my initial reaction,” he sincerely expressed. “I was hesitant about active participation, but now I have an idea to contribute.” The young man proceeded to share a personal experience, sparking a chain reaction of engagement from others who had remained silent until then. Finally, it felt as though everyone was truly united.

As the workshop drew to a close, I felt a swell of pride for the connection formed with my audience. “Thank you all for your participation,” I concluded with a smile. In that moment, it struck me with clarity that the true measure of success in filling the seats was not in the quantity of people present, but in engaging with individuals who could take something valuable away from our encounter. I stepped away from the stage and realized that my purpose as a speaker was not just to fill seats, but to fulfil minds.

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## the secret weapon

by lorenz schober

Impossible how ignorant people can be! When on the move, everybody seems to be in their own world, unaware of the things happening around them. They can't even recognize the beauty of small events. A street musician putting his heart and soul into his songs written by himself? Ah, he's just doing it for a quick cash-grab. A stunning painting from a local talent? Who cares? There are plenty around the world, it would take a miracle for her to find success.

Usually, such people make Alex sick. Everybody for himself, not even a shred of open mindedness. As soon as they are confronted with a stranger, they huddle up like an armadillo, avoiding eye contact and moving on, afraid of being spoken to. But today, this ignorance is his cover. Alex was in a subway station, keeping up the pace of stressed businessmen and overworked middle-class workers. *What a fascinating place, he thought. Our paths are always crossing here, doesn't matter where we come from. But we are still unable to see each other.* His brown jacket, blue jeans and white sneakers made him practically invisible in this buzzing crowd. Even his average height and short brown hair made him perfectly inconspicuous so as not to be recognized. Only his freckles were prominent enough to catch the eye of a young student. She smiled at him, breaking this dull human curse for a brief moment, but quickly turned away, blushing. *Shame, she could have been my first victim...*, he realized. Alex is here for a reason. He's got work to do and this cover seems to be perfect.

He turned around and decided to place himself at the end of an escalator. It wasn't the busiest way into the station, only people who came from a small side-street used it. Alex picked this spot, because he had a clear overview of the place, giving him a good opportunity for reconnaissance. He had always been proud of his keen senses. He could rely on them and detect a detail that might prove to be helpful. The escalator was used by zombie-like workers who did not pay any attention to detail. Nobody seemed to spend a thought on the wallpaper depicting a timeline with dates fundamental for human progress. Such a shame, he thought, letting his mind

wander off. *Lots of them could learn something on their way to work.* But enough pondering, Alex is here for a reason. With a stern look, he scanned the area and confirmed his first assessment. Nobody minded him. So, he lingered for his first victim.

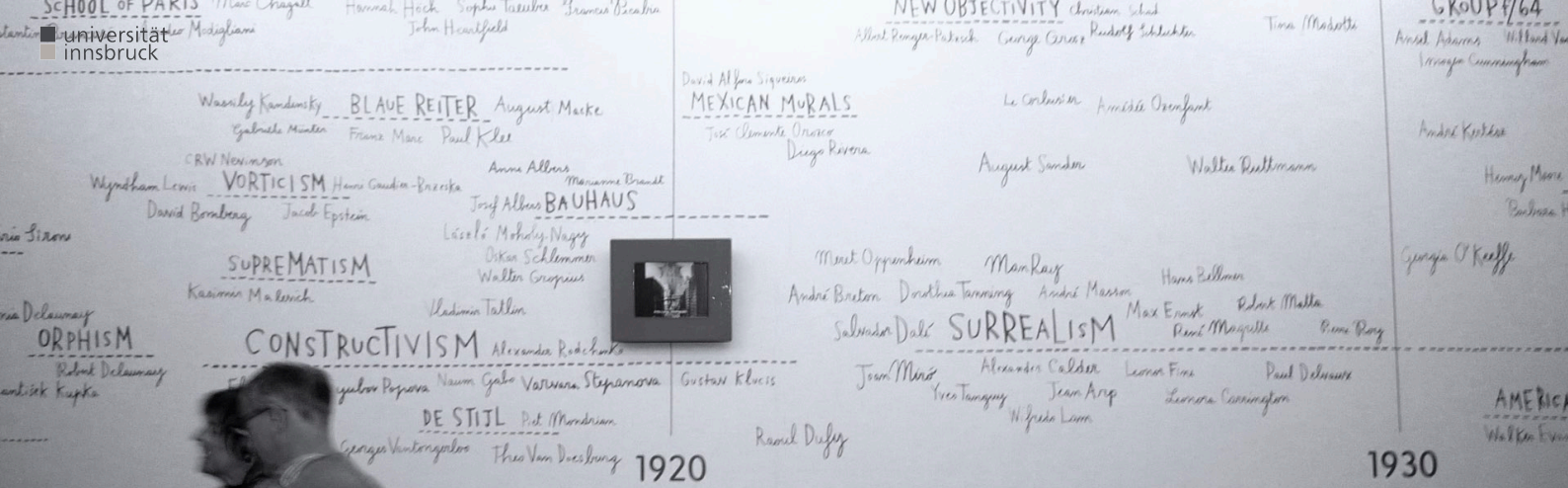
A couple of minutes later, a man, probably in his fifties, turned around the corner, visibly stressed. He held his phone with his right shoulder, so he could fiddle around in his black briefcase with both of his sweaty hands. He almost ran, his tie fluttering over his left shoulder which made him look a bit ridiculous despite his angry face. Perfect. That man will not know what is going to hit him. Alex prepared himself for the assault. He reached for the secret weapon in his pocket and delayed his movement for the perfect moment. The second the man set a foot on the escalator, Alex bowed over the railing and said: “Hello sir, have a nice day, would you like to have a cookie?” and held out a box of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies sprinkled with salt. The man jumped, shocked by such an intrusion of privacy. He really did not know what just hit him, Alex could tell exactly how he felt by his confused expression. He tried to smile at him, which made the situation even more awkward. It ended with the businessman turning away and mumbling something inaudible as if resuming a conversation on the phone.

Alex sank into a pit out of embarrassment and felt his cheeks turn red. What had he thought was going to happen? Had he truly thought that people would consider his attack on their privacy a totally normal behavior? Honestly, he had not expected such a terrible defeat on his first attempt. The man could have at least taken the cookie. But again, what did he expect? They are all fond of their solitude.

Still this disaster would not discourage Alex, so he composed himself and tried to meet the eyes of another fellow. This one had witnessed Alex’s failed attempt to bring a little sunshine in another person’s day. He was pacing quickly toward the escalator and tried to defend himself by avoiding eye contact. “Cookie?” Alex offered, but he did not even get a response. Perhaps offering food to strangers wasn’t the best idea. Were they that blind? How could they not see his good intentions? Maybe it’s because they had all been raised by a considerate mother, who forbid them to accept food from strangers? He chuckled at this thought and decided to take a large bite of a cookie. *Shit*, he thought. *Those people are really missing out on something.* The cookies were still warm, and the chocolate bits melted on his tongue. He closed his eyes, smirked, and nodded to himself in appreciation of his own baking skills.

Suddenly, he heard a small chuckle. He opened his eyes and saw a woman - she must have been close to her retirement – looking at him sideways with a smile on her face. Alex realized his opportunity and quickly said: “Would you like to try as well? They’re amazing, if I may say so myself!” And with that, he traded his first cookie for a stranger's smile.

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# escalators

by markus saurwein

The following text can be read starting from top to bottom or vice versa depending on one's mood, sense of orientation, or simply the time of the day – or one might try out both ways and fully savour the author's concept.

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If you've ever taken the time to scale and descend a pair of escalators for an extended amount of time, as I have, there are things you are bound to have noticed. The vibrations coursing softly through your body, tenderising flesh and soul. The ludicrous efficiency of their transportational capacity. You also must have noticed the dramatic sense of romance the very concept emanates; all the great mathematicians in history must have felt their hearts twist and pound when they pondered parallel lines: ever intertwined yet separated, bound only to meet in infinity.

The performance! The heartbreak!

Amidst the reverberating click-clack song of shoes, half-shout overhead announcements, and murmurs in the mass rang the singer's songs, her joys and woes and chords and such. But none would stay and listen; they preferred to sway away. Certainly, they must not have been happy there. *Green jacket a dog up the esc—and chorus. Hey-ya.*

"Exeunt!" proclaimed the right-hand escalator in buzz-buzz monotony, shouldering the oncoming ascendants. They took the right side like grape-green and wine-red and bough-black uniforms on rail, one gliding motion to leave the hall. *Green, green, out;* Adrienne's sing-sang words *de tous les jours* continued, though her gaze had wandered, and her mind followed suit. There—I could sense it—sprang forth the buds of fresh, sprightly love!—a love worth the attention of a poet (and a beating heart)!

Line after line, step by step, the crowds and songs came and went in true escalator fashion—what goes around comes around; all comes in ellipses but omissions. Olive-shamrock-clad descendant! The thief returned to the crime scene—slow gait, the eyecatcher broke the tangent and approached Adrienne! Tension palpable. Time slowed. But—where have they gone? *isn't that—long time passing.* All in shambles. But broken hearts make bitter-better lovers. Her song, guitar *gently weeping*; the clink-clank of coins at her feet played an irregular beat. Proceed, proceed—begin these rights!

Much like myself, Adrienne had been spending a tremendous amount of time being deeply moved by her local star-crossed pair of escalators. Only Adrienne was, *unlike* myself, no poet at heart. No, she was a lowly musician, a street performer in a station of the Metro, who knew more about strings and chords and choruses than about the nature of love itself.

This story is about Adrienne. Happily, it is written by a poet.

And all—merely players. Enter: The apparition of descent and ascent; the solitary secant, the prima facie of the metro! Bop-step into her underground beat, that emerald-grass on; the tune swings green-to-blue, *let me, let me—pretty face!* She mirin' it, *some might say.* Who doesn't love a love story—if tangentially—told, unfold, before their eyes? And words came, went, up, down, all the time!—*what I want!*

Lord knows, it would be the first time.

Tragedy unrolled and folded day by night by night by day. Her? Tending to her tunes like flowers in a garden; small Herculean labours, every step of the everyday—loves me, loves me not: Petals in the wind above the underground, in the air, on a wet patch by the street. Hence, earthy, dripping, jackets and suitcases carrying shouts! and murmurs. Parallels in wet-blueberry, cherry, and bark-brown descended into tangents; there ensued a symphony of clank and clap and *'woo!'—she's a little boy in Spain!* She bent the notes, they climbed up and down the escalators, in search. *Not there.* The silhouettes merged again; her focus dwindled. She was returned to herself. From blue sprang green again. "E terra caelusi" Again.

She tired. Adrienne, *face to face, with the—two parallels so tense they could twist, bend, break (oh—break your limitations!)* Love's ups and downs divided them again. Don't tear. No turn of the neck, only a passing understanding, a return of faces in a crowd. They'd be back. As logic dictates; as they must. Ever in flux—keep rolling, Sisyphus—*sold the world.*

# trapped in transit

by sabrina leitner

I kill the cigarette under the sole of my shoe and wrap it in a freshly ripped page of the newspaper I bought for 3,60 € only a few moments ago. A subconscious habit I acquired due to the lack of ashtrays in this city. As always, I am late. I nod vaguely as I hurry past the station staff on my way to the ticket machine. – Attention, passengers. The express train to Verona will be departing from Platform 4 in two minutes. Please make your way to the platform and mind the gap between the train and the platform. – I have a look at the list of destinations to confirm the numbers I need for my ticket. 22 as always. I take a second look, just to be sure. I press the buttons on the machine.

2 “click” – another 2 – another “click”

I hold the ticket against the machine.

The sound confirms that the ticket is valid.

Still, I wait until the screen gives me the “OK, good journey!” Confirmation, caution, reassurance, certainty, validation, security.

– Maintain a safe distance from the platform edge. Refrain from entering the marked area until the train has come to a complete stop. Thank you for your cooperation. –

Vigilance, boundaries, limitations, rules, consequences.

12:18, the train guard blows her trilling whistle, I hurry past her.

“Just in time,” I think to myself, as the train sets off towards its destination. – Welcome aboard the train to Ver... –

The ride is calm for a while. A conglomeration of clouds covers the sun. In these moments I can – at least to some extent – relate to the people who enjoy train rides. I have always considered myself a social person, but trains in particular are a place where I want to be by myself. *A train is an extraordinary bundle of relations because it is something through which one goes, it is also something by means of which one can go from one point to another, and then it is also something that goes by.* I think Foucault would agree with me. He doesn’t mention people either.

I start fidgeting with the change in my pocket. The extinguished cigarettes fall out of the newspaper and their ashy perfume reacts with the scent of metal in my hand. We approach the tunnel. I grow tense and try to focus on my breath. It gets dark. Breathe in...

*The man opposite me started talking to me right at the moment the train left the station. I had noticed his gaze even before I entered the train and kept walking. – Welcome aboard the train to Verona Porta Nuova. This train will stop at Brennero/Brenner, Fortezza/Franzensfeste,... – And when I finally sat down, he was quick to occupy the seat opposite mine. He said he was on his way home from a short stay in Berlin. He had visited old friends and was heading back to Italy. In a strange attempt at small talk, he shared his opinion on the weather enthusiastically and made some superficial remarks on the current state of the climate crisis. His hair was short and well-kept. He looked as though his last visit to the hairdresser wasn't more than a few days ago. But then again, he mentioned that he was only on vacation. Who goes to the hairdressers on a trip? I found this question to be way more entertaining than the small talk he tried to force on me. Still, I did not dare to ask. I did not want to talk to him. He didn't pick up on the hints I sent him. My arms crossed, only a disinterested "yeah" accompanying the occasional "mhm". In an attempt to prevent the conversation from continuing, I stared out the window, looking at nothing in particular, just avoiding his gaze. Like two pieces of a puzzle his legs paralleled mine: Mine crossed, his spread. Mine clenched together, taking up minimal space; his: relaxed, filling the rest of the shared space. Despite my clear disinterest, the man continued to talk. He told me about his work, his parents, and his problems as if we were old friends catching up after years apart. I felt trapped, unable to escape from his relentless chatter.*

*As the train chugged along, I felt my anxiety growing. I couldn't stand the thought of spending the entire journey trapped in this uncomfortable situation. I began to consider my options, trying to come up with a way to politely end the conversation without causing offense. The man's monologue continued; I became increasingly uncomfortable. His voice became harsh, and I felt like I was suffocating under the weight of his words. I searched desperately for a way out, but there seemed to be none.*

*The train rattled on, and the minutes turned into hours. I tried to tune out the man's voice, but it was impossible.*

*But the worst was yet to come. As the train approached the darkness of a tunnel, the man grabbed my arm and pulled me towards him, his hands lingering on my body for what felt like an eternity. – Next stop: Brennero/Brenner. Exit in direction of travel. – I froze in terror, unable to comprehend what was happening. Finally, the train escaped the tunnel. I gathered my things and made a hasty exit.*

Breathe out...

– Next stop: Brennero/Brenner. –

The midday sun kisses my skin. The sun has fought her way out. Just like the train had made its escaped out of the tunnel. It stops and a few people get off.

A young man approaches. "May I?" he asks pointing at the seat in front of me. I nod. He sits down, crosses his legs, and puts his headphones on.

Train, transition, transformation.

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# ‘tick tock’, says the clock, ‘I’m watch-ing you’

by isabella jud

A clock is standing in front of my door. It's small, little more than the size of a pocket-watch, the face of it eggshell white, the clock hands a deep black.

"Let. Me. In," it ticks. A voice so small I can barely hear it.

"What." I say, caught off guard. It's not every day I see a clock standing in front of my door. A part of me wonders how it even managed to reach the doorbell.

"Let. Me. In," it says again, in the rhythm of its second hand, fast paced and soft while counting the seconds.

For a brief moment I hesitate. Should I let it in? But I don't really need a clock and it gives me a bad feeling – a sense of pressure on my shoulders.

"Sorry," I say, not feeling sorry at all. "I've got to meet someone, I can't let you in."

Quickly, I grab my jacket, my shoes already on my feet. The clock caught me on my way out the door. A chill runs down my spine at the thought that it might have deliberately timed our meeting. Had it been watching me?

The clock is small, its ticking soft. It takes no effort to step over it and close the door behind me, to keep it from getting into my apartment.

"Let. Me. In," it ticks again. I pretend not to hear it as I walk away.

Hopefully it will be gone by the time I return.

...

The clock? Is not gone by the time I get back home.

“Let. Me. In,” it repeats while I unlock my front door. It takes some effort not to step on it as it hops between my feet like an undersized, mechanical cat. I don’t even bother to reply this time as I shut the door on it. You won’t get in on my watch buddy.

It was probably naïve of me, to hope that, come morning, things would be back to normal without any moving clocks bothering me.

...

It was definitely naïve of me. Instead of getting better and back to normal, things get... Well. They get weird. And weirder.

The clock stops waiting in front of my door to be let in and starts to follow me around. At first it’s easy to outrun, too small to keep up with my walking speed and I get used to jumping over it when leaving my apartment, its soft voice fading the farther away I walk.

At first, that is.

Soon after, I start to notice a soft ticking sound whenever I linger somewhere for a while. At the end of my classes before switching rooms. When having lunch with my friends. When standing in line at the store.

The soft ticking is noticeable, but it’s so quiet that it’s barely an annoyance. Yes, it makes me uneasy, to have it follow me around so much, but in the end it’s such a tiny clock. What can it even do after it finds me, except talk to me in its small voice?

But then... the ticking – its voice – grows louder. And louder.

And louder.

And louder.

...

The clock stops appearing in my sight, but that isn’t a comfort. Not when its voice has grown loud enough to be a bother. It is still slow to find me, but inevitably, it calls me in its ticking voice.

It stops using words. No “Let. Me. In.” anymore. Instead, it makes a different sound.

“Tick.”

“Tock.”

“Tick.”

“Tock.”

It’s at a volume where ignoring it is getting more difficult. People start to be worried by my absentmindedness and ask if I am feeling alright.

I’m not.

I begin to study my surroundings whenever I’m in public, but I can’t see any other clocks, can’t hear any other ticking voice except the one following me.

Sometimes I catch glimpses of similar clocks and startle, try to get a closer look to see if there’s someone in the same situation – someone I can ask for advice.

But whenever I take a closer look, I notice that those clocks are different from mine. Small and delicate, hanging from elegant chains. A little bigger, held by colorful bands and wrapped around wrists.

None of the people carrying their clocks around look as stressed as I feel and instead they seem composed. They're sometimes in a hurry, but not being hurried.

There are dark circles under my eyes and stress-lines forming around my mouth and I can barely stand to look in a mirror.

The clock's ticking is growing more and more persistent.

...

In the end it's a stranger who gives me the help I so desperately need. An elderly woman I meet on the bus. She walks with a cane and, when she gets on, I quickly get up to give her my seat.

"Thank you, my dear," she says and smiles as she sits down, her eyes warm.

"Oh, you're welcome," I tell her and glance down at my phone, distracted by a message for a group project I'm working on.

"You young people always look so busy, staring at that phone," the old woman tells me.

"It's not that bad," I reply, and she laughs. Her voice is as warm as her eyes.

She wears a necklace, stern silver in the light – with a small golden clock at its end.

I stare.

Unfortunately, she notices.

Fortunately, she notices.

Thank god, she notices.

"Are you interested in this little thing?" she asks, still smiling. Caught out I shift uncomfortably. It's embarrassing to be caught staring, but...

"Yes," I tell her, my throat oddly tight. "I've been feeling... a little run down recently, by time" I explain, my voice small. I can't hear myself talk, not with the constant ticking ringing in my ears. "So your clock caught my attention."

The old woman lifts her hand and gently touches her necklace.

"I can relate," she says, almost wistfully. "There are moments in life, where you never seem to have enough time. When every clock you see seems to tell you you're late to something."

I nod. I can't speak.

"But after a long time feeling like that, I realized – why was time bothering me so much? What was it, that gave me this sense of pressure? My time is mine to do with as I wish. And if it took me twice as long, or half the time, to do something it took everyone else, it's still *my* time."

Her eyes are compassionate, when I meet them with my own.

"It looks like that's a lesson you need to learn, too."

My throat feels so tight I can't open my mouth. The old woman looks at me for a long time. Then she raises her hands to the back of her neck and unfastens her necklace.

It gleams in the sun and for an instant it looks like she is holding a thread of light.

"Here," she says and holds out her hand. In it lies the necklace, her small clock held tight in her other hand.

"What?" I croak. What is she doing?

The old woman tucks her small clock into her purse, still holding out the necklace.

"It takes effort, to learn how to tame the time that tries to hurry you along. But it is possible to do so," she winks at me. "I think, right now, you need this more than me." She gets up from her seat and suddenly, the sounds of the other passengers rush back into my awareness. The sound of people chatting, of the bus itself, the rumbling of its engine. The sound of its door opening.

I take the necklace. It feels warm to the touch.

My eyes sting.

"Good luck," she tells me, and laughs as she gets off the bus.

I miss my stop. I miss class. I stay on the bus for a long time, necklace held tight in my hand. It's quiet. Despite all the noise around me – it's quiet.

...

Nowadays I wear my clock on a necklace, its face is still eggshell white and its hands a stark black. It's a weight around my neck, but a comforting one.

Whenever I hear it ticking, I can choose to listen. Or choose to ignore it.

The clock's voice is familiar to me now, like an old friend. And while I sometimes slip up and let it hurry me along, the necklace chaining it reminds me to hold steady.

I get a message as I slip into my shoes and pull out my phone.

"You're late!!! Where are you?" It reads.

Suspiciously I listen. Silence.

"Hey," I say and tap my clock with a finger. "Wake up, would you?"

With a small groan, the clock begins to tick again, the sound barely a whisper.

"Tick."

"Tock."

I smile.

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# Hauptbahnhof

## prayer room

by david lintner

Despite all the commotion, there was calm. I was at *Toronto Pearson*. The airport had lost the agility of its early days, but that didn't matter much to me. It was my anchor, and my anchor needed to stand still. I felt safe here, as if situated in the midst of a hurricane that knows no silence but within its own realms. People were heading to places I didn't know much about. Singapore - I'd heard of that. Buenos Aires, Lagos, Cleveland. The travellers didn't have much in common: some moving fast, anxious to get to their gate; others waiting, sleeping. For this latter group, minutes went by slowly. An hour can seem an awful long time to wait! There was much to see in the Departures hall. I felt energized.

Yes, an airport spells progress... But that's not all. Oh, no. I could see something different as I was roaming the departure hall. The floor was perfectly smooth, by the way. But it wasn't clinically perfect, if you know what I mean. The blue signs above my head invited me to follow them, so perfectly legible were they. Gates 1-12, *Emirates*. And there appeared to be a person praying, right there on the sign in front of me. The sign showed the way to the multi-confessional prayer rooms. I couldn't help but wonder how these rooms fitted into this ultra-modern scenery of an international airport. Yet, when I went there and stopped just short of the entrance, they did not feel out of place at all. On the contrary, I felt like *Pearson* wouldn't be complete without them, even though I hadn't been aware of their existence up until a few seconds ago. Isn't that strange?

An incomprehensible, irrational urge to mingle with those people exiting the prayer rooms took hold of me. I meant to touch their aura, just for a couple of seconds. And I wanted to cross the shadows their bodies were casting under that sunless light. What was it that made me want to be with them? I didn't know these people; actually, I didn't know the slightest thing about them. They were moving out of sight, too fast for me ever to catch up with. You were fleeing me,

fleeing me. That passage in the *Acts of the Apostles* came to my mind, where the by-standers just wanted to touch the clothes of St. Peter and the ones who were with him.

I didn't know what these people's faiths were, nor did I care. It didn't matter a bit. They came out of prayer rooms, so they were clean as can be and I envied them for it. I envied them for the cleansing they had undergone, I envied the need they must have felt to enter the prayer rooms in the first place. Some may have felt a sincere wish to go in there and pray; those I envied as well. They were without fear. I was absolutely certain that they were. I didn't know why, which is what made me so certain. I wanted to take my fear and lock it in those rooms. The rooms were locked from the inside, or weren't they? I was confused. *Lufthansa* to Frankfurt. I looked up, a sign showed me the way to the *British Airways* gates. That's not where I was going, though; I had other plans. I was running, running, running; there was no end in sight on this merry-go-round. But I was a child no more.

Finally, a steel bench. I didn't know how much time had passed since I first saw the prayer rooms and the people who came out of them. Calm came over me, as I was finally seated. I dared close my eyes. But I was still afraid of the dark, especially now, as people were hastily hurrying around me. Oh, the anchor was what I needed now. I couldn't set sail again. This steel bench offered all the comfort I could have wished for.

A woman sat down beside me. I wondered where she was going. "Where are you going?" I didn't know why I spoke these words out aloud. Maybe it just made sense to be talking to someone. "Oh no, I'm waiting for my brother, he's coming back from Cairo. I'm a bit early." I must have gone over to the *Arrivals* hall. She smiled, and this smile meant a lot to me for reasons I couldn't account for. I smiled back and, surprisingly, I was able to smile naturally and effortlessly. After an endless while, I said, "That's nice," still smiling, more to myself now, though, as I wasn't looking at the woman any longer, but just staring aimlessly at the floor in front of me. She was waiting in a prayer room. She was praying in a prayer room. I like to believe that I was a little like her.

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## two to twelve

by valentin spielthener

A short glance at the big clock in front of the main station. Only two minutes left until the train leaves. It was a sight I was all too familiar with. Whenever I made a last-minute appearance, the clock always made me aware of the time I was about to lose. This time it wasn't different. Time was playing against me. My heart raced, and a wave of anxiety hit me. I could feel the beads of sweat forming on my forehead as I rushed through the station concourse. The bustling crowd of people made it even harder to navigate my way through the chaos. I pushed my luggage, hoping the wheels won't give up on me now. My mind raced through all the possible scenarios that could happen if I missed the train. I believed, at least partially, that I could always take the next train, but this time it was different, and the anxiety reminded me of exactly that.

My luggage rattled over the pavement. I quickened my pace, forcing my tired legs to move as fast as they could. The cool breeze brushed against my face, adding to my sense of urgency. I hated last-minute rushes, but my morning didn't go as planned. I had missed my first train, and the next one was in two hours. I couldn't afford to lose any more time, so I decided to take a cab to the main station. Little did I know that it got stuck in traffic, but somehow managed to make its way through to the main station, and here I am now. Two to twelve.

While I was rushing through the hall, my eyes quickly checked the surroundings for possible shortcuts to gain time. I saw an escalator, but while heading towards it, I realised that it was fenced off due to maintenance. Damn. Shortcuts negative. So, I continued to head towards the staircase. I felt the clock ticking on my wrist. In a menacing way the seconds counted down and I felt heat arising inside of me. Should I make a call and tell that I couldn't make it? Should I leave back my luggage and just sprint to get the train? Should I just let the train depart and pretend to never have had the wish to catch it? No. There is no escape. I had to get on this train, there was no option. One to twelve.

On my way to the staircase, I passed by the small bakery. People were queueing up to get their second breakfast. Smell of fresh coffee touched my nose and for a moment my senses vanished. I started to crave a mug of hot coffee. How nice would it be now to sit on a sunny terrace somewhere in Italy and enjoy a beautiful espresso? Strangely, in the most stressful moments, I always used to think about things that would help me deeply relax. Maybe some kind of anti-stress mechanism my mind initiated automatically. But reality literally hit me and got me back into the moment when a man barged me from behind. I had always hated this chaos at railway stations. These were the moments when I hated humankind and our stressful life. It was all about appointments, meetings, deadlines, being in time, on time, or out of time; but what for? Couldn't we just leave this concept of time out of our lives? A call from the speaker reminded me that we couldn't. The train was about to depart in a few moments. I had to run.

At the eleventh hour, I reached the train platform. With a quick look to the display, I checked that I was on the right one. A few people were still getting on, so I dashed towards the nearest coach. Nearly out of breath, I stumbled into the wagon, and I made it. Just in time. Just before hearing the whistle of the train attendant. The sudden relief was overwhelming. I couldn't believe my luck, as I found my seat and took a few deep breaths. I looked out of the window, watching the station slowly disappear. I settled in for the journey ahead, I couldn't help but think about how my life was just like that train.

Sometimes, you missed a train, while other times, you barely made it. It's all about timing, and how one manages time. Time can be relative; it's what one can make out of it. I looked at my watch and grinned: One past twelve. I made a mental note to plan better next time, but now, it was time to sit back and enjoy the ride.

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# the power of time

by magdalena steiner

Tick tock. All day long. Every day, every minute and every second. It never stops. The clock at the train station is not an ordinary one, even though it may appear as such with its black frame and the golden numbers. The only number that stands out is number twelve. Something must be wrong with it. Is it because it is crooked? Or maybe because the color shimmers a bit less than that of the other numbers? Never mind.

Emily, a young traveler with a passion for adventures, found herself waiting for a train at the train station in Glasgow. The girl had a special fondness for public places, where she could indulge in her favorite activity: watching people. With all the time in the world, she found pure joy in observing those around her. The way other people talk, walk and laugh has just been interesting to her. And so were the clothes, the language, and the relationships of others that Emily loved to observe. As the traveler stood there, closely observing her surroundings, something seemed to catch her attention momentarily. "What was that?" she asked herself. There it was again. Strange. Her hazelnut-brown eyes followed the direction of the shining light stroke. It was the clock. Emily decided to go past the shops and take a closer look at it.

The moment Emily stood in front of the clock, a strong feeling overcame her. She could not put her finger on it. It was like an inner urge which forced her to touch the clock – a strong feeling of curiosity of how the golden clock hands might feel like. The structure seemed so smooth and yet grippy. Emily stretched her hand towards the clock, and it immediately felt so comforting. Tick tock. The next second, a surge of energy coursed through her body. And in an instant, she felt herself being sucked back, the people and objects around her mingled and melted into one big, blurred vision. Emily lost track of time; she could not tell whether it was minutes or seconds that had gone by until her eyesight turned back to normal.

Black. Black suits, dark dresses, and a lot of interesting behind the times hairstyles. Smoke.

Everybody smoked. In the building? Strange. Same station, similar sounds and yet somehow totally different. Handsome men with sharply trimmed beards and flip-mopped hairstyles moved eagerly through the main station in Glasgow. Emily felt as if all the men were important businessmen, who had to hurry to attend their next meeting. Some of these men were holding cigars in their hand as if that would add to their outfit. Just like additional accessories. In contrast, the rather tiny number of women at the train station did not appear stressed at all. Emily could not detect a single woman wearing trousers. Every female wore either beautiful dresses or skirts that were at least knee-length. Interestingly, many of these women wore head accessories, such as glamorous headscarves or beautiful pillbox hats that emphasized their stylish appearance.

Despite her fascination with the looks and hairstyles of these people, Emily was torn from her thoughts the second the man walked past her. This smell. How could a specific fragrance trigger so many things? It awakened associations of pancakes with warm butter and a little bit of maple syrup and very thin slices of a sour-sweet apple. This smell overcame the young traveler just like a big wave crashing onto a tiny island. She could not explain why but she followed this man. Similar to a baby duck that swims after its mother, Emily chose the same way as this rather tall man in a dark blue suit. She followed him past a newspaper shop and a bakery which emitted the typical scent of freshly baked bread. It surpassed the dominant smell of cigarettes and cigars. The young woman had no idea at that point where this way would lead her.

While Emily was busy following the man's fast steps, she could not stop thinking about the association his smell triggered. She had never experienced such a moment in her 26-year-long life. The confused but curious traveler kept the man's back of head, which was covered with thick and yet silky appearing hair, in her eyesight and struggled to meet his pace. Finally, the man stopped in front of the announcement board. That was her chance to talk to this person that felt familiar and yet just a stranger.

Tick tock. The sound of the clock in the center of the train station again. Even though the atmosphere in this busy building seems different, the clock looks exactly like before. This sound brought Emily immediately back to reality. The people in the train station and the building itself went fuzzy. The noise of an arriving train mingled with horn-sounds was stretching inside her ears like long chewing-gum bits. She squinted her eyes and shook her head. Twice. A third time. Was it over?

She found herself back at the normal train station in Glasgow, where she had originally been waiting for her train. Everything that she had experienced before felt so strange. How long was it? Minutes? Hours? Was it even real? No idea. Whatever it was, she still smelled the taste of self-made pancakes with maple syrup. And all of a sudden, the face of her father in an old, long-forgotten family picture popped up in her mind. She had seen her dad. Her beloved father, who had died when she was six years old. Was it just a silly daydream or had she travelled back in time for real? Before she could think of an answer her train arrived, and the young traveler boarded the train. She could not stop thinking about what she had just experienced and had an inexplicable warm feeling in her tummy. Emily had simply run out of time.

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# the value of a small life

by kristina graßl

I playfully peck at my reflection in the glass as I admire myself. A shimmering band of blue wraps around my neck. Where the sunlight hits it directly, its glow is iridescent and bright, turquoise like the water in a shallow tropical bay. Without the sun's gleam the blue darkens, turns to indigo, the colour of the deep sea churned after a storm. Just below, guarding my precious collarbones and shoulder blades, an amethyst necklace not carved out of stone, but of blush and lilac feathers adorns me. Beneath the gems, the vibrant purple slowly fades into a body of grey, marbled with periwinkle. My most prized possessions, my magnificent wings, are dotted like black ink splashed on stark- white paper. My beak, gleaming like polished charcoal, stops the pecking. With curious amber eyes, coloured like the setting sun, my reflection stares back at me.

Look at me – I should be considered the mother-of-pearl of the air. A bright burst of colour in this dreary place of concrete and metal. Instead, they call me a pest. The rat of the sky. As if that miserable mammal could be comparable to me in any way. As if its pitiful, colourless coat could compete with my pearlescent glow. Nevertheless, the absurd-looking, wing-lacking animals that constantly visit my home in droves, treat me like filth. They shoo me away, let their chicks chase me for fun and put up spikes so I have no place to shelter from the elements. So I mostly keep my distance and wait until all of them hop into the moving metal cages that take them away. Lazily I stretch my wings and fly away. Leaving my place of safety, hidden between the scaffolding, I land on the now deserted railway platform.

My first stop is always one the small metal structures where the beakless creatures perch on as if they were birds. Because some of them peck at their food there, I can often find some scraps underneath. But today my search is in vain. I cannot find anything. None of those small, salty, yellow sticks. Not even crumbs of the round brown things that are sometimes sweet and sometimes savoury. The only thing I can find is a piece of the weird, white, sticky material but I

leave that be. Many times before I have tried to eat this confusing substance but, no matter the colour, it always glues together the insides of my beak. And then, the more I try to remove it from my mouth, the more it chokes me until I am almost out of air. Thus, I have learned to leave those pieces be. However, I have found some enjoyment and solace in watching the viscous masses cement themselves into the paved surface and slowly wither to stone over time.

Hopping over this surface, I wander around aimlessly for a while until I spot something that makes my feathers rustle with rage. So small and thin, a stripe of brown similar to the colour of crumbs and a narrow stripe of white, it looks completely harmless. Its smell is neither particularly appealing nor appetizing but in need it was all I had. It was last nesting season, and my chicks were starving. The weather had been bad for a long time and the featherless beings, fleeing from the rain, were pecking their food inside the glass boxes on the platforms that kept them dry. I could not find anything to feed my poor, screaming chicks without leaving them alone for too long. So, when one fateful day I discovered a heap of these tiny twigs, I took them piece after piece and fed them to my children.

Often before, I had seen the pink animals putting the twigs to their strange mouths and somehow consuming parts, before dropping the rest on the floor. Thus, I could not imagine that I had invited death into my nest. First there was quiet and I naively thought that I had finally satiated my children's hunger. But then the quiet turned into silence. And I knew something was very wrong.

I nudged my babies with my wing. Gently at first, then with more force. But none of them moved ever again. Their tiny and scarcely feathered bodies lay still and cold in the nest I had built for them with so much hope and love. I screamed and screamed for help but even if someone had come, my babies were beyond saving. In just one day, I lost all of my chicks to these deadly little pieces of poisonous rubbish.

Furious with righteous anger and despair, I peck every last one of the evil, death-bringing twigs off the platform and onto the tracks. And I hope that down there no other desperate mother will find them and maybe I can spare at least one the trauma of having to mourn their babies. Because no matter how small, every life matters.

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## midnight ride

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2023

by andrea hellweger

by: andrea hellweger © 2023

After an arduous day spent in preparation for a pivotal exam, my mind is still a flurry of unresolved tasks, my head still spinning of the unfinished tasks ahead. An evening bike ride through the city streets is just what I need to stop my head from spinning. As I cycle, my mind cools down and my thoughts drift away. The later it gets, the better it feels. The world around me slowly takes on a different hue, basking in a muted stillness. The once vibrant and bustling streets are now bathed in a dark blue glow, the last remnants of the day blue sky. The familiar sights and noisy sounds of the city fade away, as if the city is taking a deep breath and slowing down after tiring hours of frenetic activity.

I take in my surroundings with a sense of wonder and awe, marvelling at the city's enchanting beauty at this time of day. The city is a paradox, at once overwhelming and small, insignificant, and vibrant. But in the stillness of the night, it becomes a place of wonder and beauty, where anything is possible. There is a certain magic to the night, a sense of possibility and wonder that is hard to capture during the day. The buildings that line the streets stand tall and proud; their facades illuminated by the soft light of street lamps. The architecture is a blend of old and new, with sleek modern structures standing alongside historic landmarks. As I ride past them, I am struck by the intricate details and ornamentation that adorn the facades of these buildings, each one unique in its own way.

I notice subtle hints of the season in the air. The faint scent of blooming flowers mingles with the cool breeze, carrying the promise of spring. Occasionally, the tantalizing aroma of delicious food wafts from a half-open window, tempting my senses. In the distance, a horn blares and the faint hum of traffic lights changing colours breaks the silence, reminding me that life continues to move forward even in the stillness of the night. These small sensory details add another layer to the midnight ride, creating a vivid tapestry of sights, sounds, and smells that make the experience all the more enchanting for me.

I keep pedalling down the street. Stomping further and further. On and on. I am astonished by the quietness that surrounds me. I take a deep breath and close my eyes, relishing the cool night air as it fills my lungs. Marvellous magic permeates this night. The once bustling thoroughfare is now nearly empty, save for a few lone figures trying to find their way home. The city has a different energy at this late hour, a sense of calm and stillness that is seldom experienced during the day. The night is as if it wants to create its own captivating sights, wanting to be an individual, split from his inseparable twin, called “day”. I pass by a small park, its trees casting long shadows across the ground. The park is quiet now, save for the sound of crickets and the occasional rustling of leaves. It is a tranquil oasis amid the urban jungle, a reminder that even in the midst of chaos, there is peace to be found.

As I pedal up the hill at the end of the city and take a breather at the top, I am struck by the beauty of the city skyline. The towering buildings that loom over me during the day now stand in stark relief against the darkening sky. The lights of the buildings create a glittering canopy, a beacon of hope in the darkness. The city at night is a different beast, with new sounds and feelings that are just as captivating as those of the day but still unique and incomparable. The neon lights of storefronts create a kaleidoscope of colour, and the sounds of distant music and laughter add to the enchanting ambiance.

Navigating through the tranquil streets, I pedal back, lost in thought, savouring the stillness and the solitude. The city has a way of making you feel small and insignificant, but at the same time, it can make you feel alive and vibrant. It is a paradox, a living contradiction, and yet, it is this very dichotomy that makes the city so special. A sense of peace and contentment fills me while riding through the city streets. The city may be big and overwhelming, but in the stillness of the night, it becomes something else entirely. It becomes a place of wonder and beauty, a place where anything is possible.

I pass by a bike stand near the library, its metal frames barely visible in the dim light, shielded and protected from precipitation by a light metal roof. There are only a handful of bikes resting against it now, no people milling around, just a quiet reminder of the constant movement and activity of the city. The stand is a small piece of infrastructure that has been designed to blend in with its surroundings, unassuming and yet essential to the daily rhythm of the city. I take a deep last breath and leave the bicycle between two others. It stands still, a silent sentinel, waiting for a new occupant. The weathered lamp throws a steady beam of light on it from above, like a spotlight pointing out shapes of humans on stage. I cannot help but smile at its unassuming presence as I walk away. It is now a small piece of the city, but it is a reminder that even amidst darkness, there is movement and light to be found.

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## the picture

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2023

by lukas birkel

by: Anja Szegedieny-Art © 2023

It has been a casual Tuesday night at Innsbruck university in the end of January, the 29<sup>th</sup> to be exact. The tension amongst the students in the library is palpable as it is already past 10 p.m. and barely any empty seat to find. Paper submissions are due and final exams to be mastered. Mark has been stuck on page 4 of his term paper for multiple days, trawling through every relevant article, every journal, even every dubious website possible to find relevant literature. As a last resort, he registers to several AI platforms and tries to let the software do his work, unavailingly. Mark has detached himself of his iPhone all day, having left it in his dorm to avoid any sort of distraction. Little does he know that his phone is no longer in his room but in custody.

Another hour has passed, and Mark shuts his laptop down, exhausted and devastated. He grabs the keys for his bike lock, turns the key, jumps on his bike and rides home. At that time, he has no idea what he will have to deal with in about five minutes. As he rides towards his dorm, he witnesses flashing police lights in front of the entrance. The dorm is rather small and homelike and most of the students living there are in a way chummy, which makes him concerned about what might have happened. The closer he gets, the more he realizes the sobriety of the situation as he detects at least three police cars, maybe four. When he gets closer, the rigid looks of his friends towards him scare him. “What the hell is going on here?” Mark shouts. Silence. A few seconds later the police approach him:

“Mark Rothwell?”

“Yes?” he answers deranged.

“You have to come with us now!” a police officer, barely older and certainly smaller built than him, shouts. “Put your hands behind your back!”

“Bullshit am I doing.” “What the hell is going on?” “What’s going on?” Mark cries repeatedly. He feels like being the main character in a scary movie; the flashing lights, the frightened faces hypnotize him.

His best friend Lisa sits at the doorstep of the dorm, covered in a blanket crying her eyes out and gasping for air. Mark is being dragged to the ground and put in the back of the police car. Having controlled his breath, he asks again:

“Please officer, would you please tell me what all of this is about? You cannot drag me anywhere in the middle of the night without any explanation.”

“You know bloody well what this is about,” the young officer said. “You are accused of production, participation, and distribution of child pornography. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand the rights I have just read to you? With these rights in mind, do you wish to speak to me?”

“No, I don’t,” Mark states as his face has turned as pale as a ghost.

Mark is flabbergasted by the whole situation and in a state between curiosity, fear and trust in the Austrian legal system to address the matter properly. Not having had any encounter with the police ever before, he stays as calm as possible and is willing to do anything to set the record straight. In the meantime, the clock shows 2 a.m. and no lawyer has been available.

Consequently, Mark is held on remand and brought to his cell. On the following morning the lawyer assigned to him shows him the picture; the very picture that turned his world upside down. The picture shows him naked as a jaybird in company with a little girl, probably an elementary school pupil, a girl he has never seen or met in his entire life. They check the picture for every detail which drags him further and further into despair. His necklace, his watch and even his birthmark are clearly visible. The lawyer expresses his doubts in Mark’s innocence and even Mark himself begins to contemplate criminal actions of his own.

Later that day he gets released to be ready on call. Back in his dorm he avoids seeing anyone and uses his computer to do some research by himself. Having difficulty to get any viable information he logs onto an AI program to seek help.

I accept that this program may contain incomplete or false information.

I accept that I am 18 years or older.

I accept that the program has access to files and your location.

I am not a robot



log in



M: How can I appear in a picture with a person I have never met before?

AI: There are several reasons for that. Here are a few examples:

- 1) Someone might have manipulated the picture.
- 2) You might not remember the situation.
- 3) Someone might be mistaken for a person who resembles you impeccably.

He lets that information sink in and dig deep. “What could have happened?” he asks himself over and over again and continues to phrase very general questions.

M: Do you know my name?

AI: Mark Rothwell

M: Tell me something about myself. AI: Please try to be more precise. M: Describe my appearance.

AI: Based on pictures which can be attributed to your person, I would describe you as follows: Your height is approximately 180-184 cm. Your weight is between 72-80 kg. In the past six months your hair has been 7-12 cm long. Should I go on?

M: No! Are you able to photoshop pictures?

AI: In the OpenAI free version pictures cannot be generated. You might want to consider getting the OpenAI pro version.

M: Has that software the ability to generate pictures indistinguishable from reality?

AI: I cannot give you further information on that matter. Good luck with your case!

log out



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## turning life

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2023

by mario wlaschitz

by: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2023

In a different place, in a different time, he would already be overwhelmed with two eyes watching; but on a board, on a wave, after all he had endured, let them watch all they want and all day long. Together with his dark past he had also left behind the fear of the public. They did not matter. Only the moment mattered. Surfing an open ocean wave, surfing a closed city wave with spectators; in his mind they were all the same, and all the same he enjoyed them for what they conveyed. It was all about the feeling, the steady rhythm of turn after turn.

Not long ago, the scenario of him riding a wave had not seemed plausible. The sight of a wave would have scared him, would have evoked hate, anger, and even tears. That's why there were still times when he would not believe that those moments when he was surfing were indeed real. Was reality betraying him? Was it insulting him, giving him a false feeling of hope? No. The cold water that splashed around his ankles was real. It was no dream, yet a dreamlike situation. He could feel the icy, though much appreciated touch of the fluid on his skin. Truly feeling with his legs and feet was a sensation he was not entirely used to once again. It sent waves of joy through his brain and into every cell of his body.

He had always loved to move fast on his feet, often with his feet placed on something that would roll, glide or float. His mother would tell him that he had always had a special relationship with boards, even as a toddler at a time when he had not been able to pronounce the word board correctly. He had been crawling on top of a skateboard before he could walk.

Turning and flipping his board over the concrete alley he had lived in was how he had spent his summers. The first day he tried out a snowboard, his skis were forever abandoned. Drawing lines on the snow packed mountains as if on an empty canvas in his art class was how he had spent his winters. Then the moment came when his dad brought back a surfboard from a recent trip to Hawaii. The first time he tried it out at their local surf spot, he realised that the feeling he

got while using it had not been evoked by anything else ever before. Riding inside a barrel with water all around him was like a wild ride on a rollercoaster. Cross-stepping and gliding smoothly on a long board was like floating on a cloud high in the sky. Living sideways in the ocean just was in his DNA. That's why he became so good at it.

Still, he had been shy. Shy of and around people, shy of sharing his joy on the board, shy of sharing the secret spots he would wander to on the weekends when a big swell had come from the west. Being shy had caused him to surf alone the day it happened; and shy had the winds and waters been of carrying his screams over to the bay where people could have heard and helped him. That's why no one saw it. A big wave hit him. His leash had got ripped off and he lost his board. He had only been able to catch a glimpse of the fins as his board and body were being separated. No one heard him screaming for help. He realised that he would not be able to swim hard enough to dodge the sharp rocks the waves had carried him towards. Pushed down again and again by the masses of water, slowly he lost his strength. No one came to rescue him for a long time while his back had been slammed against the rocks over and over until he had lost consciousness. Consciousness of his head for a few days, but consciousness of his limbs for the dark years that followed.

None of that was going through his head though as he was going sideways, and from riverside to riverside, in a state of joy that only he could experience, in a state of thankfulness that no one else could understand. None of the long days and nights in the hospital bed popped up in his head. None of the long conversations he had had with doctors who would tell him he would never be able to walk again, let alone doing what he loved to do. None of the times he had had nothing to look forward to. Certainly not the time he had accidentally poured hot tea over his leg. The feeling of scorched skin. Pain, but stronger, endlessly stronger, the feeling of hope. The time in therapy, the first movement, the first step. None of those moments he thought about while riding that wave. He had left the past behind as he had left behind his shyness. He no longer wandered alone but he shared his joy with like-minded companions. Sharing waves, he had found out, made the experience even better. He had turned his life around in many ways, and once again, there were water, waves, and no worries.

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# drowning

by **simon ebner**

Life is good. You are breathing. You are alive.

On a serene spring day you find yourself at the quiet, emerald-green lake situated on the outskirts of your hometown. In a Zen-like state of mind, you sit at the dock, taking in the view while soaking up the sun. The little lake is surrounded by lush green hills, trees and mountains, all of which are mirrored in the water. During the summer time, the lake is crowded with tourists, and as busy as a beehive, but now, in spring, you get to recharge your batteries at a silent scene. A gentle spring breeze travels through the air, gently tickling your face and resonating with the surrounding trees, which appear to be silently whispering to each other. Nature has come fully alive in this spring environment; the maple trees at the banks of the lake have started blooming and the water lilies are blossoming in an explosion of vibrant colors. There is a silent smile hushing across your face as you gaze at the placid water. Given the season, the lake is not frequented too much and despite the temperatures, it tempts you to take a dip, resembling an invitation to dive for its depths. For the water surface and the surrounding nature exude an abundance of peace, tranquility and relaxation, which is exactly what you have been chasing lately. At last, you get to have some downtime and happiness travels through your body as a response to the bliss the lake offers you, like a gift waiting to be unwrapped. The sunrays creep out from behind the clouds and gently rest upon your skin, making it shimmer like a crystal. In this very moment, you get to be fully in alignment with your body and mind, blocking out the group of people that sit within fifty feet of you, cherishing the peace within your soul. The smell of sunscreen creeps inside your nostrils, whereupon you slightly crinkle your nose. There is no need to wait to hit the wet, to immerse yourself within the cool, refreshing water and effortlessly, gracefully glide across the lake in steady strokes.

*“I go to nature to be soothed and healed, and to have my senses put in order.”* (John Burroughs)

Feeling almost invincible, ready to take on the world, you take a leap and jump into the water

photo: violet stathopoulos-vart © 2023

typo: anastasia kistounoglou-ara © 2023

with a spring on your step, right at the deep end. All of a sudden, however, the tranquility gets disrupted as your body gets torn into the icy water, which comprehensively submerges you. You start flailing around helplessly, trying to stay afloat. The icy feeling given off by the water spreads out through your veins like ulcers, numbing your limbs. As you are submerged under water, you feel how your limbs are frozen, and you can spot them dangling like icicles from the rest of your body. This icy sensation enters your entire system and penetrates your lungs, numbing your senses, whereupon you utter a silent scream, trying your hardest to stop yourself from drowning, as fear and panic grab you and pull you even further beneath the surface. As you gasp for air, emerald waves crash before your blurry eyes and water travels down your trachea, preventing you from catching your breath. The tide eats you up and hunts you down like a lurking lion pouncing on prey, as your world crumbles before your eyes and is shattered into a million pieces. You struggle and ruffle up helplessly, splashing around the water. By doing so, you rustle up the surface, sending waves crashing, expanding across the entirety of this emerald body of water that is stone-cold, disrupting the peace and silence. All the other noises are drowned out from your mind as you can feel the pain cutting you up like a knife that slices your skin. The chirping of the birds, the laughter of the people frequenting the lake, it all has become inaudible to you as if debilitating deafness had possessed your body. For the only noise that is left for you is your own heartbeat, pounding hard against your chest, almost pushing to exit your body.

*I need to regain control over my life!*

Your legs are thrashing about, beyond control, desperately trying to keep yourself afloat. That smell of sea-leaves, fish feces and algae forces itself up your nostrils, making you nauseous. Your skin shrivels and wrinkles, you feel your lips turning blue. Your struggling hands blur and fade feebly before your eyes as your body starts feeling like ice. The water fills up your entire body, like ice cubes creeping through your veins, possessing you, claiming control, seizing you ferociously.

*Let me go! Let me go! I don't want to die!*

Water masses engulf you and swallow you completely. You are obscured from view so nobody is coming for your rescue. You are down and out. Deserted from the world, deserted by everyone you hold closely to your heart. Your palms try to push the water away from your body, trying to stay afloat, but all those forces weighing in on this scene overpower you and submerge you again with a sucker punch. You fight with everything you got, trying to raise every cell of your body to assist you in this fight for survival, but it feels like a lost battle. Desolation and despair make you their own. Death is going to take you. You feel your senses drowning. Mist and fog permeate your brain. You are incapable of thinking. Your mind is blurred. You can no longer clear your brain and think rationally and yet you try to scramble it around. How can I get more air? How can I breathe? How can I regain control over my life? How can I stop myself from drowning?

*I can't breathe! Don't give up now! I need to fight this or else I'll be drowning!*

With all your power you throw your body at will against the water, kick your feet against the tide, which seems calm, but reveals itself to be treacherous and betraying, flushing you off the shore, away from sheltering grounds that might potentially keep you safe or bail you out of trouble. No one will help you. Everybody has let you down. You have to dig yourself out of this hole by yourself, without no guidance whatsoever.

*If I give up now, I will drown!*

This must be it! You cannot hold on any longer, trying to cling to life. You know in your soul, you need to let go. You feel life being sucked out of you. You are moving on. Setting on a new journey. Who knows where it takes you. This is dying. Your heartbeat dwindles, your eyes are hollow and emotionless. Their color fades. You can see yourself fade as a whole. Your life flashes before your eyes in fast motion. There has been joy and pain, you have been both a beggar and a king. I am staring a new chapter; painless, deprived of sadness, grief, and misery. Ready or not? There is no turning back. Everything goes black and this journey you referred to as life is over.

*“Nothing is predestined. The obstacles of your past can become the gateways that lead to new beginnings.”* (Ralph Blum)

You open your eyes and take a deep breath. Consciously you feel the fresh air and the breeze by the lake enter and penetrate your body, enter your lungs, transporting oxygen towards your brain. You enjoy the divine feeling of the sunrays hitting both your face and the surface of the lake. You smile feebly. Depression feels like drowning. Experiencing depressions can be like drowning in massive water, as you drown in your own misery. In the nick of time you have reignited a flame and the fire keeps burning within you again. You eventually have made it out of the woods. In a smooth stroll at the banks of the lake you approach your friends, feeling pebbles underneath your feet, squishing little pieces of wood between your toes. You make your way towards the dock, striding across the lawn with the blades of grass tickling the bottom of your feet as a wild wave at the banks crashes and water erupts over your feet. Winter has turned into spring and given it is unusually hot, the lake is as bustling as an anthill. Filled with happiness, you feel the bright sunlight entering your face. Grasshoppers dodge your feet, tiny little frogs hop across the lawn and crickets are chirping cheerfully. In the distance, there is the sound of a cuckoo calling. People’s laughter draws ever-so closer, ringing like music in your ear. The air is filled with the familiar smell of barbeque, especially the sensation of grilled eggplant is unmistakably clear and is mixed with the scent of S’More, which might appear to be a crazy combo, yet to you it is weirdly enticing. Eventually you have arrived where your loved ones have gathered and you settle down next to them feeling blessed to be flanked by friends and family and grateful for life. All together you raise a glass of wine into the soothing spring air and drink a toast to life.

You are alive. You are breathing. Life is good.

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# salad days

by **désirée steiner**

Those were the days we learned to be light-hearted. Hesitant at first, we gradually allowed ourselves to drift in the undisturbed tranquillity of the night. A feeling of safety emerged when we were cuddled up in my single bed, knowing it will only be me and you in the morning. No loud noises will rouse us. No shouting, no shattering glasses. As we were letting go of our apprehension, our sleep got deeper, our dreams softer and our minds calmer. In those last summer days, when mother left for her “much-needed time out”, we were starting to understand what weightlessness could feel like.

There was never a doubt about how we were going to spend the day. We had our own little place by the lake, which was only reachable for those who would cleave a way through the thicket. For so many years, this place was our refuge. It kept on calling us, though now, with a much softer voice. No more hurry, no more gravity in its summons.

All of a sudden, the path to the lake appeared in a completely new light. Carried by the patience with which we were expected, we started to observe every little detail with astonishment. The warm light shining through the lush green leaves, the sweet tunes the birds were singing, the fresh breeze that grew stronger and stronger the nearer we got to the lake... A strange sensation of weightlessness accompanied us on our way, which normally could only be reached by submerging fully in the crystal blue water. We could not help but smile at each other, as the water was kissing our toes, inviting us to dive deep into a moment of peace and levity.

After spending hours in the water, we lay down on the soft forest soil, letting the sun dry the sparkly waterdrops on our skin. From a safe distance, we could study the people on the wooden jetty. Families, mostly. It was astounding to us how well- equipped they were for a simple day by the lake. Bit by bit, the contents of their big beach bags were revealed. Colourful Tupperware containers emerged, filled with fresh fruit and homemade pastries. A stack of napkins followed immediately to save the worn-out playing cards from sticky fingers. Diving

photo: violet stathopoulos-vart © 2023

typo: anastasia kochanovskaya © 2023

goggles, water wings, and snorkels were laid out ready for use. We watched them as attentively as if we were scientists on an alien planet.

I always wondered what we might look like to them. Just two kids peeking out from the other side of the shore. No one telling us to apply sunscreen. No one covering our burning heads. No one admonishing us not to swim out too far. Sometimes my gaze would intertwine with the eyes of strangers. Most of them squinted to decipher what story is lingering under the majestic oaks. While a smile adorned some faces, showing their admiration for our secluded shoreline, others broodingly pressed their lips together. The latter must have seen us around.

When the last sunbeams were dancing on the water, we slowly made our way back home. Exhausted, but content. we would crawl into our bed and get ready for the next day, when everything would start over again. “I wish summer would last forever,” you whispered right before falling asleep. We never really talked about what was happening at home. We didn’t dare dive deep into the abyss of our heavy little hearts. We just floated across the surface, like the dead leaves on the lake.

And so the days passed by, until autumn knocked on the door. When the nights got colder, the blankets thicker and the shadows longer, we knew that the day we dreaded was just around the corner. Not many days were spent in this alerted state, until mom returned, and the old troubles with her. As she stood on the doorstep, a cloud of alcohol permeated our apartment, filling the air with its pungent odour. No hearty greeting. No “I missed you.” No “How have you been.” From the very first moment, the weight of her presence dragged us down.

Driven by our need for harmony, we tried so hard to alleviate the tense atmosphere. But all our attempts to breathe a childlike lightness into the situation failed, as if gravity itself conspired to keep us down. We had no other choice but to retreat to our room, feeling too suffocated to speak another word. Ever since dad left, shortly after you came into the world, she loomed over us like an oppressive cloud.

On the next day, when I woke up, you were not there. Mom was still slumbering on the couch, her messy hair cascading across the pillow, so I decided to look for you on my own. After all, I knew exactly where to find you. But as I was standing on the shore, panting, I reluctantly had to realise you were nowhere to be seen. Three hours later, the rescue team pulled your lifeless body out of the lake. We knew our salad days won’t last forever. But I could never have imagined how cruelly the heaviness would drag you down.

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photo: violet stathopoulos-vari © 2023

by marlene kiechl

Regular rows of pine trees slowly crawling up the side of the mountain until even the gnarliest dwarflike pine succumbs to the merciless forces of nature, gradually replaced by meager meadows and dismissive dark grey rock faces partially covered by a blanket of soft white snow. A fresh breeze and the idyllic landscape is torn into pieces, permanently devoured by a dark green mirror. A previously perfectly still surface now disrupted by small regular movements, like small mountains emerging from shallow valleys. The mountains grow higher and higher until they erupt with a burst of white foam.

She is lost in her thoughts as she observes the emerald, green surface of the lake only slightly ruffled by a gentle breeze. The deep green color of the water tempting her to embark on a journey into its unknown depths. She comes here often. Many people do. But today she is sitting alone on the wooden deck staring into the dark green mirror. Ironical how the calm ruffled surface of the lake contrasts with the storm inside of her. Exams, deadlines, expectations, self-doubt, obligations, efficiency, and a sense of constant unease, all raging like a hurricane in her mind. People say they come here for social gatherings, to relax and live life to the fullest. But she knows, the reason they come is to escape. She comes to escape. Nature always provided her with a sense of ease, a shelter, a pause from the world. To her it seemed that whenever life gets too heavy to bear, people return to their roots. Maybe it is the seemingly endless persistency of nature that provides relief to people, reminding them that their life and problems are in the end insignificant in the face of nature.

She sometimes felt trapped in her life, a vicious circle between expectations,

overexertion, and sheer exhaustion. And regardless of her effort, the outcome was never anything but insufficient. Wasn't she supposed to be grateful for the opportunities and the freedom of her life and all her possessions? Sometimes she sat in her expensive flat surrounded by high-end furniture and kitchenware, her new iPhone and her newly acquired beloved patio furniture for which all her friends envied her and felt trapped as in a self-built prison. Every new purchase in the end little more than another material burden. Her lovely garden barely more than another point on her already overflowing schedule, another expectation on a never-ending list. Her schedule. The thought alone almost made her shiver. It was fascinating how frightening a small rectangular block of paper situated on her dining table could be, especially when it was towering over her whenever she desperately tried to welcome the day, gulping down a saggy piece of microwave-heated toast. If only she had managed to do her groceries yesterday! Wouldn't she have had the time to do this, in those ten precious minutes of work time she wasted relaxing?

Her calendar. Blank spaces, in this not so atypical never-ending schedule of chores, were exceedingly rare, and when detected, immediately filled with social events, friends and family. Dearly needed time to breathe and recharge barely evident. She would never dare to admit it and even the thought resulted in a wave of guilt, however sometimes even her leisure time activities, her hobbies, her friends and her family were just another draining point on her itinerary, another expectation she had to fulfill. It was not personal but this constant race from one appointment to another and the consistent and seemingly pointless fight with her ever growing to-do list, which was always at least ten steps ahead of her, was nothing less than exhausting. Sometimes she felt like a modern-day Sisyphus, only that she would have preferred the rock. More graspable and simple. Wasn't life supposed to be easier nowadays? Simplified by a never-ending race of innovative technologies? A life without a phone or google, unimaginable in today's society. You can stay connected with friends, be online and available easily. But is there really a choice? Sometimes it just felt like another obligation to her, she HAD to be available and online CONSTANTLY. Happily adding to the already enormous mental load. That's why people escaped to this place. That's why she escaped to this place.

Time had passed and the sun, timidly peaking behind the slowly fading clouds, had attracted a flock of people. They enjoyed the calm silence of nature, away from the hustling noise of the city. Some tried to mimic a carefree smile while chatting to their peers. But she could see behind this façade. She could almost hear the rattling minds of other people: "I must mow the lawn." "Oh no, I forgot the washing machine!" "How should I get through the week?" "I won't manage to meet my deadline." "Why do I have to do everything on my own?" They are not so much unlike her. That she was sure about.

The rhythmic movement of the water recaptures her focus. The waves slowly lulling her back into her thoughts. Observing the green mirror, she recognizes her own reflections and those of the people surrounding her. It transforms into a mirror of society.

*Some people go with the flow.  
Some desperately try to swim against the current.  
Some even drown in the deep water of never-ending expectations.*

*Most linger on the surface,  
only a few dare to plunge into the depths.  
But in the end, they all just desperately try to stay afloat.*

She lets out a gasp of relief the moment her head submerges under the surface. The sounds of the hustling city and life, of expectations, of overflowing schedules of technological advancements and the burden of material possessions muted by the weight of the water. The relentless acceleration of life paused immediately, and for at least a minute she feels at peace.

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# life in a bubble

by lorena plaickner

A calm morning. I am sitting at the kitchen table, browsing through my favourite online magazine, fully aware that most of the news in there are either made up entirely or at least complemented with details people like me want to hear. It's Saturday, so I enjoy the peaceful start of the only day on which I can have breakfast with my husband.

I take the first sip of my coffee that almost tastes burnt, but I'm not sure if it's just the taste of low-priced coffee beans. My husband saves on the wrong things. I almost feel sick from the taste of my drink, and as I open the window, a flagrant scent rises up my nose. Aromatic, sweet, almost flowery. While I am trying to figure out why this smell seems so familiar, I sense how my heart starts beating faster, and how something happens with my body, almost as if a hint of joy starts flowing through it. What is this scent doing with me? Why does it give me feelings of excitement and sadness at the same time? I hear my husband mumble something, but the sound of his voice appears to be so far away that I don't understand a single word. Also, I do not care what he is saying. My body, my soul, my mind, they are suddenly somewhere else. A second burst of fragrance wafts through the window, and as pictures start appearing and disappearing in front of my eyes, I realize why this scent seems so familiar to me. It's this same sweet, fruity smell of the freshly baked, round chocolate buns with cream and raspberries that my mother used to prepare on our special day of the year. I am now completely lost in my memories and with the third wave of scent that hits my nose, I am taken back to the morning of *the day*.

*The day*. August 15th. My sister and I had already packed our swimsuits at least five days before departure. We had been talking about it for days and thinking about it for weeks. How desperately we had been waiting for *the day* to come. *The day* – we used to call it like this – was something others would consider 'normal', nothing special. For us, though, it was special. It was more than the lake, the swimming, the games. It *meant* much more. It was the day we felt seen. At least for once.

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We did not dare show our excitement, because every year, as we were waiting for the day to come, we felt the same fear. We were too scared our mother would change her mind. So we kept it to ourselves. Which was easy anyways; since I can remember, I have been taught to keep things to myself, to not share what I felt or what I thought, because it was *too much*. For my mother, everything had always been *too much*.

But on *the day*, the world was different. It was a day full of laughter, of joy, of attention – things that my sister and I so desperately needed. It felt like a day in a bubble. Life in the bubble was calm, and peaceful, and everything else suddenly seemed so small, so meaningless, so unimportant. It was the only day my mother would take us out to a public place, to the lake, where we appeared like a perfect family, not showing our ‘real’ faces. That’s the thing about the public. You find yourself in a place full of strangers where every single person lives their own unique lives, but in this exact moment, and in this exact place, you all share the same bubble, not knowing a single thing about each other’s lives outside of it. We were praying that the day’s bubble would never burst. But every year, on August 16th, it did.

Every year, on *the day*, we would follow a similar routine. Still, I remember every single detail about every single one of those days, because they were all unique in their own ways. However, there is one day which is most deeply stuck in my memory and forever will be.

August 2001. It was a 60 minutes’ drive to the lake, so we left home at around 8 o’clock in the morning. My mother had already packed our lunch boxes, with two cream and raspberry buns for each of us. It was early, but the lake already beautifully showed the glittering reflection of the morning sun on its surface, and the first chirping of birds accompanied the walk to our usual spot, where the grass was damp from the rain on the day before. My mother was in a good mood, but I had a feeling that something was wrong. She seemed excited and nervous, and I remember observing her hands shaking as she put out our water bottles. I could see it in her eyes: this *day* was different.

The first hours at the lake were not the way my sister and I would have wanted them to be. My mother seemed absent-minded and did not talk to us much, and unlike other *days*, she did not care what we were doing. Rather, she nervously looked around as if she had been searching for something or someone. I was praying to myself that nothing would destroy *our day*, that nothing would take her attention away from us, and that nothing would disrupt our idealization of this special event.

And there he came: the destroyer, the disrupter. My mother’s face lit up the moment she recognised him, and the joy in her face persisted as she observed him walk towards us. He was tall, tanned, and his arm muscles were highlighted by his white tank top. I remember thinking that he must be at least fifteen years younger than my mother. From the moment this man had entered our bubble, my mother had disappeared, and all the attention – which we so desperately wanted - was now directed towards someone who was nothing more than a stranger for us. She had left our bubble and entered a new one. One in which my sister and I had no place.

We got back home. That was the hardest part, as we knew we would have to wait for another 365 days. Back to reality. The bubble burst. This year, for once, I was happy about it.

My husband’s voice becomes louder and louder, until he pushes my shoulder to pull me out of my daydream. Back to reality. The scent of the freshly baked buns still comes in through the window and in this very moment, I feel overwhelmed by joy. As I look at my husband, I suddenly realize I now live in the calm and peaceful bubble for which I had always wished. Hopefully, it will never burst.


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# perceptual unity

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2023

by thomas thaler



If the doors of  
perception were  
cleansed every thing  
would appear to man  
as it is, infinite.

— William Blake

It's 4.45 pm. I am entering the university building through the black sliding door with its blue and orange stickers. The cream-colored ground leads to the light gray stairs which head towards the upper floor. But I am not going there. It is the university library I will visit today. That is why I choose to take a right. I float through the revolving doors, past the unoccupied black reception desk, and further towards the students' area. Once I have reached the glass front, granting a look outside at the artistic rocks stacked on top of each other, I make a halt. I turn. I see masses of people—absorbed in screens, books, and thoughts. I note them. All of them. Time to take a closer look.

o

Alright, my cultural studies essay's due in two weeks' time, I've got an aerobics course tonight, and I still have to do the dishes once I get back home. With a heavy heart, everything seems like a chore. Heavy can only be a heart that's not been freed, right? I really adored this idiot. His brown eyes; his soothing voice; his hands gently touching mine—I miss it. I wanna cry. I press

my lips together. Please! I have to think of somebody else. Luckily, he wasn't all fun either. He used to cheat on me (more than once) and I was too stupid to let him go. I should've left him two years ago when he started flirting with Sarah. But then again I couldn't. His magical aura kept me attached to him. Like a north and a south pole of a magnet. You can't detach them without force. And that force has come. He behaved disparagingly towards me. The more he spent time with other women telling them how beautiful they were, the more I felt the presence of this separating force. He even kissed Celine once—not that he told me, but I'm good at finding out...

◦

Right before me sits a young blonde girl with a ponytail. She must be about 20 years old. Her eyes are little emeralds with defined eyelashes. Her face is of a roundish shape, resembling an elliptic white and green pumpkin—the ones you use as ornaments. She is wearing a checked shirt, its squares are alternating between blood-red and eerie black. Out of her eyes pour small doses of salty water which unite to pearl drops floating on an ocean of skin cells. Her fingers wipe them away. One can see her rose cheeks again; but no change.

◦

Damn! Why is it opening another window? I didn't order it to do so. Is it going crazy? Computers are such a mess. In 1998, Bill Gates promised they'd revolutionise our lives—in fact, they are merely a tool to make life unbearably fast. Back in the day, we didn't spend a thought on emails popping up all day. We just relaxed and had a beer after finishing work. But nowadays you're considered deficient if you can't handle them. Such a stereotype! More than anything, I don't want to be considered a backward. Should I dare ask the young lady next to me? Probably I should've stuck to beers in bars instead of books on hooks. Surely that'd solve the computer issue, but it'd also contribute to a stale mind. If one doesn't dare one doesn't learn. "Excuse me, young lady? Can you please help me with the computer for a minute? It's opening windows I didn't click on..."

◦

An old man approaches the weeping blonde with the ponytail. The wrinkles, clearly visible on his face, add a portion of wisdom and sincerity to his personality. A kind smile, that could tame a lion, and aquamarine blue eyes underline these traits. He apologises to the young lady as he notes she is producing salty small droplets. They converse for a while. She joins him at his desk. Her face slowly turns from grief to gratitude. The man seems to be the north pole to her south pole of emotions. But then something happens. She seems puzzled.

◦

It's already 5 o'clock and I still haven't managed to write a paragraph. Geeeee!!! Hadn't Bones been so interesting, I would have started earlier. Dr. Temperance is such a likable character. Her social tipsiness combined with her brilliance as an anthropologist is just irresistible. I regret—but nah! Not really. To be honest it wouldn't have made any difference. Unless I'm stressed out so much that I can hardly bear it anymore, I don't get down to work. It's always been this way!

Why should it be different this time? Well, maybe there is something: I finally found the creative drive, the right topic, and the perfect instant to scribble down those lines. Not happening! At least I still hope that it will someday. . . oh my goodness! I really love this song. Alone in my

room, my world is all blue / Summer rain / Too much pain. Daa da daaa. “Stephanie!!! Stephanieeeee!”

□□□

The brunette spins around and removes her headphones. Tina seems to be in turmoil, but the old man is still smiling gently. “What’s up Tina?” Stephanie asks. “Have you ever seen something like this?” Tina replies—the puzzlement still clearly noticeable in her voice. By now the windows on the computer were constantly flashing, popping up in different locations on the screen, and disappearing again. “No, I haven’t, but it seems like the computer’s done! It’s going nuts,” Stephanie remarks. “Alright, at least it wasn’t my fault!” the old man adds.

*What I see are three people. Creatures of flesh and bones; endless pathways of neurons; an orchestra of cells; and billions of colored strings dangling down loosely from their skulls. Physiologically indistinguishable. Different are only the paths they have walked until they joined together this very moment—today. It’s the mountains they have climbed, the valleys they have crossed, and the footsteps they have taken that divide them. Mystically, however, they are still in perfect unity: they talk to one another even though they’ve never seen each other before—because they rest assured of one thing: they all know what it’s like to be human.*

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