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About Our Absence

Can you hear me? Today is 1 December. We have been in the air for seventeen hours. Recording. I'm not sure if it's really working. There's no whirring, no vibration in my hand, which feels quite normal. But of course it is normal. Others have similar hands, you said, there's nothing special about it, no swelling that isn't caused by the arthritis, no scar, completely invisible. When they implanted the recorder under my skin in the shop I felt a slight tugging, like that tugging that curls my fingers up and closes my hand. I have got so accustomed to it that I see it rather than feel it. You wouldn't have had to calm me down. Oh how wonderful to have such a grown up child! I would have any operation if it gave me the chance to maintain contact with you.

But I'm not even sure if it is recording. How am I supposed to tell if it's running? A little beep? A little LED light? Did they put the recorder into my right hand or was it the left? Don't laugh. We have been in the air for seventeen hours, apart from the two hours transit in Southeast Asia. You've got the itinerary. We spent those two hours on the roof terrace because that appeared to be the only place at this airport where you could get some fresh air, if you could call it that. A cauldron of hot air, it was humid, we drank expensive mineral water. The little one rushed around amongst the greenery and set the thick, fleshy leaves moving. I sat on a chair made of artificial wood, spent the night flight with my back soaked in sweat while South East Asia receded into the night. The first stars glimmering over the terminal.

Back in the air. Second night flight. Any sense of time and orientation has disappeared, so tell me how I am supposed to know which hand I'm supposed to speak into. Window seat. The blinds are still up, underneath us a city bathed in artificial light. The little one is sitting next to me, cross-legged, wearing the

spotted pyjamas that you put on her in the departure lounge. She is staring open-mouthed at a film that is far too grown-up for her. Just now the king of the polar bears smashed off the jaw of another one. She looks like a little blonde astronaut on her way to the moon. An astronaut with a nosebleed, not surprising in this dry air. The light is dimmed. Everyone around us is dozing. My dear son, I have to talk into my right hand. I hope that you can hear me somehow. Don't worry. The nosebleed has stopped.

2117-12-03, 06:25, that's what it says on the wall above our bed. I thought it was much later. I have been up for hours and I'm still waiting for the day to begin and if I had known how long the journey was going to be I would have flown somewhere else with your daughter, believe me. The plane that dropped us off at this godforsaken place was our fourth connection in a row, an old mail plane. You could see the welding on the wings. The crew consisted of a female pilot with extraordinarily long hair and a co-pilot who laughed constantly in several different keys, as if he was in the middle of his voice breaking. The little one refused to be strapped in to another seat so that I had to put her on my lap on the runway. She rolled herself up into a ball and pressed herself into me, her little cuddly tiger between her knees, her sticky hands clasped together, just like you used to, by the way. She was fast asleep by the time I pulled the safety belt around us. She was dreaming a lot and whimpering. We dropped from one thermal into another as if we were nothing but a shiny metallic pebble skipping over the Tasmanian sea.

But don't worry! After two hours flying she opened her eyes and looked up at me. Her face was covered in red dots, the tracks of tears and dried blood from her nose mixed with snot and felt pen marks. And then we both laughed suddenly and went a little bit crazy. We laughed and laughed and couldn't stop. We just poured it all out and I almost didn't care whether my inflamed hip joint would break under her weight. Almost.

We only calmed down when we were coming into land. The South Pole was nowhere to be seen. Instead there was just the archipelago stretching away into the salt water, divided into an almost infinite number of islands stretching

away to the south. Notonesia was shimmering green through the low-lying cloud. I don't know if you understand. The Earth was at an angle in the sky as if up and down didn't exist any more and I thought "we have flown so far and now we're never going to get away again."

But I'm talking into my hand as if it was a diary. That's not what I intended. This recording is for you. I don't quite understand why you wanted it. We could have just called you. Our voices would, in less than a moment, have bounced off the satellites and found their way down through the earth's atmosphere. It would have been as if we were sitting in your ear, small enough to be invisible to the naked eye. I suspect that you need to feel that we have really gone. "Just once in this short life I'd like to be on my own" you said, with your hands clasped together. You and Xia, you're all over each other and you talk about being alone. But I am accusing you of things that are not for your ears, and certainly not for your daughter's. She's just waking up and feeling for her tiger.

I'm happy to talk to you about anything. But it would be good if you could sort things out between yourselves in the next three weeks. Three weeks we're staying. Not much time to go to the other side of the — good morning little one — no, nobody. Well, just myself really.

My dear son, today it is St Nicholas Day, December 6, and we put our shoes out for Father Christmas. We have been on the main island for just under a week. Before she went to sleep last night the little one put her summer shoes into the shoe polishing machine and afterwards painted the laces yellow and said "daddy's going to get a surprise when he sees this!" The hotel staff must have got a surprise this morning when they found a pair of shiny children's sandals outside our door. In the right shoe there was a Maneki-neko waving its fat paw, waving and waving. In the left shoe there was a tin of spirulina macaroons made with grass-green meringue and a cream filling of cheerful music, which I can still hear in the little one's tummy. She ate macaroons for breakfast but don't be cross with me — she needs some sort of distraction. She asks me every day whether we can ring you, Xia and you. You are aware that

not only are you separated from your daughter but that she is separated from you, aren't you? I tell her that you're difficult to contact and that we should send a photo instead. But she is technically much more advanced than I am and she knows what's possible and what's not. Then we went to the city art gallery for some distraction. I looked at the old Maori woman from Goldie. Geometric patterns flowed over her lips and chin like green blood, disappeared into the folds of her skin and reappeared, and you know, I ask myself whether the confusion written on her face is not the same for all old people and maybe I look like her already. But your daughter, all covered in green the colour of algae took me by the arm and we left the tattooed lady behind in her backroom and played hide and seek in the rooms until she had recovered from the realisation that you were so far away and that it was actually all way beyond her comprehension.

We chased each other and hid again. We ran between the rooms connected by footbridges that swung almost imperceptibly in the museum's air-conditioned atmosphere, or maybe it was the earth's rotation, or perhaps our own uncertain bodies? I'm talking gibberish, I don't know whether you can understand me. She sent you the photo of the sandals full of stuff straightaway. You'll have got it already.

The maneki-neko is on our bedside table and is waving in the direction of the sleeping child in order to chase away her worries. Tomorrow we have the balloon trip and I'll be in touch.

Friday, 10th of December. Six burners are throbbing over my head and filling a balloon the size of an aircraft hangar with hot air – it's really loud and I can talk without any worry of being overheard. I just hope that you can hear – doesn't matter, as I said – am happy for any conversation with you even if it is only one sided – didn't want to get strapped into a mail plane again – surrounded by businesspeople – speaking into their hands like me, some of them with tattooed faces – the patterns look dark blue on their sunburnt skins, no two are the same – the main islands stretch from West to East – tomorrow is the main celebration of the festival which is the reason for this

long journey — three seats further along — swinging her legs — looking up to the clouds hanging just over the balloon as if it were the most normal thing in the world — thinking that maybe she could be from here. But she's holding the tiger tight to herself, the ragged ear under her nose — inhaling the smell of the fur — the smell of her room at home as well as your smell, yours and —

The burners are off again now. Very quiet here. No sound comes up from the land below us, no movement to ruffle the hair of the business people. We are floating over the hills of the main island as if we were swimming over a field of algae. We are all holding our hands in front of our mouths. Hope the weather clears up tomorrow.

2117 – 12 – 11, 11:45, I am reading in the projections that for the last 35 minutes, Venus has been tracking across the sun. But, my dear son, that's not what I am thinking about. In case you have ever asked yourself why I have taken your daughter to this distant archipelago then you are just about to find out. All along the landing jetty there are telescopes and their images are being projected onto a screen in front of the gentle waves of the Pacific. The little one is running from one to the other with a special pair of glasses made out of Papier-mache on her nose and is comparing the pictures in the eyepieces. Some of the telescopes are not working properly, the pictures are upside down. And we are wondering, even though we have no idea about astrophysics, which of the pictures is correct? Where exactly is Venus? Is it crossing in front of the upper or the lower half of the sun?

This morning I gave a talk on one of the festival stages on the beach. It was about – to cut a long story short — about the significance of Venus in the history of European poetry. I could have talked about the disappearance of the English language after the implosion of the US-American Empire or about the change to the genitive in the context of the shift in perceptions of property and belonging. These are all research areas more or less familiar to me, and which you, as a good son, may have picked up on in some way. I could also have spoken about baking recipes. Nobody was interested in my talk; I'll only admit that to you, not even to myself. For the festival organisers it was the

contribution from the old world, so they had to invite me. For me it was nothing but a pretext for travelling here and now I'm going to tell you the reason why.

The other contributors were sitting on the long row of seats behind me: the Minister for Science and Culture with a glowing green tattoo around her mouth and chin; a Russian astrophysicist with a nervous tic in her right foot, which set the stage floor moving imperceptibly; some faceless descendant of Thomas Cook; the local mayor and a South African art photographer whose camera was clicking away behind me while I was giving my talk. The little one, dragging her tiger under her arm, was running round the edge of the stage and didn't look at us even once, but kept the closed sky above the bay in her vision. She was the one who first saw the rip in the cloud cover. We were just singing the national anthem as she stretched her arm up to the sky and called to me "the sun, the sun the beautiful sun is here!" But perhaps I am only an imagining that she called out because everyone around me was singing with such vigour and I only saw her mouth move to form the shape of the word sun, three times, the rest is just a guess.

It is just before twelve. Venus is just a dark drop in front of the glowing orange disc of the sun, sometimes at the top, sometimes at the bottom, depending on the telescope you choose. You can't see anything with the naked eye. Nor with these protective glasses made of papier-mache that we are all wearing with such seriousness. Everyone except your daughter who threw hers into the waves, saying that there was nothing there; that we were making it up. And wasn't she right? Couldn't it really be some sort of animation that is being projected onto a big screen, and the actual transit of Venus across the sun could have taken place long ago, on a different day altogether or in the night, protected from our view, or maybe it didn't happen at all.

The festival has finished. The first buses are arriving at the bay. The little one is standing by the pebble beach with her dress dripping. She is shading her eyes with one hand and looking at a dark grey military boat that is moored silently in the bay. I am just going to get her and put something dry on her.

And then we will take one of the buses to Uawa, a little village not far along the coast from here. That's where it will get exciting, my dear son. More later.

Still Saturday afternoon, sometime around four. According to the telescopes, Venus has reached the outer rim of the sun's disc. And it looks as though I have found them. They are behind the last buildings in the village in a rainforest that muffles the sound of the South Pacific crashing on to the beach. They are surrounded by Southern Beech trees, climbing plants, light falling through the crowns of the tallest ferns.

My grandmother planted them a long time ago. To be precise: 105 years ago. Your great-grandmother. We have her name, you and I, and the little one too of course. It is quite a normal surname but of course in a place like this, where no one speaks our mother tongue, it sounds strange, even to me, when the compere says it and the amplifier throws it into the coastal air like one of those inflatable penguins that belong on a different coast, in a different story. Here our name is just like one of those inflatables, filled with air. No one who hears it thinks of the bare earth of the Erz Mountains, where nothing grows because the soil is poor. Sandy soil that gave one of our other ancestors — a poor farmer with thick eyebrows framing his tired eyes — his name. We don't know who he was. We don't think about him. We just have his name. But it's our name too, isn't it? I'm just thinking of the woman who planted the trees. I want to tell you about her.

There is a register of all the trees planted on Notonesia and in it you can find listed each single tree planted since the beginning of the reforestation programme and next to it the name of the person or the institution responsible for planting it. I found your grandmother's name in the register. Don't ask me what she lost here. Perhaps the last transit of Venus? It took place in the year they started reforestation. I have no idea what made my grandmother come to this distant place to view it. But I found her trees. A little Taupata with leaves like spectacle lenses, it's actually more of a bush than a tree but with thick masculine clusters of flowers hanging from the trunk. And next to this bush there is a Tī Kōuka, and that is a real tree. It is tall and slender. Its leaves

protrude into the early summer air as if they were nothing but an illusion, which could burst at any moment and be nothing but a memory. A biologist from round here helped me to find the trees, a man with delicate flower-like patterns on his face. He says that the little berries of the Tī Kōuka are eaten by what they call wood pigeons, amazing birds with big bellies. Bellies stuffed with darkness and little berries.

That's all that I have found, my dear son. You may think that it is far too little. It is probably nothing in comparison to all the important things that have happened to you in the last few years. Your daughter doesn't seem to be very interested either. She is back in Uawa where there is a tent the size of a hotair balloon in which you can dance wildly and throw white balls into the air. She even let the biologist take her by the hand without protest. The two of them wandered off to the edge of the village past a paddock surrounded by a fence made of artificial wood. Two horses, a gray and a mare the colour of a fox, were standing there and looking as if they had been there 100 years ago, standing and looking. The little one and the biologist were walking away from me to the edge of the village and looked like father and child.

Wednesday, 15 December. We have arrived in the capital. You can see the glaciers of the southern islands quite clearly from here. It is only when the weather is bad that we can't tell where the mountains end and the sky begins.

Every day there are little earthquakes, like wild children thundering around somewhere. Crossing the street; at the turnstile for the monorail; at the hill in the city and in the museum cafes. The ground shifts under our feet and it feels as if we were running backwards. But don't worry, my dear son, I know what to do. We have to throw ourselves flat onto our stomachs as fast as my old bones will allow. The little one thinks it's funny and chuckles into the cracks in the tarmac while I cover her with my body. But no sooner than we are lying down the rumbling of the skyscrapers stops and everything goes back to how it was before, or almost. Here and there you'll see a chair on its back in front of a cafe, here and there a runner stumbling. We stand up and brush each other down. And then we stand for a moment and try to remember what it was we

were doing. We look like penguins blocking the traffic, stiff, with confused faces, knee-high little men looking for something, can you tell me what?

Friday 17th of December. The little one asks about you every day. Should we tell you that when the balloon was coming into land she was so sick that all the business people around her got splashed with it? She's asking why we don't contact you, you and Xia, when are we going to go home, whether we are going to go home at all. Whether you have seen the pictures she has sent. Her glittering sandals from St Nicholas, her algae smoothie next to a plate with cucumber ice cream, a beautiful house all out of focus during an earthquake, she's taken the photos all herself and she sends them to you each evening before she goes to sleep.

I haven't told her that I'm making these recordings. Please don't be cross that you won't get to hear her voice. Because tell me how I'm supposed to explain to her that there are no answers here. To be alone, just once in this short life, you said. But we are never alone. We carry those we love around with us and are carried by them at the same time but in different places. Each one of us in the ribcage of the other. That means that we owe each other an answer!

Perhaps I will keep these recordings just for me. It's a one-sided conversation. Perhaps it won't even be that because I may have forgotten which hand I'm supposed to be talking to on the long flight here. In which case this is nothing more than speaking to an empty hollow hand, a sequence of human noises. Actually, that would be what I'd prefer.

18th December, the festival was a week ago. It seems longer than that to us. Clear sunlight, long early summer days in the city, and little earthquakes. The little one and I have found a friend who comes with us. You know, the biologist who helped me to find your great-grandmother's trees. It was a happy coincidence that he was in the same balloon as us after the conference. Every day he neglects his work for us. Instead of going into the Institute of Species Propagation to complete the lists of the species they have reintroduced here. He picks us up in the hotel lobby. He looks like a species that has been

reintroduced himself, standing between the abstract sculptures and pictures. While he takes us through the city he tells the little one about his work. He explains to her that they just need the bone of a bird, a little splinter of skull or some other little part of a wing to be able to bring back the whole bird, a feathered creature of exactly the same size and with the same voice as their extinct ancestors. The little one is spellbound. But he doesn't protect her from anything. He explains how the animals they bring back are not the same as their ancestors. The little one stares at him and nods while he explains that, for example, the new wood pigeons reject the little berries of the Tī Kōuka because they have not had a mother to show them that the berries are their natural food. And so they draw up lists of how many wood pigeons there are and in which primaevial forests they can be found so that they can go and hang artificial food for them in the canopy of the trees. Otherwise the pigeons will starve even though they are surrounded by sweet but unknown berries. The little one wants to know whether the berries of the Tī Kōuka tree taste nice. Of course, the biologist says, but that in any case the Tī Kōuka died out long ago. But apparently there were some seeds in an archive in England that were shipped south with great care so that the trees could be regenerated so that the berries would taste exactly like the berries of the real Tī Kōuka trees, just right for pigeons. "In that case it doesn't matter", she said. The biologist looked at her and the flowers on his cheeks moved as she hopped around on one leg and declared "it's all real anyway! The pigeon, my great great grandmother's tree, and all the bird food, it's all real!"

2117 – 12 – 21, 23:45. No earthquakes today. The biologist surprised us by turning up in an autocar today. He parked it outside the hotel and it looked like a shiny lizard. We were quite an attraction on the streets. The children ran along behind us and sucked in the smell that came from the pipe next to the back wheels. The biologist and the little one pretended that it was the most natural thing in the world. They looked straight ahead and, deep in conversation, glided through the long straight streets. Now and again the way was blocked by penguins and the little one reassured herself "they never died

out, or did they?" The biologist laughed so that the folds in his face wobbled and he answered "it doesn't matter, they are all real!" And the little one agreed with him "yes, you're right, it doesn't matter." We passed by figures behind overgrown front gardens. The richer the owners, the more dense the growth in front of the house. The little one said "show offs." The biologist looked directly into my eyes in the rearview mirror.

We stopped in front of the beach cafe. It looked as though it was well known to the autocar drivers. There were three other machines outside the low hut, gleaming in the harsh evening light. The biologist and I sat opposite each other with a table made of some indefinable material between us. The little one had placed her tiger at the curb with its face pointing towards the beach so that it could see how she, herself now a real animal, could climb over the rocks, jumping from rock to rock as if she could never fall.

The coffee was too strong and made my head spin. I'm not used to being looked at like that, so intently, as if there was some sort of text written on me that the biologist was trying to read. He asked me about my speech about Venus, he was in the audience ten days ago. And instead of telling him about the status of Venus in the history of European poetry I suddenly found myself telling him about my grandmother, who planted the trees, I don't know what got into me. I talked and talked without even putting my hand to my mouth. I told him about Xia and you and about your desire for once in your life to be alone, so that you could relax or, I don't know, whatever it is you want to do. I told him that I wondered whether you would use the time that we are away to put things right between you and Xia and that it may well be that everything is okay again – even if not quite how I had imagined it for you, Xia and the little one. I told him that you probably just needed a break from everyone who knows too much about the way you live your life. I have no idea how long I talked. But eventually I heard myself say "my son is taking a break from us."

The biologist looked at me attentively. I turned to look at the beach. The little one was crouching on a rock with her arms around her knees. She had her head back as if she was looking directly into the sun. Behind her, on the nearby island, there were mountains with glaciers shining brightly in the light. As I

was watching the biologist took my hands. He laid them on the table-top made of some indefinable material and put his on top of them. I thought for a moment about my inflamed joints. And then the biologist said, "feel it. Real wood."

My dear son, today was the longest day of the year. The little one is lying in the middle of the massive hotel bed, the tiger's ear pressed to her mouth. Is she telling him things, like I tell my hand? Every time she moves in her sleep the algae in the bed sheets lights up and illuminates her skin and then goes dark again. What are you doing right now? Are you having lunch with Xia under the lamp in your tidy little kitchen, because it's still rather dark? Or are you sitting in a cafe amongst piles of Christmas kitsch that reminds you of the little one? Or are you eating in silence, each one of you with a newspaper open in front of you? You won't tell me. This is a one-sided conversation. I'm just about to go out again. The little one is asleep. Softly I close the door, with its instructions for what to do in the event of an earthquake. I know them by heart. I walk through the hotel lobby with all its festival lights to the lift. I won't see anyone. The hotel pool is on the top floor. It will be empty apart from me. The surface of the water will be as flat as if no one had ever swum in it. Almost imperceptible currents. Almost inaudible noise of machines. I will swim on my back without thinking about my fragile body. Above me there will be the glass hotel roof and above that the constellations in their strange formations. But despite this I will not be alone. You are always with me. I'll be in touch again soon.

22nd December morning, grey. My dear son, I don't know if this recording will ever reach you. I was still in the bathroom when it started. The little one woke up straight away. It wasn't very strong but it simply didn't stop. 10 minutes, 15 minutes? No idea. The reception has been damaged. We were happy that we found the stairs, water was coming down everywhere, things were falling over. Nobody had shoes on. But don't worry, we are not alone. There are lots of us. 200, 300 people perhaps. We are standing on the beach

just like we did at the festival, which seems such a long time ago now. The biologist is with us but I don't know how he found us. He is carrying your daughter on his shoulders and talking softly to her, the flowers on his face are inky black. He is telling me that it was really silly to go to the beach. That the instructions warn against it. I can't remember reading anything like that on our hotel door. He says that it would have been better to have gone to the city hill. Why shouldn't we go to the beach? What could happen? More tremors? A wave? My dear son, perhaps you are surprised at how little I need to know about my grandmother, considering that I have come to the other end of the earth to find out the last few things about her. You know, here on the beach, I can see everything clearly, I can see every grain of sand.

She had red cheeks and short hair. And if I were to tell you that standing here, with the morning coming to life, that it is only by telling stories that this inextinguishable, fragile species that we human beings are can be understood. Then I think I can say that I do know a little bit more about your great-grandmother. I may have forgotten the content of her bedtime stories, but I remember the brittle sound of her voice and that she used to say "okay, what do I sound like then? I used to sound much better than this." And then I used to throw my arms around her neck and say "one day I want to sound as lovely as you, grandma." That's what I wanted to tell you.

Starting again. — after-shocks? — don't worry. Someone said — starting the balloon — take it to one of the nearby islands — apparently they have hot springs — big, silent ice flo — on the southern Alps — hope — things back on track soo — even if it's not the way — I wanted for us all — went to sleep in the arms of the biologist, her feet – tig — biologist is looking directly into my eyes with his flowery fac — it's good that we are not alo — quite a few of us. We are standing — beach and have our hands in front of our mouths. It's early in the morning — ice cold — a giant hotair balloon coming directly towards us —

On our absence

The name of the island state Notonesia goes back the ancient Greek notos und nēsoi and means “southwestern islands”. Notonesia will be formed in the year 2062 out of the New Zealand we know today. The rising sea levels will mean that the number of islands will be much greater than today. The official languages will be Maori and Notonesian sign language. English will have declined into insignificance after the end of the US-American empire.

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