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JAN WILM

THE FICTIONEER

CALIFORNIA ENGLISH • VAMPIRE WEEKEND

For some reason, she's not opposed to going downtown with me on a Saturday. Cat's paws of sunlight are scattered on the pavements under the few green trees around Pershing Square, where we meet. I say the light filtering through the trees reminds me of Max Liebermann paintings and descriptions in Nabokov, but Lavinia seems indifferent. I want to show her the Grand Central Market, and on our way there, I try to get a conversation going again.

“What do you think of the people at the Getty?”

She doesn't offer her opinion immediately, and tells me she's also not a fellow, so she doesn't interact with many people there. I must be glowing, like a pregnant woman. “I suppose they're all a bit up their butts.”

“Right? I mean, did you notice how *white* the Getty is?” She puts her sunglasses on and looks at me without an answer. “I mean, ideologically.” I laugh with disdain. “It's as white as the concrete slabs that it's made of. Didn't you notice that there are no black people doing research there or anything? I mean, there are people from all over the world, but it looks like a movie from the '50s.”

Apparently, she hasn't noticed. She shrugs a bit and mumbles something about elitism. She asks me if there aren't any people of color among the fellows. I tell her I'm not a fellow either. “Oh, thank Christ!” she says and asks me where I live.

“Here or back home?” She smiles and sucks her lips inside after taking a sip from a water bottle she took out of her handbag. “I mean, here in LA or in Germany?” She takes another sip. Didn’t she hear me? “I’m renting a small bungalow in Santa Monica.”

“So not in LA,” she says, and then: “I’ve never been to Santa Monica, what’s it like?”

Unlike her, I snap up the chance and, like the proper tour guide I am, I offer to show her around. “It’s much nicer to walk around Santa Monica than LA.”

“Well, thanks for working your way up then, mate.”

She takes off her jeans jacket and by doing so stretches her nubile young body, so that I can see she’s not wearing a bra. There are crescent sweat-stains on the hems of her dress in her armpits. I feel a soft twitch in my crotch. On the inside of her right arm, there stretches a tattoo from the wrist all the way up to the inside of her elbow: a finger’s width simple black line, like a censor bar in a redacted text. What person has such a tattoo? How would such a black bar in the skin be made legible? Perhaps it hides something, the name of an ex-boyfriend. Or some relic of her youth.

This black bar has a secret fascination for me, and throughout the day, my eyes are darting back to it. However, I don’t know if I like the ink in her skin. A fleeting thought: Would I be ashamed to introduce Lavinia to my friends? Much later: Which friends?

She tells me that she’s staying with former colleagues in Silverlake. She’s living in a silver ‘airstream,’ which friends of hers have turned into an Airbnabode.

“What is that, airstream?”

“Well, a caravan, isn’t it?” She sounds a bit annoyed, though it might just be the English accent. I feel like a child, a foreigner, with whom citizens are talking way too loud to enunciate a synonym. The advantage of talking to yourself: you understand almost every word.

She stops walking to show me a photo on her iPhone. Nearer to her, I can smell the piña-colada-scent of her sunscreen. On the photo, she zooms in on a '60s-style silver caravan in a leafy backyard. It looks like it's grown in by a bougainvillea-colored foam. I now notice that her smile is more pronounced on the left side of her mouth, which gives her a sweetly smirking skeptical look that I think suits her, though I'm not sure if I like that. But what does it matter if I like it or not? She will decide if I'm allowed to have an opinion on that.

“Doesn't it get extremely hot in there in the summer?” I ask.

“No, rather the opposite. It's lovely in there now. It was really cold at night until recently. And in the winter, it was like living in the arctic, because they've had no radiator in there. I've been in the city since October.”

“Sounds like a great deal,” I say, trying to echo the ironic tinge that her words tend to have. It could be that it's not irony at all, and she's just unhappy to be here with me.

“Well, it's fine really,” she says. “I'm being warmed now, so ...” Those are the words I think I heard, and I say:

“By whom?”

She gently frowns, her thumb flies up to her lips, then the hint of a single-sided smile:

“By *what*.”

Was that a question? “I'm sorry?”

“You said ‘by whom,’ which—the grammar is brilliant! Not many English speakers even get that one right. But—” She sounds politer than I'd expected: “You should have said ‘by what.’ I'm being warmed by the sun of course.” The one-sided smile.

“OK.” Going by my intonation I notice that I'm a bit annoyed by her, even if I like what her correction has subtly told me about her. She's on her own here.

I must seem lost to her. “You have no idea what I’ve been talking about, do you?” I softly shake my head. She laughs at me in mock-exaggeration. “How *do* you make it through this world alone?”

“I don’t.”

The day is suddenly hot, the sun is beating on my head, as the Grand Central Market comes into view down the street. We pass the seasonally closed Angels Flight. The small funicular railway is standing still till September, the slanted wedge-like orange cars shining in the morning light. They look oddly lifeless, a funfair in winter. For a moment, I only listen to her with one ear, as we’re walking around the building to the main entrance. Lavinia is talking about her research. I’m distracted, because I’ve spotted something in the middle distance in front of us: A man sitting apathetically next to a shopping cart brimming with plastic bottles—a mosaic of colors. As we approach him, I can make out that the man is barefoot, sitting on an apple crate, and holding out a paper cup in his hands beneath his sad face.

I watch Lavinia from the corner of my eyes; I fumble in my pocket and with cool composure, I produce a single quarter as a sign of my generosity. As we approach the homeless man, I roll the quarter around between my fingers a few times, where it snatches up the glimmer of the sun and flashes it into Lavinia’s face. She steers her eyes to the quarter, and I almost drop the coin. But I don’t leave anything up to chance and concentrate, until we’re level with the man on the apple crate. I spot the black rims of his fingernails gripping the paper cup. Then, my gaze rises to the grimy face, only to fall to his filthy feet. And coolly, from a gentle height and visible to Lavinia’s eyes, I flick the quarter into his paper cup, where it’s swallowed up by a low thud. Poor guy—I’m the first kind soul of the day, see Lavinia? She smiles at me warmly—yes!

She's silent for a few steps. I'm sure she's changed her opinion of me. We move toward the Marquee of the Grand Central Market and can make out the throngs of hungover hipsters hanging around in front of the food places, when I notice that the atmosphere of the day has suddenly changed, though I can't make why. Something is different. A tightness has hardened the day.

And then I can hear it. Just behind us a sudden commotion fills the air, a rough tear in the day has destroyed the open feeling of the street scenery. It does strike me as strange now that the quarter was swallowed up so quietly by the man's paper cup. Instantly, I realize that the racket that ripped through the air must have been a scream, when behind us a voice is swelling up sonorously: "Motherfucker! My goddamn coffee, man!"

Then, the man is right behind us. His face, streaked with sadness beneath the dirt and the rage, is extremely close to mine suddenly. His straggly, oily hair seems like wet algae dangling down into his eyes. I'm watching the grooved grimy fingernails of his right hand digging into my upper arm, as he chastises me that he just bought that coffee, and then some goddamn *hipster fuck* comes along and drops a totally dirty quarter into his coffee.

"And only one," he cries, confusing me as to what was the bigger offence. The people in line at the food places are looking at us. In a cumbersome way, I try to apologize, awkwardly attempting to wriggle free from his clasp, which tightens. I'm frozen by his grip, and my profuse apology only makes him louder and more aggressive. From his mouth there wafts a warm, cloying scent-bouquet of alcohol, tobacco, and rot into my nose. His teeth are thickly coated with plaque, some of them yellow and black, some of them gone. I want to move away, but his clawing hand squeezes ever more tightly, and in pain I say again how extremely sorry I am and that I'd be delighted to give him some more money. A mistake, as it turns out, although the man releases me. However, he pulls a strange tightlipped grimace now, as though there were a taste of bitterness on the tip of his tongue, which, as I'm about to

find out, is true. Because right into my face he spits a thick, lumpy ball of phlegm. I stare open-mouthed at the man, while I feel something warm and jellylike slowly rolling down my upper lip and falling into my mouth.

He hisses one last time: “Motherfucker!” I watch him trot back to his apple crate, his algae-hair trembling across his shoulders, and with his dirty fingers, he fishes the quarter out of his paper cup. The sun flashes on the coin again and the man—inconceivably—puts the quarter in his mouth, licks it and stuffs it in his pocket.

Without another word to Lavinia, with the slime on my face and my tongue, I run into the wide entrance of the Grand Central Market, rush through the throngs of tourists and hipsters and traders into the basement of the building to the filthy toilets, where I wash my mouth and face with soap and warm water. The nauseating disgust is invisible but permanent, like a removed tattoo. I look at the lonely figure in the mirror. I have washed my mouth until it was sore. The lines at the corner of my mouth, combined with my reddened lips, spell out a scarlet A.

For the rest of the date, I’m forced to walk around with the now invisible but to me ever palpable AIDS-phlegm burned into my face. As we move around the Grand Central Market, I feel disgraced, scanning the streets visible through the entrances and blazing in the sun for any sign of my attacker. Lavinia asks if I’d like to eat something. The ironic tone has been edited from her voice. Her eyes fall upon a long line of people in front of a place called Berlin Currywurst, which is eerily quiet, as everyone is on their phones. She reads a few German words from the menu and she sounds even more English than in English. “No, definitely no German food for me, thanks,” I say. Even if I don’t want to admit it to myself, I’m happy that the umlauts are in the right places on the menu: *Leberkäse. Nürnberger.*

As I look at Lavinia, I notice that she has been watching me unnoticed. Again, her eyes fall on my lips. Have I been mouthing the words, like a moron, while I was reading

‘Bauernpfanne’ and ‘Bratwurst’ in my head? Perhaps her eyes are scanning my mouth for any remnants of hepatic mucus dangling from my philtrum. And then, astonishingly she very gently puts her thumb, which has touched her lower lip all day, to my cheek and very tenderly moves it down toward my chin. I freeze up and embarrassingly get an immediate erection, because my stupid cock is always in the way. “Poor thing,” she says. Yes, I’ll take all the pity you got.

SNOW • MEKONS

“The snow is far, far away. I don’t want it to go on. I want the snow to go on not without but within me,” writes the old Blackshaw in his mountain hideaway in the middle of summer. “I suppose that I’m afraid of the emptiness I will encounter in the space where the snow used to be inside of me.” What does he mean, ‘where the snow used to be inside of me?’

He continues: “Today, there’s nothing inside me except snow, which is why I’m so empty. ‘It is the emptiness of the white that is more disturbing, than even the bloodiness of red.’ (MELVILLE). I must stop being preoccupied by something about which I know nothing. I wouldn’t even have my life. One is no longer a younger man who trusted the dream that one could be anyone. What choice do I have but to be myself?” And one day you didn’t even have that choice anymore, my dear Gabe.

I also have snow inside me, if my *mind* is inside me. Sometimes I’m reminded that the falling snows of my childhood cast shadows. These downy near-translucent shadows could have only occurred when the weather was just right, when the air was still and the light bright enough to give these glassy gray shadows their distinct look. Yet, the light couldn’t have been too bright, or the shadows would have disappeared. Once, I sat in front of a window, my

back turned to the glass, and I saw the silhouette of my small life rolled out onto the floor of the living room my parents made for me. And there was a subtle restlessness that was perceivable on the floor next to the shadow my young life cast. This unrest was similar to white noise on the TV, the monochrome swarming of a bee colony, the grain of the air stirred by motion. I could have watched it unfold for hours, the weather staging itself in shadow as it fell at my feet. My hands gripped the tassels of the rug on which I sat, the shadows of the snow snowed into the silhouette of my young life, like Robert Frost's dust of snow shaking down, and it seemed to disappear inside me, feeding my shadow, accreting it in the archive of my body—sand trickling into an hourglass.

Then I turned around to look outside, and the real snow seemed ordinary in comparison—I lost it the second I saw it for real. Because even though I turned away from the window again, my eyes adjusting to the twilight, I never saw the snow the way I had seen it during that one moment. All I saw was the pale shadow of a boy sitting in front of a window without knowing what tomorrow will bring.

I think this might have been one of the first times that I understood what immense loss lay ahead of me, though perhaps that's only my attempt to retrofit the importance of the moment, a retrospective interpretation, because I lost the boy I was. I miss him, I miss myself. "How like a winter hath my absence been," the Bard wrote somewhere.

My snow is far, far away as well. If it was ever near. Why am I unable to let go of this ridiculous project? It can't all be for the DAAD money (God love it). Why can't I let snow be snow, as in Frederick Seidel's poem: "Snow is what it does. / It falls and it stays and it goes. / It melts and it is here somewhere. / We all will get there." Why not just admit the grace of the poet, why overburden everything with meaning in this cold, academic way of mine? Strange, that you can be academic without being *an* academic. Why do I take myself so fucking seriously? I don't have any responsibility, I don't owe anyone anything. All the lines to every

supervisor are cut, I could be free. Maybe I'm feeling guilty. But on account of whom? I don't owe anyone my time or my work. The world is entirely ignorant of my snow. Warm welcome or cold shoulder—the snow is as indifferent to my praise as it is ignorant of my scorn. It doesn't matter to the raven or the black cat that they're omens of bad luck.

All I can think of is Lavinia. I wish I could let go of my snow to be with her instead. It's always either/or for me. Either a private life or a professional life. And if I had a private life and would have to have a professional life to support it, the latter would be so enmeshed with the former that losing either would mean to lose both. Snow is loss to me. What if snow is the most boring thing in the world? Then again, any topic is only as boring as the person thinking about it. The thought is the mind, the reader is the book.

When I'm—yes, say it!—*at home* in my casita, I hear all the sounds of the city flowing through the open window whose pane I caked with the fake snow what seems like years ago—only now do I realize that the urban sounds give me the feeling—*the illusion*—that I'm part of this place in Southern California, that I'm actually here. When, in fact, I'm really stuck in the cocoon of my own mind, where I'm always searching for somewhere else to escape to, always fleeing from where I am to where I think I should be. From snow to Lavinia. From Saturday to Saturday.

VENICE BITCH • LANA DEL REY

The Santa Monica Pier underpass is dark, sandy, it smells of salt and algae, and you can hear the car tires creaking on the planks overhead—a sound like being in the belly of a schooner, even if I've never been on a ship in my life. It's also the painted walls in the underpass that give the senses the illusion of an underwater experience: fish, crustaceans, strangely enough a

porthole. I point these out to Lavinia, who looks around and smiles with blank eyes. “Have you taken me down here to fondle me?” The British accent gets me oddly excited, and I wish I could do what she’s afraid of.

But I laugh. “I thought that’s what you wanted when you agreed to my exclusive tour of Santa Monica.” She looks almost surprised by my retort, and I drive it home by adding: “I’m sorry, you weren’t aware that this is LA slang, right? ‘I’d love to see Santa Monica.’ That’s a euphemism for being ... fondled. You show me your Santa Monica, I’ll show you mine.”

Lavinia’s eyes have been infected by her smiling mouth, but there’s a frown on her forehead, as she takes a hand out of her tiny jeans jacket and gives me the finger. We step back into the blaring light, and for a second, I feel like this Saturday is already over. Somewhere in the distance, there’s the lazy drone of a propeller plane.

We’re overtaken by families on bicycles. Runners are coming our way like we’re The Beatles, and in the distance there are the sweat-glazed bodies at the old Muscle Beach.

Lavinia is monosyllabic, she seems bored again, tired, or perhaps, I think, even sad. Maybe I’m interpreting her distance as depth. I read the world as I imagine it, and I don’t have much of an imagination. The world as will and experience is a pretty fucked-up concept if you don’t have a lot of experience and not much of a will. On the other hand, I don’t know her very well and her disinterested demeanor might be her jaded way of showing interest, and maybe, in time, even tenderness or love—why else would she be spending her Saturdays with me?

I watch her thumb glide toward her lower lip again. It feels like I’ve seen this gesture so often that its meaning has been lost to me, and it could signify anything. Far away, the soft roll of the surf. I feel compelled to entertain her.

“You want to go see the freaks in Venice?” I ask her.

“Honestly, what is it with you and your freaks all the time?”

“I don’t think there’s anything with me and *my freaks* all the time.”

“No, no, you’re the biggest friend of the freaks there is, aren’t you?” And there goes annoying Lavinia again with her mannered, stupidly reserved ways.

“What’s your problem?” I say, emphasizing *your*, although I wanted to emphasize *problem*.

“I’ve got no problem at all. Why can’t you just relax a bit more? We’re not ... married, you know.”

“Well, you should count yourself lucky we’re not. You’d have to fuck me if we were. And wouldn’t that be terrible.”

She smiles, her forehead a wrinkly roof to her sunglasses: “If we were married, fucking would be the last thing we’d be doing.”

I sound out a rim-shot for her, but I can’t say I’m not turned on that I got her to speak of fucking me, even if only in the negative.

As we walk along the promenade to the shops and storefronts of Venice Beach, we pass a group of German tourists during a ludicrous Segway tour, bent forward like stiff figureheads or erect phalluses. They’re all helmeted, but some of them have gone the extra mile to wear those fingerless gloves, like homeless people playing the viola in a pedestrian mall. I wish I could make a joke about the Teutonic tourist brigade, but I was ordered to relax. I hate it that everything is a competition and a struggle, a tactic, even—especially!—between an uninteresting man and an interesting woman. But why should love—yes, love!—be free from tactics, from struggle and competition, when nothing is free from it? And isn’t it exactly those things which afford the greatest amount of pleasure when falling in love with someone?

“There used to be a mural here somewhere that showed Venice in the snow.” I look around, as though I could find it, though I have no idea where to look for it. “They just put up another building in front of it, so now it’s forever hidden. But it’s there.” Lavinia is as non-plussed by my words as she is by the intact murals still gracing the walls of buildings.

“So,” she begins, drawing out the word in a teasing way. “What’s going on with your book?”

“What about it?”

“What are you going to do with it? Are you going to go with a university press or with a trade publisher? I recall you saying that you wanted to leave academia?”

“I have to write the book first,” I say. “And I’ve already left academia, I guess.” I feel a surge of guilt washing through me, but after the shudder has passed, I’m relieved, although I don’t know if what I said was the truth.

She looks at me for a beat longer than expected, her face is not unkind, which surprises me. Her eyes freeze for a bit, and then she nods slightly. The sun beats down on her pale skin, and she suddenly looks melancholic to me. I wonder if kindness makes me melancholic, because I don’t encounter it very often and it comes with the announcement of its impermanence, like snow. I want to ask her about her own book, when she says:

“Sometimes I wish we didn’t have to write at all.” She seems distant as she walks through the carnival feeling of the promenade. “Do you know what I mean?”

I ask what she means.

“I don’t know, I just can’t stand having to explain everything all the time. Justify what I’m doing as I’m doing it, and what for and how. You know? Talk up my objective, regardless how tatty the shit really is. I just ... I really despise it so much sometimes. It’s as though they wanted me to interrogate myself all the time.” She shrugs her small shoulders, as

the warm breeze gently moves her curls. “Writing just gives me a tremendous amount of anxiety.”

Tepidly, I play devil’s advocate to keep the conversation going. And yet, her words also have a rug-pulling quality, because I want to agree with her wholeheartedly. For a while the idea that I wanted to write was as important to me as writing must be to real writers. Now I’m losing an illusion. After a few steps in silence, when a saxophone player’s *Godfather* theme rises from somewhere among the pedestrians and psychos, Lavinia says: “Are you also going to look at snow in the arts?”

“Yes, in literature and film. Music maybe.”

“No, I meant the visual arts.” I’m expecting a sarcastic ironic quip, but her words are hanging earnestly in the beach air and disappear in the horrible Mardi Gras mood of the Ocean Front Walkway, the bicycle bells, the music, the dopeheads’ cries and whispers, the jock-yelps, the laughter, the warm wafts of weed infusing the air. Why so timid all of a sudden, my dear Lavinia? Maybe her blood sugar is low.

She talks about the Swedish painter Gustaf Fjæstad—she doesn’t remember if it’s Gustav with an F or Gustaf with a V. “He painted lots of snowscapes in these lovely Fauvist colors, although he wasn’t a Fauvist himself, I suppose.” Whenever someone gives me a tip about what or whom to consider for my project, my need to be liked results in a Japanese exuberance, aah and ooh. I’m almost taking a bow, and though I don’t think I’ll even google his name, I produce a small notebook—its metal spiral is burning from the hot day. Strangely, my enthusiasm leads to a heightened impassivity on Lavinia’s part, as if my exhilaration were cause for embarrassment. Maybe enthusiasm is a problem for her, the way people shy away from pathos, because opening themselves to others makes them vulnerable. I attribute this to an academic socialization, where passion—real irrational maddening passion—is as frowned

upon as invention and imagination, though they're all pretenders. I really don't what her deal is.

I ask: "Is there anything about snow that interests you? I mean, if you just had to answer very spontaneously—or is there something that you always thought about or that moved you about snow?" We're squeezing through a crowd of people, so I speak to her back, where a small breadcrumb trail of freckles leads under her dress. The crowd was held up by a rail-thin man wearing nothing but white boxer-briefs, as he's trying to ride away on a rickety bicycle. He shouts: "Careful, careful, liftoff, we have a liftoff!" As the man finds his balance on the bike he looks back over his shoulder, and a wild smile blasts across his face. He shouts: "I'm gonna go get cocaine!"

It's the first time today that I see Lavinia's uninhibited laugh, as her entire face relaxes, and her raspberry-colored tongue is touched by the diamantine light of Southern California. Thanks, you sweet cokehead! But my gratitude dissolves like smoke. The whiteness of the light frightens me for some reason, and I feel an intense loneliness pressuring me from within. All this will be lost, this moment, these people. Their presence is the surest sign of their vanishing.

Maybe this feeling is rooted in an instance of trade: Lavinia's laughter about this snowbird was so true and free and makes her relatable in such a beautiful way that her persistently ironic nature strikes me as a disingenuous mask, which covers her with an unbridgeable strangeness.

"That's the man you've got to quiz about snow," she says smiling. I remind her of my question, and she says: "You aware that you're constantly asking questions to shift attention away from you, aren't you?"

"*She asked,*" I say in an annoyed tone.

As the craziness of the Venice Boardwalk dawns a bit, I buy a small wooden Charlie Brown figurine from a sad flea market junk stand of an elderly lady who looks like a Russian peasant woman. I'm only getting the little blockhead so that Lavinia might think me cute. At least the old babushka hasn't spat in my face yet. I also buy an old Polaroid camera, and I snap a photo of Lavinia, masked behind her sunglasses, her hands in her jacket, and her shoulders slightly bent forward. She looks as if this beautiful woman wanted to hide inside herself, with a fire-golden smear of sun in the corner behind the roof of a house—this is how I freeze her, this is how she will die in this moment. We sit down on a bench near the beach, after I buy her a Mexican Coke and tell her it's supposed to be sweeter than the American variety.

"I've thought about your question though. But I think there isn't anything I like best about snow." She sucks on her bright yellow straw, the dark liquid shoots up. "Except the snow itself. We so seldom get any snow in the South of England, if at all. But of course there were the usual childhoods when the winters were snowy." She sounds so wistful suddenly. She puts the straw in her mouth, holds it with three fingers, but this time the liquid doesn't fill the yellow tube. The gesture reminds me of nail-biting. "Every European childhood has its share of snow-days, I suppose. But I always found it brilliant that it was snowing at all. That it could. That the world's able to do this. To ... do snow, I guess." Now her eyes flick to mine, and there's the hint of a melancholy smile on her lips, while her eyes remain dark. Very subtly, I can see my silhouette reflected in her pupils. "Know what I mean?"

The moment feels as if it had darkened, only to be burnished once again after her words, as when a large bird sweeps low past the sun and swipes a giant shadow across the world. I say: "'That the world is able to do snow.' That's beautiful."

“Well, you needn’t fall in love with me right away or propose or something.” Her eyes are distant again, before she directs them to the ocean anew, where the sun is scattered in brilliant flakes across the waves. I look toward the horizon and roll my eyes.

“Gabriel Gordon Blackshaw once writes: ‘The heart of the snow is snow.’ Snow is snow, nothing else.”

“Who’s this? Blakeshaw?”

“Someday soon the world won’t be able to *do* snow. So you can look forward to *that*.”

She sniggers at my pissy intonation: “Are you aware that you’re a very odd bloke, Jan Wilm?”

It costs me a lot of effort, but I ignore her. I listen to how she snorts in exhaustion. It makes me glad that she’s a bit angry with me. I say: “The people who ... undid the world’s ability to do snow—well, that’s us. You and I as much as everyone else.” From the ocean, we can hear the cry of a seagull. I speak as though it were her fault alone, but I never raise my voice. “What do you think the world will be like then, without snow?”

“How should I know? Warmer.”

“Well, it can’t be much colder than now.” I stare into her eyes. I don’t smile.

She frowns and says (I don’t know why): “Does that mean the same thing in German?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. I don’t speak German.”

THE TIDE THAT LEFT AND NEVER CAME BACK • THE VEILS

Still, she goes to drink with me and knocks back the Pinot in a way that leaves no doubt she really did go to Oxford. In the evening, there’s a plum-colored sky stretched over Santa

Monica, the lights on the amusement pier are as shiny as glass in the coming evening light, as we walk back along the beach. The Ferris wheel is a giant Chinese lantern in the far distance. It's the first time of the year that I notice darkness falls a lot later than it used to. We can hear people laughing and screaming on the wind—the sounds from the rollercoaster by the pier.

Lavinia pulls a small black box out of her pocket: “Do you want to get high?”

The sun has long fallen like a blood red coin behind the slit of the horizon to pay its dues for the night. We sit down on the sandy cushion of the beach and smoke up her vaporizer; the warm little gadget is cradled in the palm of my hand. As I take a last hit, a small red light appears on the machine. “This thing is dead.”

“May I?” she says with a sedated smile. She draws on it, and exhales velvet smoke into the night air. I watch her as she's taking off her ankle boots. She's wearing green socks, and I wonder if the color of her underwear rhymes with the color of her socks. I trail this thought for an eternity, follow it into secret crevices, searching for something very specific that eludes me right now, as in a dream, and I keep asking myself why I can't think of anything else, why my body is a labyrinth of this thought—what was it?

My mouth is utterly dry as if stuffed with dust. Hours have passed, but her ankle boots are only now standing next to her in the sand. She slips out of her socks, her nails are polished, one of the Stendhal colors, but in the dark, I don't know if it's red or black. In a lustful way she relaxes her toes, spreads them out. I would have touched each one with my tongue, even here in the infectious sands of Santa Monica. The same amount of time I have spent gawking at her toes, Lavinia must have been watching me—Tex Avery's Big Bad Wolf. Only now—as if I'd been thrust into a new day—I'm able to react: “I'm really high.”

“Good,” she says with a sapped smile. She sighs, as she leans back onto her elbows. While she's looking at me, her eyes are as dark as black marbles. “So,” she begins and very

silently smacks her lips twice, the way some people do after yawning. “What is going on with you? Have you got a girlfriend ... here in Santa Monica? Or a boyfriend?”

I say ‘no’ right away, as if either of her questions were so outlandish that the smile is erased in my face and I specify—with a comically painful earnestness due to the weed—that I have neither a boyfriend nor a girlfriend, but if I did I would have a girlfriend. “But I don’t.” Where I was so keen to be absolutely incontrovertible about my relationship status, I in turn don’t ask her if she’s unattached too, for fear that she might say no, and the night would end. Instead: “What made you come here? I mean, to LA.” For a long time, she watches her toes shoveling sand with these tiny movements that must feel wonderful. I add: “Did you run away from something?”

“Did you run away from something?” She slowly sits up, frowns, brushes her right hand through her hair, pulls out a loose hair with the other hand, then gifts the invisible hair to the wind. Fascinating. Then, she stretches herself and sighs, and after the stretching movements, she keeps her arm folded around her head, as if she’d been frozen for a moment, her left hand softly petting her right ear. That can’t be comfortable, but she seems to enjoy it. She frowns again, as though I had said something again. Then she relaxes her body again and leans back: “Don’t you think there might be simpler ways to run away than knocking together yet another elaborate scholarship application and hoping to be saved?”

“I don’t know. Seems as legitimate to me as anything else. I mean, the repetition of the same thing is hardly more than a form of running away. You know, the people who have been working on the same subject for ten years. That’s like running away too.”

She keeps quiet for a moment. The wind becomes audible in the palm fronds as hard as plastic. The thrusting pressure of the surf.

She begins: “No, I just—” She interrupts herself, and seems self-conscious, sitting up once more. But she laughs to herself again, a small chuckle that might be mistaken for a sob, and then she says with suddenly fatigued eyes: “What’s your deal? Who are you?”

“Are you aware that you’re trying to shift the attention away from yourself? Why can’t you just relax?”

“I’m only doing what you’ve been doing all day. Either your questions are completely specific or extremely generalizing. That’s mad. This isn’t how a person talks.”

I have to laugh about the choice of words. “Well, maybe I’m not a person then. But let’s not forget that it was you who was asking the caterpillar’s question just now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? The caterpillar’s question?” Her hair licks at her face in the warm wind, a dark flame next to her ear.

“Alice in Wonderland,” I say. “Don’t you remember? *‘Who are you?’* That’s the question Alice is asked by the smoking caterpillar.” My face must be exploding with a smile. “Of course, today the caterpillar wouldn’t be smoking a hookah, but a vaporizer. Like you.”

“Does she have an answer to the question?”

“I can’t explain myself, because I’m not myself.”

Lavinia leans back onto her elbows again and gazes out to sea. Then I see her smiling: “You’re comparing me to a caterpillar. Cheers, I guess.” Then she looks at me, as if she had remembered something. “And if I’m not mistaken, you’re comparing yourself to a little girl.” A beaming smile.

We remain quiet for a moment. The silence pulses through me in waves, and the same silence is pushing through her body, where it becomes a different silence. I wish I could make the silences of our bodies talk to one another.

“Maybe you’re not a person either,” I say.

“So, what do you think we are, then?”

“I don’t know. Characters in a novel.”

“Why characters in a novel?”

“Well, that wouldn’t be the worst fate, I think. Going for walks in language, and anything you do would be a sign.” It’s quiet for a long time, only the ocean and the palms are speaking. There is always the sound of cars. “I’m really stoned, you know.” I start laughing, and she joins me for a brief time, like children harmonizing their voices.

Then, she says: “Everything’s already a sign for something, isn’t it? What do you need a novel for?” She rolls a curl of hair behind her ear. “This day and the blinking lights on that Ferris wheel over there, and the pitch-black sea.”

“The wine-dark sea,” I whisper, but she doesn’t hear me.

“I think it’s a bit presumptuous to think that all of this here doesn’t mean anything. How arrogant! The sea over there—each wave means something, doesn’t it? But it just means ‘wave’ and that’s all really. But it’s enough, isn’t it?” I look at her for a long time. Her thumb touches her lower lip again, while she’s still leaned back on her elbows, so that she inches a bit closer to me. My heart is beating faster. But she looks out at the ocean again. “With each wash the sea is saying ‘wave—wave—wave.’ Like a mantra.” She shakes her eyes and her hair obscures her profile for a moment. “The correct question is: Why do you think all of this doesn’t mean anything?” She brushes her hair back, sits upright, and looks at me. “Either you’re a snob or you’re afraid.” She tilts her head a bit, smiles, and shrugs her shoulder.

“Well, now you’re talking like a character in a novel.”

“So, you’ve made it. You’ve arrived in your novel. Or in the Oculus Rift.” She takes out her vaporizer again. “Do you want another drag?” I shake my head, look out to the ocean, the wine dark sea. It doesn’t say anything, there aren’t any words in the wash of the waves—only the random, compulsive roar, liquid discs moving nothing over nothing, the cradle endlessly rocking, gravely pushing itself across the surface of the earth and waiting to dry

back into the nothingness from which it came. I have the feeling of something clutching at me, a hand of smoke gripping me from within, turning my insides out so as to crush me from without too. This meaninglessness, is that me?

I ask: “Why do you think I’m afraid?”

“I don’t know if you’re afraid.” Sleepily, she looks at me from her dark eyes. Slowly and heavily her gaze spreads out over my face, covers me like a dark liquid. Her silence shoves into me in waves. In her small hand beneath our gazes, her vaporizer lies like a microphone, or a small voice recorder, waiting. The sand is crunching like snow under my body, as I lean over to her, and—very slowly—kiss her lips. Appreciatively, I guide my tongue through my teeth and feel a hardness. Then the sudden rip in the fabric of the night, and momentarily, it’s as if a very heavy object were falling deep inside me.

She has pushed away from me, stuck in the air, looking at me. The small hand that still holds the black box has moved up to my shoulder. She’s holding on to the vaporizer with two fingers, and simultaneously she touches my shoulder in an off-hand way. “What?” is all she asks. Her face closes up. And then the moment breaks. Repulsed, her animal-black eyes are staring right into me.

I’m cloaked in a cape of shame. Disgraceman. I think I don’t say anything for an extremely long time, until I make a flippant comment and smile. I take her other hand from the sand. It feels dry and papery. She closes her eyes and squirms away. Even after my hand has let go, she still seems to try to shake me off. “What are you doing?” Her countenance is surprised, nearly disconsolate, and she closes her eyes once or twice more and shakes her head, as if she wanted to make me understand something—but was what just happened really so dreadfully outlandish? What else am I going to, after all I’ve been through?

The mistake I make is to speak my mind: “What else was I going to do?”

“Well,” she says, and her British accent seems more pronounced in anger: “For starters: Not go kissing me maybe?” She touches her head and softly shakes it again, which strikes me as random and operatic and unnecessary. Just as her next line: “You will definitely never see me naked.”

The ocean is sluggishly drawing its water across the beach. The automatic monotony of the moment. How alone you suddenly are, though just mere seconds ago, you were still sitting on a sandy beach with someone you don’t even know. And you didn’t know how happy you were then, at home in your jolly preliminary phase of the possible—a juvenile moment. Now, everything is hardened and old. I feel naked suddenly—I can’t see the irony of her words in this context.

“Why did you do this?”

I think about her question for a second. “Why not?” Impetuously, I add: “It’s not that great of a transgression, right? I mean, why would you go out with me?”

“You hardly know me.”

“Well, I was trying to change that.”

“What about a hug for a start? Why do you always have to kiss people?”

Later, I will ask myself what these words meant—she hardly knew me—but not just now. Now, I accompany her to the bus stop on Wilshire to where she ordered an Uber. What I failed to see was that she was probably speaking generally, while I was reading her subjectively. Why do you—men—always have to kiss people? While we’re waiting—lengthened moments when she says I don’t need to wait with her—I awkwardly ask if I could see her again.

“I don’t know,” she says with a shrug. She looks like a person who has seen the proverbial ghost, though she’s just come off her trip. She clings to her smartphone as to a railing. “You *are* always at the Getty, so ...” And then she holds her forehead again, maybe

she's just coming down. "You know—" she begins and sighs dramatically. "I've had a really good time with you, but—I don't know ... you're more like a sister to me."

"Oh man, you really could've kept that one to yourself, couldn't you?"

She remains silent for a moment, checks her phone. I can't keep the next line locked in my head, and now it doesn't really matter anyway: "You know, sisters do see each other naked from time to time." I grin. She just shakes her head, though more to herself than to me. And then she disappears, kissless, wishless, in a car whose windows are like mirrors. Entering the Uber, she speaks to the driver in the comfortable-looking interior, and her voice suddenly sounds so gentle and sweet with that stranger that it seems to be coming from another world.

On my way home, walking beneath the jet-black silhouettes of the palms against the mud-colored night sky, there's only one thought: How I wish I could call you now and tell you what happened tonight, you wouldn't believe it, and the wish is all the stronger because it's impossibility incarnate. I tell myself that nothing happened, I only lost what I never should have hoped to have. But whatever you lose begins to feel like something you never had.

In my casita I check what the weather is like in Germany, and I drink a long glass of bourbon. Tangy, liquid light like an oily fire. *You will definitely never see me naked.* My disgrace is a second skin, I tattoo it to the inside of my body with each retelling of the shameful stories of my life.

I THINK I NEED A NEW HEART • THE MAGNETIC FIELDS

I'm afraid that the only home I've ever known is inside my head, and that I will essentially remain homeless forever because of it, no matter where I am. I'd need new paths to move on from where I am, I'd need to put another foot forward, forget the best one, any foot would do. But even in these relatively new surroundings I'm moving in circles, perhaps because they are new surroundings. The new, what good has it done me really? Lost like a person in a blizzard, I'm unaware that I'm only ever moving toward the place that I came from.

“Where are we really going?” asks the Romantic writer Novalis and supplies the answer: “Always home.” If home is a state of mind, then we're all trapped there. Escape would equal death. And yet, we're always going home, trying to find ourselves. Translation: We're not at home in our minds. We don't have a home inside ourselves, we don't *have* ourselves.

I have the feeling that most of my thoughts are attempts to return to the past, or attempts to re-present the past, not mimetically by copying the past, but by trying to bring it to the present, trying to bring it home, which we steadfastly deceive ourselves is where we are. In trying to make myself understand where I'm coming from, I constantly see what I've lost.

Elsewhere Novalis writes: “All representation rests on making present—what is absent and so forth—(Miraculous power of *fiction*).”

Is all representation fiction, dear Novalis? If so, how can the fictional be the substitute for “what is absent” if the fictional is the *new* rather than a mere copy of what was?

I don't think I've ever felt that a novel or a film has filled an absence in my heart, because to me the defining character of fiction is that it's new and giving me something that I *didn't* know I needed but that I don't want to miss as soon as I've experienced it. And yet, maybe there is a solution in Novalis. He always looks like an androgynous mouse on paintings to me, an eternally 28-year-old friend of Schiller and Schlegel, whose writings,

nearly all of them, remained fragmentary and whose mental cosmos was entirely built around the loss of a woman who to him was love incarnate. But I think he was on to something when he spoke of the “Wunderwerk der *Fiction*,” the “miraculous power of *fiction*.” Maybe the way to overcome the past is not to try to ignore or deny it, but to make it present in his sense, to *represent* it—not by retrieving it fully, and not by inventing something new. Better to build on the past, making it just new enough to feel like something singular that feeds the desire to revisit the past without the loss and defeat of return. To transcend the past by freeing it into fiction.

Following the death of Henriette Barthes, her 62-year-old son Roland resolves to end the “kind of listlessness that (since a recent bereavement) bears upon everything I do.” To counter the endlessly looping and dragging monotony of his mourning thoughts and to begin after all to write once more. Surprisingly, his plan is not another book of essays, though he does decide on a new book project: *Vita Nova*. But the *new* that he wants is fiction.

Why, when facing the loss of his mother, does a semiotician, an essayist, a philologist not turn to an essay, a scientific work, or even a memoir, but to a novel? Barthes has never written a novel before, but now that his mother is gone, he finds that the customary work of mourning isn’t suited to nonfiction. It’s clear to him that he can only live if he writes, and that he will only survive if the writing is able to preserve his mother. How odd, that writing the ‘facts’ of nonfiction is unsatisfactory in this moment of his greatest loss.

Barthes seems to believe in Novalis’s miraculous power of fiction to preserve, mirror, hold, represent *and* reconstruct, alter, ingeminate, make new. Fiction is the aesthetic repetition of the past—I think that’s it—and every repetition is an overriding of the past, an overwriting. Renewal must necessarily be fictional, because fiction doesn’t defeat reality. Instead, it overwrites it, conserving it underneath its aesthetic sheen, like tendons under the skin.

The problem is that I can't apply that to anything in my life. Not my 'real' life, anyway. If the radical change of scenery, if even this new country couldn't change my heart and mind, what can? I'm still constantly dragging my thoughts over the same things, the same person.

I'm sure that only fundamentally disappointed people, injured in their essential core, think this way, always following the same tracks in the same snow, retracing and treading them ever deeper, so that next time it'll be even easier to see them and step into them.

Be careful what you think of. You're bound to return to it one day.

My inability to find new ways of thinking makes me understand, embarrassingly, that I still don't know how to get over her. It's been almost two years, but it's as banal and simple as that. I'm still the hurt lover left behind on barren shores beneath a bleeding sky with a galaxy of pain spinning inside my head. I'm sounding a bit too Romantic now, a would-be Novalis. To sound like myself, I'd say it fills me with shame how much I resemble obsessive men I've always despised, who years and years after a breakup still pine for that one lost person—men who feel something like love creeping up on them when they're drunk and can't handle the emotion, so they look at that one image of her on their phone in the small hours, crying over her before cursing her, men who keep googling her full name in quotation marks to scan for evidence that she might be as unhappy as they are.

If I were back in Germany, I would be mere steps away from becoming the creep who haunts the old apartment building to check for added names on the doorbell. The dead-eyed stalker who waits beneath the loved one's bedroom window for the lights to die and listens for sexual Foley effects while masturbating in the hydrangeas.

Back when it was first over, I should have written about you right away. I didn't, because I feared it would become clear to me how writing about you would have ended you fully in my mind. I would have felt myself emptying out with you. You would have flowed

from my pen, as if the words were drawing blood. I would have put you down on paper, emptied the archive of my memory, stored you away in language, where you'd be lost to me forever, because you'd be open to interpretation. Even my own.

I never wrote about you, because I was afraid to see the writing in front of me and have it brought home to me that this was the truth: you were gone.

I didn't relent for my own sake alone, you know. I was doing it for you too. I didn't want to murder to dissect.

Now—in retrospect—I understand that it would have been the right thing to do. I should have gone to work right away, the way Peter Handke does at the beginning of *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, in the wake of his mother's suicide: "I had better get to work before the need to write about her, which I felt so strongly at her funeral, dies away and I fall back into the dull speechlessness with which I reacted to the news of her suicide." I knew that book back then. It seems I've known it all my life.

But I didn't write one word. I couldn't, the way I now can't say your name.

Still, I could still try. Set you down, word for word and sentence upon sentence. I'm certain I wouldn't lose you if I simply made use of the miraculous power of fiction.

So why not?

This isn't one of my rhetorical questions, you know. The answer is that I'm afraid of fiction. I can't invent anything that could ever compete with you. That could hold the water to you, as we say at home. That could hold a candle to you, as they say here. Fire and water. You were elemental to me. Trying my hand at Romanticism again, Dr. Wilm? But that's not the truth anyway. I'm afraid of making something up, because I'm afraid that it *could* compete with you. Then, I would know I had truly killed you in my heart.

After my love for you had become directionless, compassless, like one of those snow-blind trekkers in a snowstorm, I thought I could channel the residue of my love for you into

my ridiculous snow project. You had hashed it out with me, we hashed it out together, when you were still around. I had all this excess emotion that I thought I could sublimate into writing. Like the good philologist I lied to myself I was, I thought I could love snowy words the way I loved you. When was the last time you've heard someone call themselves a 'philologist,' a lover of language and reason? This is Victorian stuff, as remote as Regency letters on hot pressed paper, as useless as camisoles and duels.

The truth, the answer to why I don't write—be it fiction or nonfiction, academic or aesthetic—is that I'm just not a writer. Which is why Lavinia's words hit me so hard, when she said she wished we didn't have to write. That's why I lied to myself that I loved her, or that I could fall in love with her. She got me off the hook. I've been a little too much in love with the *idea* of being a writer, with what it would look like from the outside, but I've always lacked the ambition. I'd make a great one-man-show of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. The stinginess of the patriarch, the madness of the mother, and especially both Tyrone brothers rolled into one: the idleness of Jamie *and* Edmund's Romantic reverie leading nowhere. I'm usually so inebriated, I could pull off the maid too.

For a while, I told myself I was living a writer's life, because I remembered a meme—of all things—that said in every writer's past there lay a period of debauchery. Maybe that's true, but the reasoning is ass backwards. Most writers drink, but if you drink, you don't become a writer—see Jamie Tyrone. You *do* have to write between happy hours. I'm not even living the life of a writer who's washed up or blocked. I'm just living the life of a washout.

Love fades. I'm no longer in love with a creative life. I'm not in love with life at all. I'm half in love with easeful death.

I doubt many people today remember the Tyrone brothers. They're as forgotten as the Collyer brothers. The past is dead, ignored, denied. That's why we repeat it forever. At least I do.