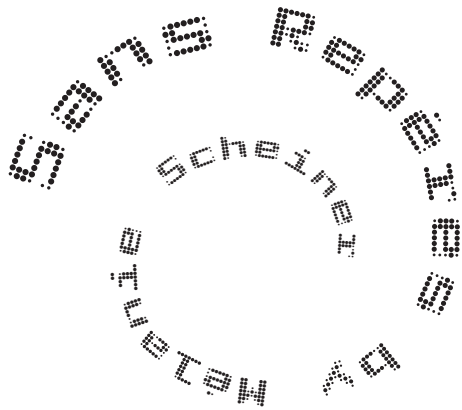




I'll refrain from making a joke about running on fumes, but I suppose that's how we've arrived here. I was crouching in the backroom of the used bookstore on the left bank, scanning the spines of creased mystery novels, when I felt myself tip forward and spiral into an eddy of time, like water swirling down a bathtub drain. I resurfaced at Pfeffersteuer in Vienna, at a dinner with some artists and poets. The Murano chandeliers cast a warm glow on the rumpled white tablecloth before us, now wine-stained and littered with crumbs and empty silver platters that waiters in suits came to collect. The guests slowly peeled off towards the courtyard to smoke.

I stepped outside and joined Vladimir and Luke beneath the Ginkgo tree when Luke produced a joint that we passed around, and then stood exchanging stories under the balmy June sky for twenty minutes or so. I was midsentence when all of a sudden I felt an immense gulf open up between myself and reality, as though a helmet of static seven inches

thick was being squeezed onto my head and cotton gauze had been stuffed in my ears. I couldn't hear. The noise of the world seemed alarmingly far away, like I was in an airport bathroom. I began panicking and trying to breathe through it when I again felt myself lean against something for support. The next thing I knew Vladimir's voice was coming through muffled and then more clearly, S-? S-, *can you hear me?*

Eyes still closed, I could now see the darkness, like I was looking at the back of my own lids. I sensed two hands firmly gripping my biceps. I muttered a reply and opened my eyes to find the entire dinner party, about nine people or so – some who had been standing elsewhere in the courtyard, others who had stayed inside – all seated around me, where I too was seated, in a circle. All looking at me intently, like I'd convened a tea party on the cobblestoned curb and they were awaiting my toast. A server was running out of the restaurant with a glass of water towards us. Stamped along his collarbone was a tattoo that read: TUTTO PASSA.

I could hear clearly again and at my urging, between sips, the little party reluctantly dispersed before the normal social cadence of the evening resumed. Apparently I'd gone limp when the men caught me, and I'd been nonresponsive for a few minutes.

I eventually began making my way home, the light of the streetlamps glimmering in the slicked pavement's reflection. The harsh illumination of a vitrine dedicated exclusively to the merchandising of umbrellas momentarily stopped me in my tracks, reminding me of another strange detail from the reading we'd all attended before dinner. As Luke read his piece, seated beneath the gallery's fluorescent lights, a white aura began to tremble around his silhouette. I looked away, confirming nothing else had an aura, and looked back to find it still there, vibrating. I did this several times. Curiously, when the next artist read their piece, seated in the same chair under the same lighting, no aura appeared. Were the two events connected?

I considered this all while cruising down the single asphalt ribbon that cuts through the martian landscape of the national park. The *malpais*, or badlands, as they were known, were a jagged brown-anthracite terrain that collapses and rises in gargantuan peaks. A sprawling carpet of coffee-ground shards formed by torrents of lava spewed from a concert of volcanic eruptions some time in the last half-millennium. (Curiously, here and there, a single shrub, or fig tree with one delicate coral flower, appeared to thrive in its solitude, against a sea of black grain and a colourless sky.)

It looked like: a pool of those corrugated soundproofing foam blocks you might find in a gymnastics pit.

It looked like: the earth had been tilled with colossal digger cranes, by some prehistoric civilization of giants, and left that way.

It looked like: a partially generated world in a video game, where the landscape only renders as the character moves through it, as though the character's awareness was building the world it moved through in real time. External reality frozen mid-formation by the direction of one's consciousness. A random rearrangement of particles in a vibrating superposition, suspended through the act of observation. A misdirected gaze, cast into a pillar of salt.

A searing numbness shot down my calf, prompting me to stand as the small vestibule crammed with creased spines continued to spin around me. I had been crouching for too long, nodding off over a yellowed copy of Musil's *Tonka* now stuck in the palm of my sweaty grip. I dropped some coins on the cashier's makeshift desk, a precarious bastion of unsorted and unshelved volumes, and floated towards the boulevard. No one was waiting for me. Not long before (but how long? I couldn't say) my familiar—who used to navigate our painfully slow perambulations, allowing me to take in the architectural adornments on the facades of old buildings

otherwise invisible to time; who with every stilted step over days and weeks and months had sewn me into the fabric of Montmartre's hinterland—had left me. And then things began to get weird. Impressions did not hold for long.

The toothless man of our alley no longer appeared at his window to beckon us with roses. And the trio of shrouded women—whom for as long as I could remember would block the entrance to my building with elaborate picnics, and jeeringly solicit me for one of Velma's puppies, imagining those loose faps of her belly to be filled with burgeoning life—were nowhere to be seen. Had any of them ever existed? In one week, three of my beloved watering holes shuttered, and with them all the hours sunk swimming in the eyes of friends and lovers whose neighboring houses I'd never walk to again, steered by my blimpish shadow. At home, I cut open a dragon fruit that had accidentally traveled back to Paris from the island in my bag. Its thick fuchsia skin gave way to my spoon and laconically surrendered its flesh.

As that very hot summer wore on, it got harder to remember who was who and when was what, and what was who, etc. Increasingly, little thoughts, images, faces came to me and I'd draw a blank on their context, their names. Their image floated in an utter void, unassociable to anything else in my

mind. Over negronis in a wood-paneled dining room in Fort Greene, or was it vermouth in a former monastic granary in Malmeillac-sur-Terre, Clarisse was recounting the gist of a running joke we'd had as young colleagues the decade prior, of which I had utterly no recollection. And yet, as she told it, little fragments—either suggested and reconstructed, or perhaps truly recalled—began to populate my imagination so I could encouragingly play along. But it felt like my soul had been replaced, as though the continuity between that 'me' and the 'me' now had been irrevocably severed, though I could not locate exactly when or how.

Staring out at the mountain-flanked horizon on the beach, streams of non-memories, non-names, holographic figments of headlines I'd read somewhere or paintings I'd seen, floated vividly before my eyes, while I remained at a loss to pin them to any articulable object. An impulse to see my dentist, for example, seemed to trigger the evaporation of any tangible information about him. His name and address now supplanted by the taste of his bubblegum-flavored latex glove against my cheek and a framed reproduction of Manet's *The Soap Bubbles* hanging in his office.

Through the haze of a sandstorm, a scene from a 1960s Italian film set in a fabulous party at a house on the Amalfi

coast unfurled around me. A party so lavish it's even being televised. An aging actor, a washed up celebrity, must perform for his hosts. He needs some cash. He needs something. He must get up on the table and tap dance. And as the circle grows around him, as his breathing starts to become labored, his overlords clap and cry for more. The clapping builds, the tempo quickens. The man dances, pantingly, painedly trying to keep up until he collapses. Thee guests disperse to the next diversion before the gurney has even cleared the front door.

It's difficult to tell a story with no anchoring objects or nouns, just as it is difficult to navigate space-time without coordinates or landmarks. Like trying to stitch a continuous line of thread into thin air. Much has been said of unreliable narrators, but what of unreliable landscapes? A ground that shifts incessantly beneath one's feet ensuring that all that remains is narrative alone?

Thee night of the big match in Marseille, after several rounds of Pastis by the cartographer's studio, the static helmet descended once again upon my skull. # is time, not speaking, I simply left myself. My body stepped away from the people I knew and sat in a booth occupied by two perplexed couples and one toddler while my essence emanated like a rolling fog down the Canabière and dissipated into microscopic

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particles blanketing the old port, binding themselves to the water's inky meniscus.

From that point on, the experience of embodiment began to feel increasingly stfling. Something like squeezing myself into a tight shoe, as Ram Dass, I believe, put it. I could not stay in one place long enough before the vortex opened before me and sucked me back in, spitting me out in a dfferent century, in the Bronx, or another dimension altogether. It took little more than resting my unfocused gaze on, say, the tiger-shaped area rug in my room for its black outline to start quivering, its woven spots to start dilating and contracting, for the whole of the object to somehow start breathing, trembling, as the rest of the room hung still, for me to detach and slip away. Straight lines of parquetry gave way to hypnotic spirals and the corrugated leaves of decorative bushes shivered without the slightest sensation of wind.

I now needed only to look in one direction or another to find myself in Brooklyn or Tribeca, Nanping or New Orleans, the Hudson Valley or Klagenfurt. Either sliding down or crawling up a torquing Scala Sancta on my knees; an ifinite winding staircase with no beginning or end, no up or down, only the alluring promise of some salvation awaiting me on every step.

perpetuity and the air —a delicate cocktail of exhausts and fumes—is replaced every ninety seconds, it had the effect of a Gravitron, one of those old-timey fair diversions that spin and pin you to the wall through sheer centrifugal force. As you can imagine, this immediately put me somewhat at ease. In the words of FDR, during his informal remarks at the groundbreaking ceremony for the Brooklyn-Battery tunnel upon which I now reside: ‘I feel like saying today — “at last!”’ Yes, yes. I’ve been here, which is also everywhere, walking in circles, ever since.

Stefan Reiterer: *Two Things Can Be True*
9 September – 10 October 2026

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New York, NY

