

Very Quiet

Written by Naoki Sutter-Shudo

Things, things, things... Of all sorts. Many things: a mini megaphone mounted on a lamppost, next to a tattered and indecipherable flag; piles of cardboard boxes behind a ground glass window, the top ones fresh and brown, the bottom ones paled by decades of sun; abstract candies in a vitrine; a log chunk, perhaps a stool or at one point a base for something; specialized tools whose uses are forgotten; worms as bait in neatly stacked tupperwares; a small vessel labeled "for paper trash only" used as an ashtray; a sign telling people not to talk while eating, held up by a mannequin wearing a top hat; unfinished wooden shapes in a crate outside of a store that has not been open for as long as anyone can remember; a corner wall patched so many times it's hard to tell what the original material was... And also trash, floating among dead leaves on the river; on the sidewalk a mysterious coded message which, upon closer inspection, is nothing more than cigarette butts lined up in a perfect grid, and on the asphalt nearby a mandala of skid marks... Passersby with inclined necks stop suddenly, not because they are taken by an abrupt and overwhelming desire to inspect any of the detrita; they are just looking at their phones. It's obvious there is much more gripping and satisfying content to admire on the handheld screens: compared to all the unnamed (and unnamable) stuff on the street around, it's heaven... It's like playing in clouds. Some have their eyes really close to the backlit glow, and the eyes glow, and in the glow is found the warmth of many friendships and the comfort of logical, well-structured sentences, unlike in the poor list above, in all that thingy stuff which serves no purpose, the stuff that has outlived their original intentions, and waits. Clearly a big mistake this place was spared from the bombings in the last war.

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Having learnt a valuable lesson from Hansel and Gretel, it's a good idea to keep, inside the front pocket of a sturdy jacket, something like pebbles made out of an indestructible material, something that can withstand any kind of weather. Or maybe cigarettes with the filter made of gold: the butts, tossed on the ground at regular intervals, would shine dully, easy to spot even in the evenings when having to find one's way back becomes the most crucial mission. As precaution against those who try to steal the golden butts, a city-wide team of elite snipers is dispatched on top of buildings, keeping their eyes wide open at all times (they get infinite coffee delivery)... Try to pick up the butts and disturb the signage, get shot in the head: the splatter blooms, vivid red, into a flower as another marker on the road, a flower as a moment of delight for the eyes of weary tourists.

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"What a discovery! What a discovery to find myself within this thing, this thing made by god-knows-who! Or god-knows-what, should I say: perhaps no human is to be thanked for the making of this thing... In fact, it's quite probable this thing was born without man's intrusion, without any intention. Without any intention but the instinct to be, like a plant growing toward the sun. We call this instinct: life; I prefer calling it: beauty. Truly, beauty is always on the lookout, searching for a looker to acknowledge it as beauty..." Having finished his speech destined to no one in particular, with a tearful smile the man approaches the thing, and holds it in his hands. He inspects it, wordlessly, for a long time. A healthy sense of curiosity compels me to approach the scene, to find out what this thing could be. If it's as beautiful as the man makes it seem – and how could it not be, for a brief glance of the man's attire proves his undeniable taste and connoisseurship – then nothing can stop me from acquiring it for my collection, not even an unspeakable act of brutality... Like my banker would say: one life, one chance. I make sure my trusted revolver is still in my pocket as I approach the man, attracted by the promise of beauty.

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The flavor... Consciousness fades in. As the random and rapid movement of the eyes slows down to a halt, and before the eyelids unseal, the flavor sets in. A taste of bitterness—a foul kind of tartness thickens: instinctively the hands search for a touch of vomit. Within reach, only the sheets are felt, which is a relief... Until the fetid flavor, intense, raises the question, in my now waking mind, whether or not I had been scratching my anus (itching all day due to being too busy to wipe thoroughly) in my sleep, and unconsciously sucking on my fingers... But when I understand, at last, that the tang is nothing but the aftertaste of something internal – from inside the stomach,

perhaps – which is definitely putrid, I fully awake, in disgust, and mostly in fear. The memory of a man (a cop?) forced to kill (in a sequence of sprees?) because (because, really? why, how?) his organs were rotting inside of him (the work of extraterrestrials?): that was how a novel (title in yellow on a black cover,) stolen in my father's library, began (I think?); in any case I never read more than its opening page. "You're not gonna read that," my father had said. A decade later, the public consensus on the author of that book was that he was a fascist (I think?); now he is dead (phew.) Suddenly I imagine both my arms being cut off at my shoulders. Instant and painless. Alas, I have once again fallen into a mere description of a recent night, as vulgar as it is unpleasant to read, where I had set out to sketch a far more joyful and instructive scene, one that would have raised the following questions: if the never-ending categorization of all facets of modern life can be considered a divide-and-conquer strategy, then do we eat category? Do we drink category? Do we wear category? Do we speak category? Alas, these questions shall remain poorly formulated. Can we suspend eating, drinking, wearing category? Do we sleep in category or do we sleep outside of it? Alas, I shall not ask these questions. What shape is the house of category? Is it tall and skinny, like a metropolitan apartment building? Is it flat and wide, like a suburban palace? Alas, alas.

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The low clouds, rich in rain soon to drop, pulse blue to purple to yellow from the lights of the city below. I can't stand the rain! The city people, in the canyons between buildings, hurry into nearby doorways, they can't stand the rain either, they can smell it brewing above, they can't see the rhythmic glow, though. Aviation obstruction lights on skyscrapers add a dash of twinkling reds: only from a distance can the light show be enjoyed... Until the curtains are drawn and the view goes away. Inside the room, a leather sofa takes up one whole wall, its surface is darkening and cracking slowly but surely; against the windows, meager taps politely announce the rain's arrival. As I lay naked on the sofa, a new scent is created, a private perfume just for this room: the top note of musk is what I provide atop a leather base note; and a slight hint of salt and sea, from a nearby plate of unfinished seafood. For a while the bouquet is enough to entertain me. But glancing at the plate sideways, the configuration of discarded shrimps and clams overwhelms me by surprise: for a brief moment, something about the way in which they sit looks like an evil sigil... I rush to scrape it all off into the trash, but not without personally thanking each uneaten mollusk and crustacean for their service. The rain can't be heard anymore, so I open the curtains to check. All the lights of the city are out, and stars have entered the sky. It's as if a giant and invisible being has vacuumed all the beauty from the ground world, and sent it up into the air.

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Even the tiniest blue fly can, on a horse's back, travel ten thousand miles... Into a totally mineral structure the fly goes, sliding through its cracks. Once upon a time the divine resided among these giant stones, but to a fly, a pebble is enough of an altar on which to rest... Before you know it the horse has deserted the temple; one last neigh echoes faintly, although no one is present to notice it. Between colossal columns are obvious passages deeper into the edifice, although the fly prefers the many crevices where the stones are joined; but watch out: some sutures are not openings but mere decorative seams, carved by skilled builders of the past, unless they were fashioned by the rain and the wind finding, somehow, their way in... All of a sudden everything is reduced to powder by tons of explosives strategically positioned around the sanctuary. The destruction is as swift and effortless as ripping out a failed drawing from a sketchbook, then rolling the page into a tube, a makeshift telescope: through it, far away, no temple but a cloud of dust. The sound of the blast has yet to reach you, a few more seconds to go... But first, why not use the tube to try to hit this pesky fly that's been buzzing around?

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Everything, in front, around, behind, above and under, glows as a solid expanse, shines; so when they appear pustulating in the distance, it's impossible, really, to gauge if they are in the distance, or mere flecks inside the retina; in such a situation, attempting to even think is a chore that's better avoided... And there's comfort in that: it's wiser to try to sleep. But the scenery remains even with eyes closed; and they still pulsate... All of a sudden, it's clear what they are: fruits. No hunger at the moment means no rush to decipher which kind they are. A slightly acidic smell misleads towards oranges, until the sharpness in the air is understood to be nothing but a metallic drone permeating the zone... A simple mistake. No, they are not oranges: they are apples, yes, and perhaps they are ripe. Adam and

Eve ate one too — unless it was a quince, like some would point out — and their murderous son Cain had Enoch as a son, and Enoch was the father of Irad, and Irad was the father of Mehujael, and Mehujael the father of Methushael, and Methushael the father of Lamech, and Lamech the father of Jabal, Jabal the father of all ranchers, and Lamech was also the father of Jubal, Jubal the father of all musicians, and Lamech was also the father of Tubalcain, Tubalcain the father of all smiths, etc; etc; Adam was also the father of Seth, and Seth the father of more than fifty children, etc; and from Seth descended Jobs, who was the father of Apple, and with Apple Pay and Apple Card there are no fees, not even hidden ones: no annual fees, no late fees, no foreign transaction fees; no fees, really.

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Indeed a diet of cobwebs has the downside of deepening thirst — on the throat, laces of dust are slow to melt — hence the handiness of humid moss, which, fortunately, in these here caves, happens to sprout, if not here and there, then at least every half-day during the slow crawling of the hollows where, for some time now, the envoy has been heading to his destination, avoiding the surface world and avowing its furnace-like weather; inside the envoy wriggling inside the cool minerality, the worm sleeps in the warmth of the small intestine: it carries the message to the destination, its content unknown to its host, even. The journey's end promises an unbroken golden expanse, or so the envoy was told, an endless dazzle that is sure to contrast with the absolute darkness of the caves. Occasionally, some spider eggs, on cobwebs still fresh — stickier, on the palate, than the granular abandoned webbing, the older, the more proliferating kind - tingle when eaten; they burst. Just like roe, lightly: in such moments, moss barely suffices to quench the thirst, in these moments not for water, but for liquor — delicacies do require a finely paired drink. How nicely it echoes, the sound of the eggs popping under teeth, in the obscurity, like remembrances of tranced nights spent dancing in equally dark bunkers. Perhaps at the golden terminus a party — orgy, even — awaits... Unlikely; first, the envoy must go forward. To consider the possibility of the most inebriated of feasts ahead does help in keeping pace. One must hope! At least there is no risk of getting lost: the tubular cave does not branch. It's been a few steadfast weeks, which is way less than the months an embryo spends waiting for its delivery (unless termination.) Thank god!