

**Elif Saydam**

*Selfing*

curated by Patrick C. Haas, Jonas Schenk

text by Elif Saydam

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02stamp down the punch card<sup>[SEP]</sup>touching stigma for my pay<sup>[SEP]</sup>anyway, too late

Since the bottom-up extinction of all winged pollinators, the pirating or smuggling of flowers and flowering bodies was an inadmissible felony. The pollination workers who brought real paperback books to read at recess aroused the most suspicion. Pages were searched and when flattened petals were found, charges were laid. All violators were duly prosecuted by the company.

It's not that the flowers and flowering bodies had more intrinsic value than before; they were just as pretty as they ever were. Still cheap to buy at the supermarket, too. But you couldn't just pick them roadside willy nilly. Intercourse and birth were no longer provided by Mother Nature free of charge. There were cameras. To pluck was to steal from the company.

She loves me, she loves me not! had been a radio hit for years now – an anthem of longing. 'Honey' was what you called someone who went away and left you forever, who broke your heart. It took approximately 62,7 hours of pollination fieldwork per week per worker to meet public demand, let alone afford studio space at the company atelier.

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The self-driving company bus was pulling away from the stop, she could see it down the dirt road. Shit! Breaking into a sprint her right foot smacked down hard into a huge puddle. Mud sprayed her thighs. She halted in defeat, knowing the next bus wouldn't come for another fifteen minutes, enough to dock an hour of her wage. It made her grimace but mostly because she just hoped the next bus would take her to the same farm as her friends. Weekly cycles, seemingly random and indecipherable to the workers, determined where they would go and what they would be pollinating. But occasionally there were separations when the algorithm detected too much camaraderie, and tardiness was effectively punished through random relocation. Fifteen minutes dragged on. The bus arrived and rattled its doors open, mostly empty.

She wondered where they were going. No driver to talk to. A few older women with veteran privileges – allowed to start a quarter of an hour later – sat together in the front, sharing food from a brown paper bag. Crumbs all over their billowing jersey-knit floral-print trousers, matching purple hoodies tucked into elastic waistbands. They smiled at her as she walked past them, offered her some dough across the aisle and Augen sympathy because she was no veteran and they knew it. She was just late.

Arriving, disembarking, thank god, same farm as yesterday. She passed the metal grate with the generic punchcard database, triggering an orange flash. Uh oh. But she comforted herself with the fact that at least her friends were inside, wondering about her, as she pushed past the sage green tarp and into the Kurbis patch.

Vera, wearing an all-black velvet number emblazoned with a brown satin hexagon on the back, was crouched on the periphery of the patch, delicately spreading open a sunset-tipped zucchini flower with a Wattestübchen while giving her the side-eye. „Shit, man, are you...“

Amy’s head popped out of the third aisle of squash plants. The zippers on the breast pockets of her olive green flight suit were embellished with white leather tassels. „Ah! Thank God! But you’re late again? Dude, today you’re clocked and docked... if you’re not careful, next you’re sacked, then we’re fucked...“

„Mmmhm,“ Leonie purred from the sidelines in orange coveralls, looking up from cleaning her toolkit of fine tweezers with concern. She had the best track record for avoiding cross-pollination contamination. „We need to stay together in this. We cannot do this without each other. We cannot bear to do this work without a single member...“

„SAYDAM...“ the foreman interrupted on the company loudspeaker. „It’s totally chill, but today you’re clocked tardy, your pay is docked an hour and if you let us all down again this quarter, well, you know...“ She knew. Picking rocks in the potato mines, with a bucket strapped to the waist, or crawling like a wasp into the sticky fig incubator, drowning in sweetness...

There was a pause and then the speaker synced once more. „And you really need to take a hint from the others and work on your FLAIR. We take FLAIR really seriously here at the company and we expect everyone to take the chance of expressing themselves through FLAIR very seriously too... don’t you want to tell us who you REALLY are? Don’t you see what a good opportunity this is?“



In this renaissance-era of Nouveau Serfdom, her ecoterrorism employed ancient and medieval tactics:

Prudently prepare a rich ochre brown roux packed with oxtail and parsnips, and slip a slice of Amanita phalloides Death Cap or Amanita virosa Destroying Angel as a treat for the head of the company. No risk in ruining the event and no mess; the terminal phase starts only after 3-5 days with the re-occurrence of stomach pains, vomiting and diarrhoea – accompanied by jaundice, with coma and death occurring between one and two weeks after eating. A few court jesters and food testers taking one for the team in the process, of course.

There's no prettier sight than lookin' back on the town you left behind, Ellen would think each time.

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– Elif Saydam, March 2020