

Out of the Sugar Factory

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*Body my house
my horse my hound
what will I do
when you are fallen*

*Where will I sleep
How will I ride
What will I hunt*
May Swenson: Question

*Where's sugar, can't find it
sugar!*
Wolfram Lotz: Heilige Schrift I

– Maybe something like this: I'm walking through a thicket.
Some birds are chirping too.

– Then what?

– Nothing else, it just goes on like that.

– But you like it, the thicket.

– What am I supposed to say to that?

– Whether you like the thicket, can't you say that; what you expect from it, what's in it for you.

– But I myself am right in the middle of it. You obviously don't know what it's like in there.

– I imagine it to be very messy, without any order or clear view. And beautiful, because almost anything can play a part in it and because the light falls in different places depending on the time of day, and sometimes there's snow, and it's unnerving too, because you keep getting tangled up in the shrubs' branches, especially the ones with thorns, and because you seem to like wearing those velvet pants so much.

– Fine.

– So then you walk around the thicket, or what is it you're doing there?

– Nothing, nothing at all. Well, I might walk for a little bit, and then sometimes I stop and smoke a cigarette.

– And the birds?

– Yeah, I like them enough.

PLAISIR

Nowadays, whenever I wake up, the sun is already shining.

On TV, a documentary about a pineapple farm near Santo Domingo. Wide, overcast sky. In the fields, Haitian workers are throwing ripe fruits to one another.

Then the *Pineapple King* enters the picture, standing in the field he speaks into the camera. Before he bought these 180 hectares in the eighties, he was a vegetable grower in the Zürcher Unterland.

The sembradores are putting seedlings in the ground, they're paid at piece rate.

The *Pineapple King* is measuring his fruits' sugar content for television.

Later he's handing out wages.

On one of the workers' shirts: MY SKILLS NEVER END

—

A second film: Karl Feierabend, a distiller from Rotkreuz who migrated to the tropics to become a farmer, on his horse, driving four geese through the green landscape. Grass, meadows, palms. The sky

completely colorless.

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A message from France: I'm supposed to talk about my work at a school in a Parisian suburb this winter. The principal, I'm told, wants to pick me up by car in Paris, drive me to Plaisir, where the Collège Guillaume Apollinaire is located, and drop me off again at the hotel at the end.

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My makeshift explanations when someone asks me what I'm working on.

The Philadelphia parking lot (NEW WORLD PLAZA)

Desire

Sugar, LOTTO, *overseas*

Annette during dinner: Two years ago, she'd read a novel by an Australian writer in which a long succession of images was described, images that appeared suddenly, one evoking another, all of them thus linked, however loosely, forming a kind of path, a luminous path that led through things.

If I leaf through my notes and copies, the images, schemata and photographs, if I open the files I've created in the course of the past

months, I see no path, no illusions, no images whose borders overlap, conjuring each other; rather I see a place, a point from which I set out four or five years ago. Since then, everything that fell into my hands, everything I saw that somehow seemed connected to that original site, I carried back and tentatively set it down on that ample square.

Like the yew trees from the palace grounds in Plaisir, which are cut in the shape of sugarloaves. The shopping center in the north of the city (GRAND PLAISIR), la Mosquée de Plaisir.

There is no definite order to this place: With every walk through the chaos, across the pineapple fields of Monte Plata, through the Parisian suburbs or the long-forgotten sanatorium garden, over the mountains of Sicily, past the Russian baths of Philadelphia to the banks of Swan River in Australia, everything seems to enter new relations with one another.

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Through these landscapes, this preliminary order of things, this *essai*, I return again and again to the one scene in which something seemed to reveal itself to me when I saw it for the first time, something I was unable to articulate but could at best find again, in states of a similar, an analogous structure, as affinities, repetitions, parallels.

1986: The men crowded together in the low-ceilinged hall of a

guesthouse in Spiez, on Lake Thun's southern shore; among them the sons, boys of twelve, maybe thirteen years of age, and some women, wives, mothers. Warm light illuminating the town's assembled inhabitants, spilling out even into the hallways. Him, finally, to whom everyone turns in this very moment, as if he were the priest of a vulgar mass: In his hands he's holding two figurines above the heads of the attendants, two female figures of wood or polished black stone, perhaps thirty centimeters tall. The bodies, which gleam in the light, are naked apart from a golden necklace and a cloth loosely wound around the hip and the head. They are kneeling, seemingly oblivious. Then the auctioneer raises his voice: *Who wants to place a bid Quiet please Twenty Twenty Francs Another bid Five Francs Twenty-five Twenty-five More offers Just look at these breasts Thirty-five Who wants to go higher Thirty-five little francs are offered Thirty-five francs going once going twice sold Now these old n— are taken care of too*

The more often I return to this hall, which I only know from a 1980s documentary film, the more clearly I see that my desire to frequent this place again and again has nothing to do with the possibility of something showing itself to me there with extraordinary clarity. On the contrary, I suspect by now that my recurring visits, these neurotic pilgrimages of mine, are provoked by the fact that the scene is quasi *unsolvable*, a transient convergence of entirely different strands of history – as if diverse rocky bodies, luminaries, which had been circling the sun for a long time, seemingly detached from each other, collided, and their clash resulted in a momentary enlightenment of things, debris and dust.

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A verse from John Berryman's Dream Song 311: "Hunger was constitutional with him,/women, cigarettes, liquor, need need need/until he went to pieces./The pieces sat up & wrote. They did not heed/their piecedom but kept very quietly on/among the chaos."

What I am doing, when I study this strange settling, these geographical patches and the evidence, artifacts and phantasmas related to them, seems to be connected to the *constitutional hunger*, to the "urge," as Ortega y Gasset writes, "to step outside oneself," which is at the basis of everything orgiastic ("ebriety, mysticism, infatuation, etc."): Maybe it would be true to say that this hunger was the actual subject of my inquiry, the place where the Haitian worker (MY SKILLS NEVER END) sleeps, in the shadow of the trees, on the palace ground in Plaisir, etc. — and at the same time the cause of my research, the mainspring of this small production.

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On the last train home among the mountains of Oberwallis. Bright snow-covered flanks in the night, dark, high crests in front of a deep blue sky. Spiez, Thun, Berne. I fall asleep; in my dream I publish a volume titled *The Lyrical Measure of Excess*.

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I watch Chantal Akerman's "J'ai faim, j'ai froid" (1984) again. The *education sentimentale* of the young woman in ten minutes. The pretty haircuts of the two seventeen-year-olds. They are walking hungry through the French capital, their appetite is immeasurable and encompasses everything, I think, things and people and landscapes.

Their glances at the displays of the cafés and shops, through the windows into the brightly lit restaurants. It's not because they haven't eaten that they're hungry, it's because eating is such a tremendous delight to them.

- *J'ai faim.*
- *Viens.*
- *Combien il reste d'argent?*
- *Rien.*
- *Bon, c'est maintenant que la vie commence.*
- *Qu'est-ce qu'on fait?*
- *On cherche de travail.*
- *Bon. Où c'est qu'on va?*
- *Je ne sais pas.*
- *Qu'est-ce que tu sais faire, toi?*
- *Je sais coudre, écrire, compter, lire, chanter.*
- *Moi aussi, mais j'aime pas coudre, écrire, compter, lire. J'aime que chanter.*
- *Moi, je chante faux et je crie quand je chante.*
- *Moi, j'aime crier, je chante juste.*
- *On va chanter alors.*

How they then enter a restaurant and start singing without really knowing how the melody goes; how they are standing between

tables, their mouths wide open, awkward and misplaced and beautiful. And how slender their necks are.

That's what I'm trying to do here too, at least that's the way I always thought about it.

One of the film's last scenes: While one of the two is lying in bed with a man

("J'ai envie de t'aimer." "Aime moi, alors."),
the other one is in the kitchen cracking eggs on the edge of a pan.

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C. as we're walking past Saalsporthalle: He's never felt hunger, the feeling of being hungry has always been foreign to him.

How pale and tall he is, walking across the vast fields of the former Waffenplatz with his coat, as if he'd descended from an impoverished noble lineage.

In my case, on the other hand, every sentence I currently write is also saying:

J'ai faim./Aime moi, alors.

But all my offerings are politely declined by him, who fancies nothing,

also the fruits, which I always polish carefully using my handkerchief before I present them to him.

We walk across the open grounds, golden fields, pools; at some point we cross over the motorway; far beneath us, small vehicles shooting across the lanes into the evening.

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In the mail, a book from S., a collection of *Biographies of the Insane* from the late 18th century. He thought these texts could be of interest for me, he writes.

The hospital of the insane in P.

Lovesick Jakob W***r, who believes he has a vitreous chest and therefore a heart that everyone can look into.

The young woman of B., who, abandoned by a man, a tall man “like a poplar at a great river”, climbs up into the treetops again and again.

After she’s fallen from her parent’s roof and died, as the town’s inhabitants follow her casket through the streets, the priest declaims:
He has left me, but the lord has received me!

—

Around two in the morning I walk home across the lawns of the park, the dry stalks breaking with a crackle under my shoes.

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To C. I write: I know a foreign, tropical realm, where partridges wander through shady groves, where red-eyed turtles lay motionless in bodies of standing water, where silver squabs nest in the crowns of high trees,
and while I write, outside the birds' great chirping sets in already.

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A dream: I wake up past midnight and walk down the stairs. I know that I'm in my parents' house. As I reach the hallway, I can see that the light in the kitchen is still on, which doesn't surprise me, because my mother, a primary school teacher, spent many nights in my childhood bent over the kitchen table; to her right the writing assignments she'd already looked through, to her left the pile of assignments still to be marked; and in my youth too she would often still sit there under the low-hanging lamp and work when I got home in the evenings on the last train of the day.

As I approach the kitchen, I see that my mother is holding not a pen, but a spindle, a spindle, I believe to remember instantly, that I had seen a few weeks before my grandmother's – my mother's mother's – death, laying about in the upper floor of her house between overwintering plants and Dürrenmatt's *A Dangerous Game*. I must have walked past it countless times on my visits over the years, but I never paid much attention to it: No one seemed to have used it for a long time.

Just before the light that falls through the kitchen doorframe catches me, I stand still. I'm wearing a white T-Shirt with the words "International Institute for Sport" that reaches down to my knees. I can't be older than fifteen.

My mother, who seems to be fully absorbed by the spindle, has not noticed me so far. I watch her handling the instrument skillfully and with extraordinary speed. She's working the spindle as if a strange spirit has taken hold of her, or as if she'd remembered some long-lost knowledge, and while doing this her face changes; new features cover the old ones – or are former features emerging again from underneath the shape of the face I'm familiar with.

I'm still standing in the dark and I'm embarrassed to witness my mother's transformation, these states whose meanings I don't understand. I enter the kitchen resolutely and snatch the spindle away from her without saying a word; and in this very moment I happen to prick myself with it; I drive the point of the stupid spindle deep into my left index finger, blood is dripping on my t-shirt, and I'm thinking oh no, not my left hand, because after all I'm left-handed.

Holding the hand in front of me, as if it didn't belong to me, I climb the stairs and lie down in my old childhood bed. I spend weeks and months, then years in a state of lethargy. Often, I barely move over the course of a day. Now and then I walk down the stairs to the kitchen and let a handful of Kellogg's Cornflakes dribble into my mouth before I lie down again.

As my mother drives to the movie theater to watch *Independence Day*, and then once more, to see the film a second time, I go along, and I see with my own adolescent eyes how the large extraterrestrial disks undock from the mothership and slowly slide in front of the sun.

BELLEVUE

I enter the space where things are temporarily stored, this hypothetical repository, like I would enter the Italian churches and chapels around noon now and then to seek refuge from the heat: short visits, a quick walk through the opulent, obscure aisles that nobody seemed to take notice of.

I let my hands slide across surfaces, touch everything there is.

To Laura at the canteen: In truth I'm not up to anything besides sitting around and reading these days.

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In Marie Luise Kaschnitz' final accounts titled *Orte* the description of herself and how she once danced with the patients of a "lofty asylum", whose name she doesn't tell; then the memory of a child, the asylum director's son, who, in the nocturnal sanatorium garden "approached a strong thick tree with two burning candles and held the little flames to the bark, convinced he would be able to light up the mighty tree." That same night, fireworks rise up into the air: "Growths of light," Kaschnitz writes, gaiety, patients applauding at the windows.

For days I've been seeing this boy, moving somnambulantly, ghost-like almost, through the dark garden, flickering candles in his

hands; his face and the scenery now and then illuminated by the firecrackers exploding above him. As if guided by an intuition, a summons directed solely at him, he seeks out the tree and tries to set fire to it, to set it ablaze, to turn it into a bright sign in the garden of the sanatorium.

The brief illumination in a text as marking of a passage. Like the glass that suddenly begins to tremble as Hermann Burger passes Badgastein in a dining car: “as if a medium tried to communicate itself to me.”

He knew “something was going on, but not what.”