

Ten Months and Two Days. Fragments

Natasza Goerke

Translated from the Polish by W. Martin

Memory

Life is a journey. And memory is a magic suitcase stuffed with recollections. It bulges with the passage of time, but never bursts; nor does it ever get lost or mistaken for someone else's or stolen; and although it is sometimes very heavy, there is no way to get rid of it. How is that possible? I don't know. But this is what makes it magic: it cannot be explained rationally. Perhaps, by way of illustration, it would be possible to imagine something just as strange as memory is, but explicable, for example: a snake that has swallowed an elephant.

Memory is a snake that has swallowed a rainbow. The spectrum of memory, however, unlike the girth of a snake, is unlimited and can contain an endless range of recollections. Recollections vary—from the beautiful to the very sad. But as a rule, regardless of what they are like, recollections are freighted with longing and have the power to move.

Can something that can only be considered unpleasant also have the power to move? Is it possible to long for something that will turn out to be dismal or ugly? Yes, it is—the world of recollections follows the logic of fairy tales and is every bit as irrational as Shrek's longing for the forest swamp.

Longing is part and parcel of every journey.

Wandering

A journey is not just a wandering in time. It is also a moving in space, an expedition to a chosen destination, which is a location on the map.

This (more or less concrete) destination may be near or far, but (unless it is sand or an iceberg) it is unlikely to be mobile. Not everyone who desires it is in a position to reach it, however. The way to the destination is cut to circumstance and can be a very winding one. What seems to some to be as certain and attainable as a Mediterranean beach, is for others very far away and abstract, like faith in a happiness located beyond the horizon.

The millions of people who travel by their own volition are known as tourists. A tourist is a hedonist with a flair for masochism (the risk is included in the price), who travels from place to place extracting peculiar pleasure from all manner of discomfort. A tourist craves sensations like a bungee jumper and faces every challenge unflinchingly: with a sweaty hand he makes the sign of the cross as the airplane takes off; cutting hairpin turns, she rides through the Himalayas in a dilapidated bus; boldly he ventures into the malarial jungle, or enters taxis despite the threat of being kidnapped or getting blown up, or chews ice made of water of questionable hygiene, or goes snorkling or sailing among crocodiles and sharks. In the tourist's desire to commemorate these travel experiences for posterity, she takes hundreds of souvenir photos: the tourist wearing a Native American feather headdress; the tourist standing before a mud hut; the tourist riding an elephant. This she does partly out of self-love—which, like vanity, requires a mirror—and partly out of motives that are noble and pure: in order to share her travel impressions with friends and family. For the longer the tourist travels, the more she misses those friends and family. This longing is discharged on paper: a diary is kept, letters are written, the world is flooded in a sea of postcards, and no occasion to make a phone call is passed up. Until, in the end, the tourist returns home. For a tourist is like a boomerang and usually goes back where she came from.

Tourism, however, is a hobby for the young and privileged; most of the world considers it an extravagance. Most of the world simply doesn't have the money for it; and when it travels, it does so out of painful necessity.

There is no pleasure in traveling out of need. People often pay with their lives for it; but millions nevertheless go through with such journeys every year. These people are called migrants. A migrant does not seek

sensations and has no interest in recording his journey for posterity. She does not send postcards and would prefer not to be photographed. Although she longs for home, she does not want to go back where she came from. The migrant, unlike the tourist, travels one-way, no return.

It can happen that a tourist and a migrant end up traveling to the same destination. Lampedusa, for instance, or picturesque Ceuta. But once they are there, they are unlikely to run into each other; and if they do, then their encounter will take place at a safe distance.

The world of the tourist is separated from the world of the migrant by a wall of fear and barbed wire; and it is carefully protected by laws, conventions, patrol boats, and night vision devices. Tested by hunters, heat sensors can reliably detect everything—whether alive or half-dead—that attempts to hide itself or to steal away—whether in open spaces, forested terrains, or in thick foliage (in a corn field, for instance).

Nevertheless it can sometimes happen that a migrant succeeds not only in making it to the world of the tourists, but in staying there. Her journey then comes to an end. She settles down, makes a home for herself, and with time, if she wishes, the migrant may herself become a tourist.

Life is a journey made up of endings and beginnings and surprises.

Longing

Tourists and migrants merely occupy opposite poles on the map of human wandering. Between having fun and having no choice stretches an immeasurable expanse of shifting oceans and countries—all those people relocating to various destinations and from various motives: Visitors of friends and family, *Gastarbeiter* and guest professors, students and scholarship holders, seasonal workers and economic refugees, soldiers on peacekeeping missions, missionaries, managers, bureaucrats on state visits, itinerant artists, business travelers, and incarnations of nomads with a penchant for globetrotting.

As well as those who in their thoughts go traveling after the ones who did leave.

Whoever these people may be, and despite the obvious differences between them, they have one thing in common: All of them long for something.

Longing is the feeling of missing something. Freighted with sadness, it is usually painful.

The longing a German student feels for her boyfriend living in Lisbon is hardly any less than that of a Kurdish mother for her children scattered over the globe. The longing for home felt by a Moroccan émigré living in Belgium does not weigh more than that of the *plombière polonaise* living in France.

Longing holds no passport. Longing, like suffering, can be neither measured nor weighed, nor can it be assigned a value.

The only thing you can do with it is try to alleviate it.

Divisions

Longing is immeasurable, but no doubt it *weighs* less when it is not reinforced by anxiety. And although longing cannot be assigned a value, those who have ongoing contact with their friends and family tend to bear it better than those who wait for months for a shred of news.

Thanks to cheap flights, telephones, and the Internet, distances around the world have gotten much shorter, and the flood of information surges at lightning speed. It's enough to fly somewhere for a few Euros, to dial a number, or type an email. But does everyone have that possibility?

Cheap airlines only fly to destinations nearby, primarily large cities in industrialized countries as well as places commonly recognized as tourist attractions. Ryanair has no flights to Ougadougou. Darfur is out of reach for Germanwings.

As for telecommunications on a global scale: Only a third of the world's population has access to a telephone. Almost half of them happen to be in G8 countries. In the USA, everyone has a *Telefonanschluss*; in Nigeria, only two persons per thousand do. In Germany alone, twice as many people have access to a telephone as on the entire continent of Africa.

Backwardness comes from lack of education, which comes from poverty, which comes from backwardness.

There is a way, according to some, to break this dismal cycle, and that way is the Internet. The Internet is the *Wunderwaffe* of contempo-

rary *Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologie*, and one of its most important tasks, in brief, is to reduce the imbalance between poor people and the wealthy. But a fundamental requirement for using the Internet is that you have access to a telephone line, or at least to electricity. And more than anything, you need to have a computer.

In light of the this, the Internet, rather than reducing inequality, appears to be reinforcing it, contributing to a further division of the world—a digital one, this time.

The Telephone and the Internet

That which appears to divide, however, may nevertheless unite. And inventions are meant—at least in principle—to make life easier, not harder. But beginnings are often complicated.

The question of who invented the telephone is moot; many people, however, believe that the *inventore del telefono* was the Italian inventor Antonio Meucci. In order to facilitate contact with his paralyzed wife, Meucci constructed the first electromagnetic device for transmitting voice—a prototype of the telephone—which linked the bedroom of his ill wife to his laboratory. This story, as moving as it is, had a tragic ending. Due to a lack of funds, Meucci was unable to patent his invention; instead, this was done two years later, in 1876, by his Scottish colleague Alexander Graham Bell, who had shared a work space with him. A bitter Meucci took Bell to court, but unfortunately he died during the trial. The case was shelved; and although the United States Congress over a century later officially gave credit to Meucci, it is commonly believed that the inventor of the telephone was Bell.

Beginnings are often complicated. And regardless of who invented the telephone, one thing is sure: a hundred years ago, even in highly industrialized countries, to own a telephone was a very rare thing. Public telephones—i.e. telephone booths—were installed and made available for private use. The first one went in at the end of the nineteenth century in the United States. Right afterwards, telephone booths spread to Europe: to London, Paris, and Berlin. Originally they were furnished not just with a telephone but with a cashier as well, who collected the payment for each call.

The telephone, as is only right for an invention considered useful to mankind, was constantly evolving. Along with the land line came, in time, the satellite phone, the cordless phone (the first iteration of which, known today as the cell phone or *Handy*, weighed more than 40 kilos), and Internet calling.

The year 1969 is generally held to be the year the Internet was born. Back then, the INTERNet was called ARPAnet—after the Advanced Research Project Agency—and was a project of the United States Department of Defense. During the Cold War, in response to the threat of nuclear attack and as a result of the shock over Sputnik, the project’s goal was to develop a communication network that would be nearly indestructible. Well, necessity is the mother of various inventions, and beginnings are always complicated. Nevertheless, with time ARPAnet was made available for public use, and its name was changed to INTERNet. Mmass access to the internet is a relatively new phenomenon, however; it started only in the last decade of the twentieth century. And since not everyone owned a computer, just as not everyone owned a telephone in the past, public computers were introduced. *Cyber cafés*, *telecenters* and *cabinas públicas* emerged as contemporary analogues of the telephone booth.

The Internet expanded its functional range, too, and having telephone conversations over the Internet became a big hit.

The most noticeable feature of Internet telphony is that it is a very good deal. The Internet is used for cheap phone calls by people who are naturally frugal, as well as by those who simply cannot afford a “normal” telephone call, which can be horribly expensive at regular rates. The only requirement is that whoever is being called must also have access to a telephone, although it does not have to be their own.

The majority of people around the world still do not have a telephone in their own home; but even a single telephone for five villages is enough to carry the voices of those who are missed and longed for.

UFO

The voices of family or friends, for instance—in Goa, on the Seychelles, in Turkey, in Egypt, in Montenegro, in Hungary, in Chile, in Greece, in New Zealand, in Morocco, in Jordan, in Gabon, or in Gambia.

Sometimes the whole village runs for the telephone, and then everyone has to shout because otherwise no one can hear. Sometimes people whisper when they talk. Sometimes people are too emotional to talk. Sometimes people cry, sometimes they laugh. Sometimes they lie, sometimes they fall silent. Sometimes people don't know how to start, sometimes people can't stop.

And sometimes it's impossible to get through. When that happens, the caller hangs up the receiver and walks away.

This situation would be entirely different if an artist had created it. An artist is a kind of alchemist. From the elements available to him, he conjures up something that from the standpoint of logic has no right to exist. An artist transforms reality and creates her own, alternative world.

Anything can happen in the artist's world.

For example, a blue camping trailer containing two telephones that people can use to make ten-minute phone calls to anywhere in the world—for free. Of course, this sounds unbelievable: The line “for free” is usually just a window with a view to slashed prices. But the artist's world, like longing, is based on the logic of fairy tales, and that's why anything can happen in it. For example, it can happen that when something is “for free” it really is free.

What's more, the blue camping trailer contains not only telephones, but a writer.

Since what writers do is write, this one is equipped with a pen and a notebook. But despite being a writer, she has no idea whatsoever what to put down. So the writer drinks twenty cups of coffee and instead of writing, she doodles little circles in her notebook. These circles have no secret meaning: They symbolize nothing; they refer to nothing. All they do is spread across the page instead of letters.

The artist's world has room for everything, even for a writer who doodles circles instead of writing.

What is there to write about here, after all, since so little has actually happened? Like a UFO, the blue trailer awakens the interest of the passersby; but even more it arouses mistrust, and except for children hardly anyone dares to approach it.

This UFO is still new to the landscape. Except for children, the only people who approach it are either not entirely sober or completely

drunk. This should surprise no one. The UFO, as the name suggests, did not come in on the train after all; the UFO can only have flown in from another planet. From Mars? From Jupiter?

Or from Venus. After all—and how could anyone miss it—inside the sky-blue capsule, where you can make phone calls for free from two telephones, someone is sitting there, wearing a dress and doodling little circles to boot.

Flowers

The writer really is wearing a dress.

At the sight of the first person to enter the camping trailer, she stops doodling and heroically asks: Where are you from? Where are you calling to?

These questions are like first steps on the moon. For the moon, they're commonplace, but for the writer they're a breakthrough. In the artist's world, anything can happen: Even commonplace questions can grow into an uncommon story.

The writer is very lucky; most of the people who mustered up the courage to enter the trailer forgive her for asking such commonplace questions. What's more, most of them suddenly start talking of their own accord—about the really important things.

About the grandmother who just died.

About the grandchildren who may or may not be alive, scattered in wars as they are.

About how dirty politics is.

About how cleaning wrecks your hands.

About religion, and how if it's going to exist at all, it should bring people together, not divide them.

About how borders are mental constructs.

About how things might one day get better.

About how it's still better not to take pictures, because you never know.

About how there's no place to go back to.

About how knowing six foreign languages is pointless in a country where no one understands a single one of them.

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About how Germany is a good and hospitable country.

About how time is not an abstract concept, because exactly ten months and two days have passed since leaving home.

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The writer shuts her eyes and organizes what she knows. She knows very well how to define a hundred kinds of sadness and longing; she knows who patented the telephone and how the Internet came about; and she knows that all of these points of reference have no bearing at all on what is happening right now.

So the writer opens her notebook; but although she is a writer, she does not write. Instead of putting down words, the writer doodles flowers. Anything can happen, after all, in the artist's world.

It can even happen that in the evening, as the day approaches its end and the last person has walked out of the sky-blue trailer, the writer's notebook looks just like a garden.