
Stories of Nothing #01 —

This is a story about geese. It happened to me as I was cook a goose for the first time of my life. In exchange for cash, I had acquired a frozen goose from a butcher in one of the streets at the West end of Oslo.

I tucked it in an Adidas bag, for which I had no other obvious use, and walked proudly across the King's park, flanked by the Palace to the right, and Kunstnernes hus (a well-known artist run space) to the left.

By the time I went strolling down the *cobble-stone* road to Holbergs Plass—by the SAS hotel—I had run through a recipe I was intended to apply, given to me by a Danish cook called Sverdrup: an alcoholic cook, but an expert.

To my great surprise, as soon as I hit the cobble-stones, I met a live goose. It was walking toward me, and it was clearly angry (as geese sometimes can be). Such geese would normally be found in Southern Sweden onwards.

But not as far north as Oslo. Of course there was noone else in the street. And I would have pinched my arm—known that nobody would believe me—if I hadn't been worried about how to pass it unscathed.

I had been caught in dire straights with geese before—like in Tuscany, outside Florence—and my sense was that I had to be as angry as them: trying to behave like a goose myself (to blend in and not catch attention).

In the cobble-stone street, however, I just tried to catch as little attention as possible. Because the goose was really big—I imagined that it had to be male—and it was flapping its wings as it moved on the opposite side-walk.

I couldn't believe what has happening: maybe it could be compared to meeting someone really famous on the street (like Mick Jagger). They fill the whole street with their presence, and you pretend not to see them.

It was like that. You don't cross a goose on the street like this every day. And certainly not when you are carrying the evidence of a dead cousin strapped to your shoulder. But as one says: "this too will pass!"

Before I knew it, I was back home where I put the frozen cousin to thaw. Being aware of that it would take some hours, before I could start working on it, I went off to do some shopping down Nordahl Griegs street.

More precisely, Al Quds: a "Palestine Shop" where I enjoyed discussing politics with the two ladies who worked there. While we were at it, a couple of absolutely huge horses—exceeding the window frame—appeared.

In came two leather-clad police-men, of the type that they take out only on special occasions: like political riots. From the look in their eyes I was thinking murder, or rape. I can tell you: these guys were ready!

One of them broke the silence and asked: "Have you seen a white goose on the loose around here?" Of course, I had and I even had the cousin at home. But by now I was instinctively asking: what next?

The end of the story is that I denied all knowledge of the goose, or maybe that I had heard about it (but from someone else). I was genuinely afraid of getting mixed up in something beyond control and ending up in jail.

Stories of Nothing #02—

(this story happened some years before story #01—the numbering is not chronological, but circumstantial).

This story relates to long-distance EXCHANGE, which after all is our topic here. The story is about a cassette with klezmer music that I had in my keep, while I was conducting a field-survey in 18 different sites.

18 sites in Central- and Eastern European cities, in a project devoted to the active role of Jewish communities and organisations in civil society. The journey took place in 1995, and lasted for one month. 18 different stops in 30 days! That's some travelling schedule, I can tell you.

We're talking about the days where the Internet was burgeoning and fax still dominated. Long strips of thermal paper, with smudged letter-standards, that quickly deteriorated when submitted to sunlight. I had a computer, but I kept my diary in hand-writing.

In the days before the trip—I dare say, a journey!—I had received help from Bente Kahan and her husband Alexander Gleichgewicht, who had a network of contacts in Poland and the Ukraine, where the conditions were particularly unsettled at the time: green-houses in the attics, rabbits on the balconies.

And, to be sure, dollars on the streets. Without Bente's and Alexander's connections and help in mobilising them, I simply wouldn't have made it. The only thing they asked from me was to transport a cassette with her klezmer music and give it to a musicologist in Prague, where my journey ended: a certain Dr. Pokorny.

I thought I had been careful in keeping this little treasure, along with the hand-written note with Dr. Pokorny's address in Prague. As I was becoming weary of my journey—owing to the pace, the search-and-find of Jewish community centres, and the amount of information—the cassette became a peg to me.

Or, it was a string holding my mind and body together, as in Bernard Malamud's novel *The Fixer*—preventing it from exploding into a fountain of "rotten fruit, one-eyed herrings and birds-of-paradise"—I was lagging behind with my diary (400 hand-written pages), and my memories from other places blended with current ones.

Actual and virtual images turned *topsy turvey* in my mind: showering me with *déjà vu*, or memories that I could not have. My psyche was flying into pieces and coming together in notorious and unforgettable aspects—as Antonin Artaud would say—like shifting gears, but at scale engaging the entire person.

When I finally had made it to Prague, and I was standing the lobby of Hotel Forum—where I was attending a research conference of the ECJC—I was intent on contacting Dr. Pokorny. I found the cassette, but to my dismay I had lost the scribbled address! How could I do something like that! The receptionist tried to help me.

What was the name of the person, she asked?—Pokorny, I said, Dr. Pokorny explaining my errand. But as she leafed through the telephone catalogue, there were pages with people with this family-name, and I came extremely distraught. A lady nearby had been eavesdropping, however, and she asked:

"It wouldn't be Dr. Pokorny, the musicologist, who is an expert in Jewish music, by any chance?" She saved me. I had to leave for the airport, and therefore had to send the cassette with a message to his indicated address. When I came back to Norway, I spent the next 10 days at Jomfruland thinking of whether he had received it/not.

In the aftermath, I was thinking of this more as an act of citizenship, than an exchange of favours. First because of the disconnection between the helpers that had made it possible (and the connection between people unknown to each other that became possible by carrying it through). If we are going to do it, we do it together!

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Stories of Nothing #03—

This story is about MIRRORS: real mirrors, imagined mirrors—who knows? I was descending on Dejà with Mariann (life & love) from the Archduke's trail. It was in March, we were staying at Valldemossa, and were there to visit the West Majorcan mountains and for trekking.

While descending on Dejà we experienced that optical phenomenon which sometimes happens during mountain walks: the real distance is extremely difficult to determine, and the goal—in this case Dejà—seems to be endlessly receding: as close and as distant (for ever).

Then, suddenly, we came out of a forest of reeds and we were at the foot of the village. We were hungry, so we found a decent restaurant with something that we could eat: a mushroom risotto. From the loudspeakers in the restaurant came some Miles Davis. As perfect as it gets.

We decided to go for a stroll in the streets of this mixed bourgeois/old hippie resort, and also went to the cemetery on the top of the hill. It was municipal and catholic, yet with certain number of odd characters from a variety of places, whom ended their lives here.

One of them caught my attention. The name of the deceased was Abdul Mati Klarwein. The tombstone was made of slate with a Hebrew alef and a Greek omega. The name resonated with me, but pointed in different directions: Arabic/Moslem, German, Jewish.

So, I took out my jaw harp and played a tune for him: I noticed that someone had fixed a used painting brush under an iron-clamp on top of the slate. After a while—short or long—I heard Mariann saying that we should go down hill to reach the buss back to Valldemossa.

While seated on a bench waiting for the buss, I noticed a "presence" at the opposite side of the street. Like us he was waiting for a buss, but in the other direction. I avoided looking in his direction. Mariann—of course—elbowed me, and said: look over there!

And she continued: "It's you!" I uncomfortably moved my eyes in his direction and had to agree: it was my Doppelgänger. I took his picture, just to do a reality-check, and presented it to my friends on FB and elsewhere. They all agreed: "Yes, it's you!"

I can tell you: nobody wants to meet their DOUBLE. It is really uncanny. Even more so that the physical resemblance—if you analyse it—may be superficial. The resemblance runs deeper: the way of being, the demeanour, the way of holding one's body (*hexis*).

Fortunately, we were saved by the buss. It stopped, we entered, paid our ticket and sat down. It was kind of a slick buss—to be in Spain—and, an unusual trait, it had a really good HiFi stereo. And guess what? From the loud-speakers we heard Miles Davis intone with his band.

To those who are reading these stories, please consider that I am in NO WAY an amateur of coincidences. I have known of the Surrealist's fascination for such. But I somehow attract them; as phenomena that BREAK with Murphy's laws (type: if anything can go wrong it will).

But with this in common: even if everything derails (with Murphy's laws) and everything appears to be railed, in the stories I am telling here (Moebius' laws?), you don't want reality to be like this: because it feels that your part does not make a difference. It just happens to you.

But, on the other hand, it is about receiving: to accept receiving something, and engage with the work of reception. I learned this from Hans Hamid: things do not happen because they are important, they are important because they happen. I am OK with this contract.

I think this is why I sense that there is a liberty in art & design: you can explore anything (pace Wittgenstein's "Die Welt is alles was der Fall is"/The world is everything that happens), without feeling compelled to adopt a metaphysical world-view, or New Age.

When Mariann and I came back to our flat in Valldemossa—facing a monastery where Chopin and George Sand lived at, in the same season, in 1836—I googled Abdul Mati Klarwein: and—guess what?—he had been a LP-cover artist for Miles Davis. Two albums.

The one was Bitches Brew the other was the palindrome LIVE/EVIL. Then I saw the connection I may have picked up from the deep of my mind: he had also done the LP-cover for Santana's LP Abraxas. I remember that my sister Bitte had it in her collection. And the name.

As you can tell, the story that I am relating have the same "grammar" as what you can see on the covers: the play of mirror and reality. Reality playing mirror, and mirror playing reality. I imagine that it has something to do with enfolding/unfolding time and space.

Wittgenstein's famous phrase continues (from above). "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen" (what cannot be spoken must be passed on in silence). I cannot (for now) explain these stories but I can tell them narrative.

Artists make them happen all the time. (more to come...)

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Stories of Nothing #04—

This story definitely belongs to the series, but is likely to be of specific interest to BOOK-lovers. Sometimes books become like mirrors to our lives, picking up on events and even driving them onwards. In some ways, it is the 'forbidden fruit' of fiction: when FICTION becomes FACTUAL.

Many years back—I think it was in 1985—we treated ourselves with a trip to Vézelay, near the natural park of Morvan, South of Paris. We were going to take in on a hotel with a *** restaurant in the Michelin Guide. The Hôtel Espérance. Sitting next to the driver, I was reading a novel by Umberto Eco (1980): The Name of the Rose.

True to my habit, I chose to read this particular title because someone had recommended it to me. The 'from hand-to-hand pleasure' of reading, which is undeniable. On the road to Vézelay, the density of ancient ruins and romance churches is considerable. So, I ventured to incorporate these as scenographic elements in the story.

Whether committed a deadly sin, I do not know. But it demonstrates the power of the BOOK to augment reality: as though a pair of these glasses that overlay reality with whatever. The old stone- buildings no longer appeared as alien historical traces, exhibited along the roads/ highways, with the car as a rolling vitrine.

They were the real thing! You might object that one simply doesn't read in this way. Maybe not. So, don't try this at home. But killing some hours in car over a Mediaeval crime-mystery novel, it might still work. I am fussy. And it isn't that important, really. What might be, is what happened in the following, after we had arrived.

The hotel was a dream: huge beds and bathrooms, ancient furniture, and... the food. How can I describe it? Everything was produced locally. And down in Burgundy that's saying something. In France, contrary to how it was in Norway for many years, they always kept the best stuff locally. The wine, the butter, the flour, the honey.

I won't extend the list, because it is endless. Needless to say that the croissants were so crisp—from the excess of tasty butter—that the sound from chewing them was a concert-like. I've had a few croissants. But nothing like these. Ever. Of course, it wasn't heaven. But it was like heaven. And the hotel is aptly called Espérance (hope).

In the day following our journey into a taste-bud mystery—as can sometimes be experienced in France—we went for a walk up the hill, to visit the St. Madeleine Cathedral. It is has a colourful history from the 2nd Crusade. It started here. And then there was the story of survivors from the 1st World War who journeyed here.

They came on pilgrimage from different parts of France, on foot and along trails used from days of old, carrying body-sized crosses that are displayed inside the cathedral to this day. They testify to the existence of a hidden geography of ancient trails and customs: the Old Catholic France. Known to be politically right wing.

As if this was not enough, the cathedral contains a rich play of relics—bones of saints adorned with gold-thread and pearls—around the altar. And down below, in the basement, an older structure ante-dating the Gothic style of the Cathedral: an underground crypt from the time of the 2nd Crusade. Forbidden fruits, indeed.

The feeling of being at the wrong place at the right time. Have you ever felt that? When we visited the Madeleine, I had come to the chapter, in *The Name of the Rose*, where portal to the forbidden library—most important structure in the novel—was described. And of course, I incorporated the Madelaine-portal into the story.

The trip to Vézelay was really light-headed, so I didn't think much about it. But when I returned to Norway, and had finished the book, I wanted to know more about Umberto Eco. A neighbour at the university dorm—who was older than me—told me that Umberto Eco was a Professor in Semiotics: the science of signs!

To my young mind, this sounded extremely exciting. So, I went to a library downtown of Oslo—called Tanum—to see if they had some of his works. It turned out they only had a slim hard-cover featuring his visual research for *The Name of the Rose*: Eco's archive. As I was leafing through it absent-mindedly, I suddenly was numbed.

I had come to the page featuring the motif that had inspired the description of the library portal in his novel: and it turned out it was the portal of the Madeleine Cathedral. How is this possible? As I have already related, I am not a fan of coincidences of this sort. They are deeply unpleasant, because they are implicating.

—Like I had a connection with Umberto Eco: silly me! I thought, and felt guilty in a strange way. Like I had been eavesdropping (or, even worse, peeping). However, I did not withstand the temptation, in 1989, of applying for a scholarship and travelling to Italy: that is, to Bologna where he was working. Istituto delle comunicazioni.

To my disappointment, Eco wasn't around—met him at a couple of occasions only—because he was busy with Sean Connery making the movie version, in Hollywood. But I got to know his entourage and the Italian way of organising knowledge and grooming elites. People were extremely well read. And it was rewarding in its own way.

For instance, I got to visit a mansion donated by two English sisters to the Bologna university, in the hills above Bagni di Luca (in Tuscany). A doctoral seminar with lots of challenging and interesting stuff. Eventually, I went to France at the *Maison des sciences de l'homme*, because they had a far better library service.

During my stay in Italy, however, I ploughed through another of Eco's novels (1988): Foucault's Pendulum (*Il pendolo di Foucault*, in Italian). It was about conspiracies and referred to the Second Crusade. It brought me back to Vézelay. So, I had to read it—of course—equipped with my French and an Italian dictionary. I could go on.

Since when fiction conspires with reality it behaves like a virus. Apparently Umberto Eco had the knack for playing with fire. A book is like a tower: when built on muddy grounds, it leans (like so many towers in Italy). And this greatly facilitates hoisting what there is: on the way up, the magic happens. A warping mirror, of sorts.

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Stories of Nothing #05—

One way of approach is to think that coincidences occur whenever reality (exceptionally) adds up. Another way of thinking is exactly the opposite: that coincidences don't add up, and that all they do is to multiply. In such cases, they would turn up whenever reality is multiplying, and coincidences thereby are acts of leaving. Farewells, rather than greetings.

This story is about escaped, or abandoned, parrots. We wouldn't know. All we know is that someone finds them, you—as a passer-by—are brought to witness. This happened to my

daughter and I as we were on our way to a yearly ceremony. I had attended this ceremony at an earlier occasion in Benneches gate 4. The year after, I thought it was held there again. I was wrong.

Indeed, the ceremony was held at another end of the city, barely within a walking distance. So, this year I made a point of reading the invitation—with a care for details—and we headed off to the address in Benneches gate. We were talking about everything, as we usually do, but as we made a turn from St. Hanshaugen down Frydenlundsgate we passed a man standing on a chair while looking up a tree.

He turned to us—have you seen this? Do you know who owns this parrot? We were in haste, and I was beginning to feel uneasy, so we hurried past the man, throwing back at him “No! I have absolutely no idea...” I don’t know if I knew where things were going, at this point, but when we arrived at Bennechesgate 4, the locale once more was empty. No-one there. Evacuated!

I was thinking—not again! The sense of repeat and crossing a parrot of course was doomed to blend. There was no match, but rather a series mis-matches piling up. I went home to look up the address on my computer, and found a picture of the establishment that was posed next to the address. But the number on the door (6) was different than the one I had just seen (4). I checked with my daughter.

You think you are going to join a crowd of known faces, you go to an address you solemnly think was indicated on the invite, only to realise that the assembly—so, present—is at present somewhere else. You are at the right time at the wrong place. Now they are enjoying themselves, listening... perhaps wondering shortly what became of you. I related the incident to a friend of mine who directed an art-space in Paris, called The Institute of Social Hypocrisy.

He giggled at the end of the line, saying—that’s odd: I was just involved in an incident with an Ara parrot! It was right down the street from where he lived in the Marais, rue des Archives. He even had video-recorded it. A truly wondrous specimen. People crowded around it, wondering what they might do. Someone decided: we’d better alert the Mayor! Whether they did my friend could not tell me.

Some days later, in Oslo, I read in the newspaper that the parrot we passed in Frydenlundsgate had escaped from a flat nearby. It belonged to a local porn-star the article said. Oddly, it didn’t surprise me. A few days later my daughter had left for her new life as a student in England. When I received a call from her—I could locate her down there—my sense of orientation returned to me.

It was then I realised that coincidences were not about odd ends of reality joining, but rather are constituted by a departing reality. An act of disjoinery, of leaving, temporary confusion and then a settlement. We wake up to a new reality. Like when kids are born: they are not born in time, but born of time. Having a child is not a change in time, but a change of time. Clearly.

Living and telling about coincidences therefore is better understood as an act of disbelief: you literally do not believe. And by pursuing them—checking out the detail and relating them in story — you commit your disbelief to action. It might give you a sense of closure. But not from things adding up. Rather from testifying to the fact that something new has been created.

Something from nothing. It shouldn’t happen, but it does. At such crossroads—or, forks—the laws of nature appear to be bent and are momentarily replaced with occasional causes: highly irregular things happen. A term I cherish from François Laruelle’s non-philosophy. From this day, parrots—in my experience—are omens. Like crows are to some people I know.

When I am presently tasting it, the story has a flavour that reminds me of Gustave Flaubert’s novel *A simple heart* (*un coeur simple*). A Goodread excerpt states:

“In *A Simple Heart*, the poignant story that inspired Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot*, Felicité, a French housemaid, approaches a lifetime of servitude with human-scaled but angelic aplomb. No other author has imparted so much beauty and integrity to so modest an existence. Flaubert’s “great saint” endures loss after loss by embracing the rich, true rhythms of life: the comfort of domesticity, the solace of the Church, and the depth of memory. This novella showcases Flaubert’s perfectly honed realism: a delicate counterpoint of daily events with their psychological repercussions.”

On her dying day, she is filled with rapture and mistakes here parrot for the holy spirit. Maybe it is for this reason—this weird ending of Flaubert—that I think of parrots as blasphemous birds. A little bird told me.

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Stories of Nothing #06—

When Sophie turned 18 we decided that we would rent a flat and spend a week—during the summer—in Portbou. A small Catalan town on the Spanish side of the border between France and Spain, on the coast of the Biscaya Bay. On the map the situation of the town comes through as a bit ominous, since the two nearest places, next to it on the coastal line, are called Colera, to the South, and Cerbère—the Death-hound in Greek mythology—to the North: the first French city on the border.

The curious think about Portbou is that many people know about it because they have descended to change trains there. But rather few have descended into the town. You just see it distantly far below, hidden under the enormous mass of a train-station, built of natural stone hewed out in grossly hexagonal shapes. The reason why we had taken the step to rent a flat, for a good week, is that Sophie and I had a shared interest in Walter Benjamin. I was always surprised by her reading.

Along the water-front there was a stony beach—with bunch of hazel-tanned nudists far off—and in the hills behind the city—through a tunnel the railroad edifice—were the Pyrenees, where it was possible to go for long walks, equipped with a good supply of water and peaches. At this time, this was a close-to ideal situation for both of us. We had our supply of books, of which what we deemed the essential Walter Benjamin for this trip: *The Arcades Project*, *Illuminations*, his correspondence.

The town had the functions and structure of a miniature city: descending through the endless stair-case plunging into the depths of the railway-stations enormous stone-mass, the streets suddenly appeared in the lush green of bountiful branches stretching out from Sycamore trees, that seemed to. Be everywhere present: even along the more windy streets and alleys. The city was roofed by this greenery—providing shade from the sun, as did the overbuild traditional market-place.

The only place connected to cyberspace was a single Internet café: in fact, it was one of the first things we saw at the exit from the train-station, as was our flat—in the 2nd floor—where we would spend our nights. Sophie was working on an essay—*The Librarian in Portbou*—and I wanted to see how much could be gained by reading, studying and writing: as though Walter Benjamin was a companion on our trip, and that the locations and books together would reveal a mystery.

More precisely, the mystery of his death in Portbou. To place ourselves in his “shoes”, we even walked a marked trail with Benjamin’s name, supposedly the track used when escaping the Nazis, helped by Lisa Fittko, in 1940. We used about 3 hours. The escape lasted over-night, and extended in time because of Benjamin’s heart-condition, and also from his insistence on shlepping a large bag with documents from his research in Paris, that he wanted to prevent from falling into Nazi hands.

So, important—in fact—that we valued them over his own life. Upon arrival in Portbou the little troupe of escapees were denied a transit-visum they needed to cross Spain and escape overseas from Portugal. Then, oddly, Benjamin—after the toil over the Pyrenees—supposedly took his own life with a large dose of Morphine, after having duly written and mailed farewell letters. The rest of the group were granted transit the day after. The oddest still is the bag. It simply disappeared.

No records of it having been retrieved: neither by the Gestapo nor the KGB. Something not checking out as your ordinary suicide. Suicide was an option, in Benjamin’s circles, at the time. And he had considered it on previous occasions himself. There was a kind of culture of suicide. But the simultaneous disappearance of the man and the bag—the contents of which he deemed more important than his own life—that is more like a disappearance act. A bit of magic in the tragic.

Since Sophie is interested in book-binding—amongst other things—we discussed the Benjamin’s disappearance act alongside the volumes we had brought along: what does it take to have a book? Illuminations is an anthology of famous essays by Benjamin, edited by Hannah Arendt. While the Arcades Project volume is largely considered as research for a book, organised in envelopes with a small and capital letter catalogue in alphabetical order. They were in the care of Georges Bataille.

There are some large holes in the alphabetical: though Benjamin had spent 13 years working on it. Were these the contents that vanished with the bag? Maybe. Or, not. If they were removed, they were taken out of the main body of research, left to Bataille; and, following the trail of his correspondence, we would find them at the very end, destined to disappear with him. So, what is the bag beyond a dead end—no pun intended—if constituted, so to say, by its disappearance?

What is a book—as a built entity, or volume—if it is as an edifice conceptually between the collection (of essays) and the archive (of research). The latter two are differently indexed: the one complete in its form (anthology), the other unfinished and in becoming (envelopes). This is a bit technical for a story, but I want to take it somewhere. I have been thinking that the mystery of the book and of human being—their existence and essence—are quite similar to one another.

Because between our achievements (finished) and our progress (unfinished) there is still a question in hiding in the shadows of the crack: who is that wo/man—independently of achievements and progress? There is no way around it: by proceeding in the way he did, in Portbou, he forces us to ask that question, on his account, and thereby also on our own. Who is that creature whose existence and essence will not be denied? Not any creature of the class: but that one there.

And that one, the one over there, and yet another one... endlessly. Before it leaps into the sea, Dani Karavan’s memorial over Walter Benjamin quotes this statement (from his essay On the Concept of History): “It is more arduous to honour the memory of the nameless than that of the renowned. Historical construction is devoted to the memory of the nameless.” Did he join the nameless? And what is that creature beyond the name (that creaturely creature)? This, he asked, I ask?

In his book Benjamin’s Grave, Michael Taussig brings us through the twists and turns in this mystery. Hannah Arendt had her’s. I have lost my innocence to this question as well. Walter Benjamin is the James Dean of a little crowd of intellectuals. While in Portbou, Sophie and I came across one of these: a small crowd of artists, philosophers and psychoanalysts from Grenoble in France, gathering in Portbou for a yearly seminar. We were welcomed in this small troupe.

I continued to receive hand-written invitations from Bruno Quésanne—the bandleader—to attend gatherings that, except for this once, was at the beginning of the term at KHiO. In one of his letters he confided that they had found the actual historical path followed by Benjamin and Fittko (and the marked trail we had followed was the ‘tourist trail’). They were anti-tourists, of course. As for Michael Taussig, he took a giant leap from Portbou to continue his musings in Brazil.

More precisely, the history of a group of enslaved black people in Brazil, their liberation from slavery, and what became of them in the aftermath. I give more credit to this ending than to one digging into the details of Benjamin’s last days. If Dani Karavan’s monument down by the seaside is a springboard, I believe that the leap overseas to the history of the nameless was the truer to the spirit of what Walter Benjamin—who is buried as Benjamin Walter—in Portbou.

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Stories of Nothing #07—

Of course it is NOT nothing. But it is nothing else than this story. The rest is up to you. Or, up to US, as we seek counsel and advice from each other. This story is about *La Benevolencija*: a Sephardic humanitarian organisation that decided to stand with Sarajevo, as the city was shelled from the alpine hills around the city—in the war 1992-95—at about a rate of 800-1000 grenades/day. The city was, during the war, a world unto itself: separate from the warring factions.

So, when Moslem, Croat, Serb and Jewish humanitarian organisations worked to help a city without water, home-care, pharmaceutical distribution and food, they were Sarajevans: people siding with the good mix of people that lived together before the war, as elsewhere in Beirut—in older days—and Istanbul to this day. They were people who believed in CITizenship as the extension of the CITY, an expression of urban culture, and that the city's expanded field could include ALL groups.

The core of the Jewish community was made up of people with names such as Tolentino, Montiljo, Kamchi—who were very much aware of their Spanish heritage, even though it went back 400 years in time. Some families had kept the keys to their homes in Granada. And when singing songs (romanzas) in a Catalan dialect from 400 years back, they would play the guitar. As the city lived under siege, the community included members of all ethnies in the Passover celebrations.

It is not the kind of situation one expects to find. And the way I met it, when doing my fieldwork there under still unstable conditions in 1996, I felt it was like a parallel universe, where everything we have also existed there, but in a completely different configuration. Like you rotate the kaleidoscope, and you have a different pattern. I selected this site for my anthropological fieldwork, precisely because of this: it couldn't be derived from a known trend, nor feed one. Untrendy.

The situation in Sarajevo before the war would be such that people of different denominations would visit each other for major festivities. The Jewish community was 1 of 10 places where people could come to smoke and play chess, as the Bosniac soldier and soup-kitchen aid in Cicko's soup kitchen: the place I have already mentioned elsewhere on the page. Anyone who was hungry was welcome to the soup-kitchen, during the war, provided they did not discuss politics at the table.

Music and food—period! If not you had to pay for your meal. And, as the cook confided, they would speak *lotto voce* (in low voices outside his hearing range). Otherwise they had to pay. The cook was an old hippie, who had lived and worked in Italy, for a number of years, so that's what he spoke to visitors like me. Before the war he used to have a restaurant called Lucifer, where they served hot—spicy!—food: hence the name. He grew his herbs outside the soup-kitchen's window.

The reason why I am telling this story, is you couldn't have made up Sarajevo the way it was. It was completely off the grid. For instance, many citizens—no matter their belongings—would go to the Moslem shrine of the 7 brothers, where they would tuck pieces of paper, with written wishes for good luck. I didn't sense that they did this kind of thing because they were particularly superstitious, but because they knew who they were, kept to their ways, but also had these gestures of respect.

Gestures of respect and good faith. I don't know if this makes sense to you: but actions that might look superstitious to an outsider, actually were quite secular. Mundane acts that kept this world together. What they did believe in was the city. So, when the president of La Benevolencija—the humanitarian organisation—said “We did all this to show the world that not all Jews are Israeli soldiers,” nothing could really prove him wrong: since some Jews—like Victor—were Bosniac soldiers.

This is what I mean by ‘off the grid’. The city was off the grid—it should have been an ideal for European citizenship in the EU sense, but never was—and Jewish community was off the grid: every warring agreed that they had “no part in this war.” So, they became like the local version of the neutral Swiss, who would help belligerents, no matter their nationality or creed. Everyone knew this. Even the Chetnik (Serbian nationalist) snipers on the roof-tops, Victor told me.

When the president of La Benevolencija—Jakob Finci—strolled across the bridge over the Milacka river every day, on his way to work, no sniper would ever shoot at him. Still, it must have taken some courage to walk calmly across the river, as the city was shelled continuously at a high rate, the snipers did their job, and the city was in total confusion. Finci related his feelings in this way: “imagine that you are walking down a crowded main street and every one you meet says hello!”

He was talking about the shelling. After the war, everyone had done their bit: the Caritas (Catholic and therefore “Croat”), Merhamet (Moslem/ancient Bogomils and therefore “Bosniac”— the

largest organisation), La Benevolencija (Jewish) and Dobro Tvor (Orthodox and therefore “Serbian”). Don’t ask for clear lines here. I heard a man saying: “During the war, in Bosnia, you’d better not ask people various denominations who their grandmothers were...” But still not really a hotchpotch.

You couldn’t account for Sarajevo from the group-perspective, that’s all: an example was the Radio La Benevolencija: it’s arrangements for facilitating aid between people in and outside the war-zone, who could not reach their families and friends. They wanted to help, but could not. So, idea at the radio was: help a STRANGER... s/he is likely to have a friend/relative elsewhere who also needs help. So strangers would help each other on both sides. The transaction was broadcasted.

Everyone listened to the radio—a broadcasting and communication channel—you would help someone who was not your family/friend, so that stranger would help your family/friends where you could not reach them. Strangers too have family and friends. So, it was a win-win situation. What has struck me upon several occasions ever since, is that if the coincidences I have written about in my stories so far, were emergent, the radio La Benevolencija made them happen.

So, thought: can they be designed? It depends what you mean by design. If something you need to do—during the current pandemic—is hindered/obstructed, then you can find a way around it: for instance by helping a stranger, who reacts to your proposal by helping you. You can imagine and organise swaps. And you never really know what it will be like to get the job done, before it is a fact. I always thought: wouldn’t it be interesting to develop this sort of exchange in peace time?

Today, a FaceBook group—like this one—can do the same job as the RADIO did in Sarajevo. At a local scale, maker-spaces and workshops can operate in a similar way. But is the operations of the kind that took place in Sarajevo transportable to a different setting? Or, is it locked to context and the experience of specific people? After the war, Jacob Finci became the Ambassador of Bosnia to Switzerland. In the same period the humanitarian organisation started its work in Rwanda.

In the aftermath of the genocide in Rwanda, the radio made a soap-opera to turn hate-speech to dialogue and sort out conflicts in ways with which people—the Hutu and Tutsi—could identify. The statement of the radio, that became extended in its activities and registered in the Netherlands, is the following:

“Established in 2002, Radio La Benevolencija Humanitarian Tools Foundation (RLB) is a Dutch NGO committed to the empowerment of minorities and social groups that are, have been or are in danger of becoming, the victims of ethnocentric or other forms of hate violence. It promotes an agenda of sanity, empathy and mutual help among those who are the target of hate speech, as well as among societies that have suffered its consequences. It is strictly non-ethnic, non-denominational and non-governmental. “

It makes one think. I also think that this was the idea. It is a creative idea: which means that when it moves it will change according to context and experience. But the idea is the same. What would it be elsewhere? What would it be during our present circumstances? I am thinking a lot about this, these days. Victor said: there is human being, with two arms and two legs—and I can help that person. The nameless human.

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Stories of Nothing #08—Enniskillen International Samuel Beckett Festival

In the Nameless, Samuel Beckett sets out on one of these journeys of ‘knowing-by-staging’ in text —as he often did when not working as a stage director or a playwright— which is so typical for him. His journey often appears as a ‘journey within’: to toy and toil with that aspect of human being, as a creature, that does not necessarily deserve to be loved, but may find love/ company (or not). So, in this sense, the story I am about to tell is about the Purgatorium/cleansing: an overall topic, central to Beckett, and dear to him as one of his Italian references: Dante Alighieri, Giordano Bruno and Gianbattista Vico.

His journey into the modern one might say, with James Joyce in Paris, but also at and his earlier initiative to learning Italian while studying at Trinity College in Dublin. This is his journey many of us know about. For my part heavily biased by my own French cultural baggage: Samuel Beckett married in France, made himself French, did his bit in the French resistance during Worldwar II, and often appropriated by an audience and readership inclined to see the philosophical problem in his work. Forays into the play *Waiting for Godot*: He made himself French and was made French by the French.

Journeying with my daughter Sophie from Dublin to the border-town Enniskillen—in Ulster—we echoed Samuel Beckett's journey from his parent's home in Foxrock, outside of Dublin, to Enniskillen at age 14. In 1920 as the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic was drawn into the minds of people at two sides. What a strange border!?! When we embarked on the buss to Enniskillen, indicated by cardboard-sign with the destination hand-written with a blue ball-pen, the border was nowhere visible—no signage and unguarded—but still everywhere present, in bodies & memories.

Coming from Dublin, Enniskillen appeared in the middle of nowhere. The town is not lost, however, but rather connected westward, through the ancient waterways—some human made, som natural—through Donegal to the Atlantic Ocean. Like Beckett, we came in from the decrepit side where the human life-form is lost. When we worked our way from a desolate buss-stop, through a gothic town-centre to the outskirts where Sophie had rented a flat, we tried to locate the address on Google-maps, which only got us to the nearest MACE (24/7 store with basic necessities).

From here we had to ask our way, and the property turned out to be some 10 blocks off: condo-streets similar to Ullevål Hageby, in Oslo. We felt the journey started here: we were at the outer edge of Google-maps, like a contemporary version of travelling into the unknown. What we found there was not a lush vegetation of trees, flowers and mushrooms—nor rare members of animal species—but simply an older layer of historical Europe: post-historical Google does engage with historical hierarchies. It doesn't compete with history, but quite simply runs over it.

We had taken the journey to Enniskillen, from Dublin, without thinking of Beckett's journeys there: we were simply going to whatever the Enniskillen International Samuel Beckett Festival had to offer. But Beckett's own journey appeared concretely relevant when on the spot, since Portora Royal School—where he was inscribed from age 14 to 17—on a hill adjoining the town, was the selected location for many of the plays that were set up for the festival. If there was an equivalent of Eton College in Ireland, it could be Portora: Oscar Wilde, for instance, also studied there.

What prompted us to the significance of Samuel Beckett's journey(s) to Enniskillen, was the festival key-note speaker. Diarmaid Ferriter! He addressed the audience at the current Portfora Grammar School, based on a historical portrait he had developed on the topic of the Irish border — the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic—and opened up the cultural and political landscape of this ghostly border, that no-one can see but is everywhere felt: it takes two three exchanges in a normal conversation, a stranger will early get lost in detail, but also in the language of bank-notes.

In the Republic the currency is Euro, in Northern Ireland Irish punds (British pounds is currency in Northern Ireland, but not Irish pounds in England). The Northern Irish Bank is called the Ulster Bank. But Ulster historically also includes Donegal, which is part of the Irish Republic. The troubles between the North and the South in Ireland, generally has this structure: that is, an endless point and counterpoint, and a level of detail that you have to be local in order to trail. The culture of one-upmanship and the dynamic structure of the border are related. Its explosive power is tremendous.

Diarmaid Ferriter's book was simply named—*The. Border: the Legacy of a Century of Anglo-Irish Politics*. After Portora's current head-master had praised the book for its lucid—and readily available language—on a difficult and labyrinthine topic, the author with his elongated and furrowed face, tanned skin and light green-bue eyes, started to talk. It was clear that he was no less a master of rhetorics than of written language. And, as the talk developed, the ambience grew to an electric intensity. An explosive tension that could bring about either lightening or thunder, judging by the Q & A.

From this point on, Beckett's plays appeared as explorations into varieties of border situations. QUAD—a dance piece with Beckett's choreography—certainly: I urge you to see the performance on the attached link. If a border was not simply a line in space, but everywhere present, one can see that specifically modelled in QUAD. But also in Beckett's play *Cascando*: where it is the border space of theatre itself, its various layers, that are explored. I also attach a link to this piece of Beckett's: because it is more readily experienced, than analysed. We heard it on the grounds of Portora Royal School.

A procession of people in hooded black gowns—in fact Moroccan Jellabas—we walked with each our head-sets listening to the piece, making an occasional stop at some ancient ruin or by the rugby pitch. Mediaeval role-play combined with Beckett on the grounds where was known as a promising athlete. It was almost a bit frivolous. What made the penny drop, however, for the both of us, is when we journeyed by buss (small busses that looked like they'd been taken out of the fifties) to the foot of a highland bog, from where we went on foot to see *Waiting for Godot* uphill.

We knew we had arrived when we saw the sculptural tree—made by Anthony Gormley and set up for the play each year—and were seated with fleece plaids in the marshy and cool environment of a highland bog (even at summertime). Here we saw the whole play, but read from Beckett's script: Vladimir (Didi), Estragon (Gogo), Pozzo, Lucky and the Boy. In the Enniskillen International Samuel Beckett festival Didi and Gogo are played by actors from each their side of the border: one from the Irish Republic and the other from Northern Ireland. A contemporary border-ritual.

To see Beckett demonstrated, as it were, in the Irish borderland made me “leave France” in engaging with Beckett: engaging with Beckett as a borderland traffic—a cultural situation, more than a metaphysical problem, appeared at the centre-stage for me. Perhaps because I am an anthropologist. I think Sophie—who has studied theatre & direction—has a different interest in Beckett. While I engaged with the journey, she delved into acts of expanding the readability of Beckett's pieces, which is a challenge given the strict rules that govern the Beckett estate. What is a reading? What is a play? We had two video-footages: she merged them.

And then there is the sound of Irish English—the “good crack”—which you hear at just any bar. When combined with the Beckett materials it opens a number of doors, that are really beyond Beckett's texts—and the quasi-philosophical contents ascribed to them—and never leave you once you got the idea. Even if you haven't been to Ireland, you're sure to have heard somewhere, try apply it to the first lines of Beckett's *Nameless*: even if you're alone, you'll see that thee company is good. What is important about this story—surely—is Samuel Beckett's journey, rather than our own.

“Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on. Can it be that one day, off it goes on, that one day I simply stayed in, in where, instead of going out, in the old way, out to spend day and night as far away as possible, it wasn't far.”

I heard a story of someone visiting Beckett privately in Paris: he said the ambiance was neutral and warm—come and go! Our journey eventually evolved into docu-fiction, and preserved our journey with Beckett in the border-traffic between two video-footages that was transportable off-site (if merged). American artist Robert Rauschenberg defined a non-site: “Whereas a ‘site’ is scattered information, a place you can visit, experience, travel-to, a ‘non site’ is a container, an abstract work about contained information.” Our journey from Dublin to Enniskillen was coincidental with Beckett's, in this sense.

QUAD:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPJBIv13Bc>

Cascando:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wT4-k0_3mmM&t=155s

Stories of Nothing #09—

Saddam Hussain had misspelled the King's name. He wasn't really the King, but a proxy-King from country far away. The Iraqi President therefore had a cordial meeting with him. But he misspelled his name. It was written on an envelope, with the insignia of Iraqi national coat of arms. The envelope contained a business card: Saddam Hussain, President of the Republic of Iraq. Eloquent in its simplicity. On the envelope the name of the symbolic king: Bayron, Ambassador of the Kingdom.

It was a gift-card, of sorts: it came along a silver-framed glamour-portrait of Saddam, and hand-signed by him. A movie-star portrait. He also presented Bayron with a wristwatch—a Swiss chronometer—with the Iraqi coat of arms on the lower dial, and Saddam, in Arabic script, in the upper dial. A photo was taken at the meeting. It's formality was marked by the distance between the two, in a huge L-shaped sofa. In the photo of the hand-shake the Head of Security (he is looking intensely at Bayron).

In fact, he appears to be the most important man in the room. And the Saddam in the picture is too short: according to the official record Saddam was 186 cm tall. But Bayron was 10 cm shorter. So the chances are that the man in the picture, posing as the President, is one of Saddam's Doubles. Here's the situation: the guest's name is misspelled and Saddam wasn't there. One may ask: who was meeting whom? And, in which sense was there a meeting? Did the meeting take place?

Bayron discussed this at home, in the residence, with his wife: thee symbolic queen. It was during the war between Iran and Iraq, in the beginning of the 80s, and whoever were based in Baghdad on similar terms as the two of them, lived in splendid isolation—with a radio-mast as sole connection with the world outside, the river Tigris and the desert: the symbolic queen, especially, felt that they were living in a gilded cage, a life of wealthy incarceration, with servants and other helpers.

They belonged to a community of symbolic monarchs, who were present in Baghdad the place of their sovereigns. They had receptions, dinners and cultural gatherings—the almond-cake with Dream Whip, that the symbolic queen had med in her kitchen, was extremely popular among the guests—the symbolic royalty and their dependants. It was as though the Congress of Vienna (1814-15) had taken off on a flying carpet, got lost in time, and landed in Baghdad.

Should we be surprised? After all, it is the city of story-telling: Arabian Nights—Layla-wa-layla—during the enlightened monarchy of Harun Al Rashid. The Head-of -State who traded war-prisoner for Precious Books, who kept them in the House of Wisdom, and visited his people incognito, on a number of occasions, related in 1001 nights. The symbolic queen had always been sensitive to this aspect of politics, and would—during her life-time—complete 71 diaries, as her life-chronicle.

There appears to be a mystery with Time, in the desert. You don't always know the time you're at. They blend. As it was said in Fort Saganne: in the desert it is not enough to harden, you have to simplify yourself. In the haze of the desert math, writing and speech come closer to each other, threaten to blend into a mush, if not kept apart to combine them with intelligence. It takes some practice. 71 diaries is the Sanhedrin, it is the combination of Alef, Lamed and Mem, or Arabic: Alif-Lam-Mim.

Faced with the desolate splendour of the desert simplification means that an assembly of Hebrew elders and a Sura of the Koran, may catch up with each other, separated on the verge of blending, and still have a deeper connection. The math is simple, but clear: Alef = 1; Lamed = 30; Mem = 40. There can be no discussion about that. Still we cannot leave out the context of the desert itself: but the symbolic queen would hear nothing of it; she refused to cover her face when she was out.

The desert would get the better of her. Sand grinding on sand... a powdery dust that will cling to the lungs as pigment, or putty. Eventually, she would develop Chronic Pulmonary Obstruction Disease (a Miner's disease). In 1981-82, during her residency in Baghdad, she was ignorant of the

fact. She thought she'd developed asthma. It took her years to find out, as her health kept deteriorating. Desert, sand, breathing: in 1988 Saddam attacked the Kurdish city of Halabja with chemical weapons.

When he was posted in the Hague, he chaired the board of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). The symbolic monarchs eventually came back to their homeland. They would discuss their sojourn with their children, tell the stories again and again: but the symbolic king struggled with it... it seemed that his attempt to write his memoirs on this particular chapter in their lives, became subject to repeated rewriting: the memoir grew into a palimpsest and was never completed.

The OPCW was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, December 10th 2013. The symbolic king passed on—shortly after—May 1st 2014. The year the bicentennial of his country's Constitution. His wife, the symbolic queen, passed on 4 years later. To honour her memory one of her children took a mitochondrial DNA test (a blueprint of the mother's line—the kitchen and communication-unit in human cells). The test showed that her ancestry was from Baghdad and Halabja.

For those who like this open-ended strand of story-telling, I recommend the 13 tales of Nachman of Breslev. In the Arabic glossary—as it was once explained to me—an ALeM. Tales of the One, the Almighty, whose wisdom we cannot grasp. In the desert, this sort of self-evident: there will come nothing conclusive out of the Corona-crisis: save that it at some point, as we hope, it will eventually recede. Stories with no ending, nor conclusion, but with correspondences and patterns.

What happens in our lives may not happen because they are important, but are important because they happen. In this light, events—things that happen to us—are determined, at some level, by the absolute border to the unknown. But under the present contract this boundary is yet permeable, and we are left to wonder on patterns of connection. As dwellers unto this border, we can apply a simplified regimen of math and story, steer clear of conspiracy and determine the next step.

At the meeting between the Symbolic King and Saddam's Double, the language of power was clear: there was a picture of the genuine Saddam signed with his autograph, and the gift was an extension of his hand. But he would not step down by turning up himself. It was an un/friendly gesture, with a distinctive shrewdness and intelligence. The arrows that hit us from a hidden place, are worse than the honest blade of the sword. Which is why I have conveyed this story in writing, number and speech.

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Stories of Nothing #10 (final)—

Exit-story: pdf version is available if you scroll. A short essay, on the stories.

Since it is an exit-story (short essay on the stories), I am also making it available in pdf (attached). Visual story is the same though... (see separate entry)]

William Kentridge states: 'No, It is'—of coincidence, mirrors, borders and Apartheid. It doesn't add up. It doesn't add up in the end. Along the way—perhaps—but not in the end. Good timing would appear to be essential. Stories cannot be told, of isolates and quarantines, without speaking of Apartheid, at some point. It is a tale projected on a canvas across the railroad tracks; or something else dividing the city. What goes on at each side of the divide... when the divide is a canvas/screen.

It divides the city and is projected unto the screen. It is familiar—huh—in an uncanny sort of way, isn't it? We see William Kentridge's interminable processions, paper-cuts, drawings, film. Is it burial, life or repression? We do not tire at them. Last time I saw his work was in Oslo. He gave a lecture at Henie Onstad Art Centre. We had a short chat. I had seen exhibits and performances by him with Mariann, at several occasions. Last time at the Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin, 2016.

<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=No%2Cit%20is>.

No, it is. There is no overcoming of the divide. Even as the drawing becomes an animation movie, the movie begets a performance, the performance becomes a video-work projected in a room, with strange contraptions: viewing-machines, perhaps—something producing everything that is shown in the space (lots)—perhaps ‘history-producing machines’. Calligraphic shapes, auto-portraits, contraptions, walking across old book-pages: legal texts, lexicons, lists. The divide invents itself. The Apartheid.

Kentridge was studying to become a lawyer but became instead an artist. Perhaps in the period of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission many lawyers became artists, and artists lawyers. The question of how the border is reproduced—as mirrors within mirrors—is of course not unique to William Kentridge nor to any other non-black opponent to the Apartheid. Once it has occurred you can move it, never remove it, like seemingly an endless and pointless repetition: $1 + 1 = 1$.

This is at the level of a ‘repetitious & effective procedure’. However, at another level, there are changes. They appear interminable and slow, and convey a sense that it will take endlessly long time to “arrive”. Wherever that might be. But human beings are strange creatures: since when processes seem pointless, but still somehow compelling, they continue. They want to find out. At last some of them. They ask: am I missing something? When did it happen? When & where? Somewhere in the middle, perhaps.

Like Mads Brugger—the Danish journalist—in his docufiction about Dag Hammarskjöld’s plain-crash in South Africa, in South Africa at Ndola near Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). There were always too many loose ends around that crash to ever come out once and for all as an “accident”. Brugger wants to investigate these events... long since, a ‘cold case’. Interestingly, he uses fiction to drive the investigation onwards. And the series (on NRK) could be a case of ‘story-as-software’.

Radical software, of course. When Mads Brugger dresses up as a member of the SAIMR—a black operation where all dressed in white—while his secretaries, during his investigation (writing on old school type-writers to get thee setting right), are two black women. The scenes where he tells them what he has found, and his ideas about it (which they dutifully type), he also gets into conversations during which he often gets good ideas from the two secretaries: this is staged at the Steenberg Farm. Processing.

By staging himself—and part of the set—as a protagonist he somehow fictionalises the investigation. He appears as a mature version of Hergé’s Tintin. And he even wears the Phantom’s ring—the hard-striking ring that leaves the famous skull-mark on the bad guys’ chin. So, his intentions are clear. And driving around to people who can testify, phoning people who won’t speak to him (and deny the existence of SAIMR), digging at the landing strip, he generates information.

But it is, as one says (and he says), circumstantial evidence. Till, eventually, there is this former SAIMR operative, who not only will talk to him, but wants to lift a weight on his heart: he seeks closure. So, he relates how and where SAIMR—the “South African Institute of Marine Research”—taught its operatives, and its actions in neighbouring Mozambique of inoculating black people with HIV. “But that’s gruesome!” Said one of Mads’s secretaries. SAIMR also partook of Hammarskjöld’s murder.

Other agencies linked to the operation were the British MI6 and the American CIA. It all took place on the backdrop of Dag Hammarskjöld’s radical democratic vision for the 3rd world—in his position as the General Secretary of the UN—and on the Central-/South- African continent there was simply too much natural resources to be overlooked. Leaving it into the hands of the poor and uneducated would not permit their exploitation. So, he was eliminated. This is the story.

<https://tv.nrk.no/serie/mysteriet-hammarskjold>

Be that as it may. The SAIMR comes out as a White Suprematist covert organisation that Mads Brugger emulates in his attire to tease out information. He is too clever to assume that he has solved the case—I think—but he somehow managed to move it. Which is the point. And also the point in William Kentridge’s dealings with the topic of the Apartheid in his art. Moving history, moving us. A common point between them: the place of cartoons in driving a query onwards.

Another common feature: the piling up of ‘circumstantial evidence’. It may be crucial to our understanding of information. Because if the Apartheid was a railroad-track—cutting the cities

into two—the victory gardens cropping up in the edgelands around rails, would be like information: circumstantial evidence. We are left to wonder if information will ever be anything else than this? Circumstantial. And we may ponder on what happens when we accumulate more of it.

But what are the nature of these movements, and whereto? After the Apartheid ended as a State ideology, William Kentridge motioned to create the Centre of the Less Good Idea. To the effect, he quoted a Tswana proverb saying: “If the good doctor can’t cure you, find the less good doctor.” William Kentridge translates this into a practice at the centre, involving both black and white people. As he has done for many years within his own art practice. So this is what he has to say about it.

“It is often the secondary ideas, those less good ideas found in trying to address the cracks in the first idea, that become the core of the work... the intention is to provide a forum for these less good ideas —arguing that in the act of playing with an idea, you can recognise those things that you didn’t know in advance, but knew were somewhere inside you.” So, the crack, the border, the divide somehow runs through it. It is not something merely external, it also runs within/through us.

It is in this dual boundary that not only determines the relation of the master and slave—but each one to ourselves under the state of exception—that brings us to the coincidences, mirrors, time-warps of ‘the border’. It is external and internal at the same time, but in a way that lacks closure and our relation to enveloping facts can never be more than circumstantial. To communicate, we rely on the very apparatuses that set up walls that isolate/confine us.

Like the rails of the Apartheid. Separation and exploitation of fellow humans and of nature. Our digital media work no different than this. Or, if possible, radicalises the same situation. Or, this is what we are led to believe. Like Maggie Thatcher, the British Prime Minister, said in her heyday: “there is no alternative!” We’re ‘alone together’, as Sherry Turkle wrote under this book title: “Why we expect more from technology and less from each other.” But we are not at this now.

We are ‘together alone’—it’s the opposite contract. There is an online togetherness flanked by our doing ‘each our bit’ alone. So, in a strange way, we are presently less confined by technology than ever, as we are confined by the embodied isolate of the quarantine. Does that mean that we can expect more from each other? Maybe. If we truly understand the potential of ‘story-as-software’. And the property of stories that allow that: being specific but open-ended, and never conclusive.

By this I mean that it is not in the beginning or the end that something conclusive can happen, but in the middle: this is also where stories of this kind connect, it is not at the enclosure—at the entrance and exit—but in the relationship between the two, which is in the middle: this is where we can seek and find some form of consistency. The middle is a wellspring of contingencies—of things touching alongside, according the Middle English Latin word-history—that are truly connective.

So, what is it that we can expect of each other, more than of technology at the present juncture? Well there is little we can do at the edgelands of the quarantine border—no problem to be solved — as long as we are not equipped to understand the situation on ‘the other side’. This understanding is not kept as a secret code into the depth of each story, but because the stories are open-ended their specificity lends itself to scan and stalk situations. Stories connect within and beyond.

The story allows for what’s isn’t in it: “No, it is”. If modulated in this way, information is no longer circumstantial. A point that will be amplified if we take (affirmative) action: this is where problem-solving hits in. Stories is what may help you define them. Stories do not solve problems—never—but they can programme for solutions. So, the current horizon for improvements, and expectations, are not in problem-solving, small-time or big-time, on a global level. But in programming for it.

The collection of stories here—featuring in all ten, but told in this story #10—is such a programme (relating to confinement in terms of coincidence, mirroring, time-warps and border). Something we may want to have in our bags, if we agree that we have to reconsider how we understand and live with value creation. Chomsky has expressed that we are seconds to Midnight—if we pile up the crises we’re in—so we may not have too much time. But what exactly are we trying to achieve?

We are certainly not going to solve the world-puzzle—and from failed attempts at it try to discover and dismantle world-conspiracies (instead). Nothing is going to happen from our failure to understand: be it from Cartesian doubt, or simple ignorance. What we can and need to improve is our path from confusion to action. We need to be on the money, instead of acquiring as much as we can of it (in the hope that one day we will). We have to quit anticipating and postponing.

So, we can train ourselves at going directly to the middle of things—rather than spending the bulk of our lives in preparing and concluding—and give a direction to what is currently propagated at an enormous speed on a global scale. Where is the middle? Or, when? I have a story from my mother about geese. Her parents kept geese in the garden. They were tasty and better than watchdogs. She was terrified by them. From the gate to the house there was a rather long stretch. And she ran...

While running she would always spot father goose's tail somewhere. And in a matter of seconds he had the entire band with him. A bully-band. She could have gone straight to the geese—as also I failed to do—and stand in their midst. Insisting that she had as much a right to the ground as them. Instead, she avoided them till they ended up on the family's dinner table. Maybe we cannot befriend geese, nor quitting eating them, but we might learn to live and act in the edgelands.

We have to learn to balance our books differently. The ten stories in an attempt in this direction. The stories actually are quite meaningless. Or, at least, they do not aim at resolving something that has to do with meaning. Quite the contrary. Which is why they might partake of the kinds of value creation where 'scanning and stalking the situation', comes before 'problem-solving'. If we manage to concentrate our emotional power in the energy animating situations, then we can start solving problems.

Is it too much to ask that the books should balance across the border (to nature, to other humans, to the planet, to ourselves)? What would the economics of what we are considering here look like? It is sure to be a world in which everything is not solved by economics. Because if economics is the answer, what is the question? Did you ask that question? If yes, please let me know. I need to learn, and would certainly enjoy telling your story. Because, it would have to come with one: no, it is.

(Qua-Qua)

One reason to think about situations bordering unto the unknown—and programme for solutions rather than solving it—is the image it projects in us of the absolute: like our presently living in isolates, historical conditions and transitions as the Apartheid in South Africa, or the mercantile way of operating money economy: there is no alternative, to which I have quoted Margareth Thatcher already, or as Slavoj Zizek said, from his vantage point on the political left: we can imagine the end of the world, but we cannot imagine the end of capitalism. How do we think of sealed boundaries?

This is the common question to all these situations. However, if move our assumptions from being individually affected, to transforming the boundary into a common, we may come to work interactively with 'exchange across the insurmountable'. If you cannot help your family & friends, because you are separated by a border, you can help a stranger—because the stranger has also family and friends. This is the basic idea that I have been trying to explore in story.

Through this experiment, story has been added as a generative resource for border-dwellers: a condition now shared by all of us who—in the words of Zizek—have the privilege to live quarantined. But the border is more than our present narrowed condition: the proof is that criminals are let out of jail, in some countries. The borderland of quarantine, is not only an enclosure from other people. It is also an enclosure from nature, protecting us from the Corona virus.

We are using technology to connect across a border that we otherwise can cross only at the peril of contamination. The border—I imagine—is thicker than a line: there are edgelands around it. For instance moving outdoors 2 meters clear of one another. To the edgelands I would also include our hand-washing routines. Anything relating to the boundary that makes us operational as border-dwellers, is part of the edgeland. The choreography of hand-washing and movement for instance.

It provides us with a new grid, allowing us to intercept courses of action that are other than those readily opening to us, under normal conditions. We will scan our life-space differently, as we will also stalk/track life-situations beyond our own. In other words, we live on two sides of a mirror, which may be the most economic concept for what an absolute boundary is. It allows us to intercept across this sort of digital mirror, is that it is time-warped: the reflection asynchronous, but active.

Stories are situations related from the 'other side' — which is why we never tire at them: their possibility, but also what they do, in calling for action, when our actions become divisible and transmittable, folding traversing the edgelands. We currently live in the edgeland: a realm between the contaminated (Corona) and the connective (Zoom &c.). But isn't this our current situation also without the pandemic? The Corona crisis has simply brought contamination closer to us.

We will continue to live between contamination and connection—this is our life-sphere—this is the edgeland where we can, or must, develop our 'victory gardens'. Has the Corona-crisis made us wiser? We can hope, or at least bring the wisdom of what can be learned, in our bodies and minds at the present juncture, in story: the situation related from the other side—to be continued...

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