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Self on the Straßenbahn

It makes complete and utter sense to me that all life began with the jellyfish. Abigail and I are in Berlin's Zoologischer Garten, the first sun-filled day we've had in this country, our final hurrah before we fly home. A minuscule, gelatinous, squishy mass of life thrusts its way through a vertically cylindrical tank of water, propelling itself onward forever. It pushes forward, pulling itself in before throwing itself out, the entirety of its life sustained within that millimeter membrane. In my mind, the universe spreads across that astral plane, stars like the twinkling bubbles of air and dust within the tank. I want to put my hand to the glass, to experience the world which we inhabit. I step closer. The tendrils drooling in its wake pulse with creation and flash with destruction. Another step. Every thrust forward is an inhalation, an exhalation; a birth and a death. One step closer. My breath fogs the glass and my nose scrunches. I touch the tips of my fingers to the tank. I picture one of the guards coming over, "*Was machst du denn?*" they'd ask. And what would I say? "*Ich gucke einfach.*" I'm observing the universe from outside the universe. No, I'm just looking. My forehead presses against it now, glasses squeaking from the strain. The jellyfish pushes itself onward through infinity.

I perceive a rumbling at the center of my being, something being shaken into place. Above my vision is an older vision, and the pages of Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* appear. His characters, Toru Okada and his wife Kumiko, visited a similar aquarium in Ueno, Japan, an aquarium also displaying jellyfish. Toru grew sick watching them and couldn't understand how Kumiko appreciated them so much. To his question, she responds, "I don't know. I guess I think they're cute."

“But one thing did occur to me when I was really focused on them. What we see before us is just one tiny part of the world. We get into the habit of thinking, this is the world, but that’s not true at all. The real world is in a much darker and deeper place than this, and most of it is occupied by jellyfish and things. We just happen to forget all that. Don’t you agree?”

As I focus once more on the jellyfish before me, I recall just how much of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* resonates within me still. Kumiko, so far away, continues, “Two-thirds of the earth’s surface is ocean, and all we can see of it with the naked eye is the surface: the skin. We hardly know anything about what’s underneath the skin.” And I think she’s right. This book shook me when I first read it. It grabbed my shoulders and thrashed me about at times, pushed me along its pages with a gentle ferocity. Each word would lift off the page, enter my mind, and fall back down onto paper. The jellyfish floats on. The universe shrivels and expands.

It is morning. The next day, presumably. Abigail and I are asleep. The wild covers have been thrown about, the window vertically ajar. Outside a bird, somewhere, somehow, emits its call. It is distinct, unnatural, and yet entirely organic. Its cry: a harsh creaking carried by the wind. The rasping sound of the world reborn. The world’s spring has been wound for the day. Or, I have been woken by Abigail’s cough.

We set about packing our bags. One of our suitcases we have aptly named Jennifer because it is of the Jennifer Lopez brand. She’s falling apart. Absolutely dilapidated. She will not survive the trip, of this we are sure. This is her second time in Europe, and how she has made it this far we cannot know, but we do not question. It’s some work of the fates, some miracle. We would duct tape the damaged bits if it would do anything (if we had duct tape) but all we can do is hope.

Berlin is closing around us. Neu Wulmstorf, Hamburg, Germany, France—Europe folding behind us into memory. Each step we take away from our apartment is a removal, a disconnection, a dying. We are home-bound. The freedom we have come to breathe on this continent dissipates as the fogs of Neu Wulmstorf, the rains of Hamburg, the great overcast of Deutschland.

The sun shines now, and yet we must leave. Lyrics to a Revolverheld song, *Hamburg hinter uns*, repeat in my head, “*Wir lassen Hamburg hinter uns/ Machen das Leben wild und bunt*,” but we already left Hamburg behind us, Berlin joining her. Hamburg has been *hinter uns* for quite some time, and when we will meet her again we cannot know. Where we are going there will be no Seine, there will be no Elbe, no Spree, the only river will be that of traffic. “*Hier gibt’s viel Stau*,” my host father would say in that clunky

Niedersächsisch on the drive into Hamburg, all of the words rolled into one low monotone mumble, each on top of the other like the cars, bumper to bumper.

In Berlin, we've managed to reach the spotless Straßenbahn. One suitcase contains our clothes. Another is near bursting with books. The books outweigh the clothes. Why we have entrusted Jennifer with our precious books, we will never understand. We have sacked every *librairie* and *Buchladen* we could find and will return to our monolingual motherland with the glory of Babel piled between our arms.

We stand out in the morning crowd. Two stressed, sleep deprived Americans mumbling German to one another. The stares glaze over, finding their respective windows and objects of scrutiny. Once we're settled, we toss bits of English into our conversation and mourn over our impending departure, but we don't speak much. There is a difficulty pronouncing the truth of the situation. I want to speak as much German as I can, to get it all out while there are people whose ears it will not fall empty upon. I want to read every street sign, every advertisement. Never will the announcements over the loudspeakers leave my mind. *Austieg links. Austieg rechts.* I want to hear them, want the railroad from the Newark Airport to New York City to feel as relaxing as the Deutsche Bahn.

Our suitcase rolls around on the streetcar, and I wrap my legs around it in the aisle to keep it from falling. Within are books in French, German, and some English because we couldn't resist the temptation of fiction. They are ours. Nobody can touch this suitcase. "*Entschuldigung*," I'd quickly mutter if anyone dared lay a finger on her. The movements of this tram are akin to that of a slow washing machine, and that perceived circumference becomes Toru Okada's deep, damp, waterless well where he sits in contemplation. I too sit, eyes closed, allowing the movements to drench me as I attempt to retain my gravity. Toru sits in the black, trapped: "In the darkness, I pressed the fingertips of one hand against the fingertips of the other—thumb against thumb, index finger against index finger, and the fingers of my left hand ascertained the existence of my right hand."

The Straßenbahn rolls onward towards the S-Bahn, which we must take to reach Schönefeld Airport. One hand I clutch around Jennifer, ensuring her safety, one around Abigail, ensuring her existence. My eyelids veil the truth from me, and with an inhale I'm outside the streetcar. There I sit, washed in thought as the rains of this country have doused me. I hold my fragile needs in those two hands. Books and love. Words and comfort. Language and her. A silence sits in the sliver of space dividing Abigail and myself, and neither of us can utter the words to smash it. "Words are just words," I want to joke, but I watch and feel the grip of my palms; I know the contents of Jennifer and that words are not just words. Was it Emerson who said language is fossil

poetry? That each word was once a poem of its own? He was right about that one. I swallow the joke and savor the sour tone it's left unspoken on my tongue. Too gentle is the truth of it to wield against the silence. In the richness of the word, I find *selbstverständnis* and hold my breath on it. Self and Comprehension fuse together to forge the self-concept. This moment, this singing moment, signifies me; she and I lugging those suitcases through the streets of Berlin. Here we are, surrounded by the lives living in another code, and we can decipher it. German and French being *lingua francas*, but think of the dialects. Think of the borrowings, the stolen speech, the lexicons from town to town, person to person.

Abigail and I have more books than we will be able to read in the next decade: French, German, English. Words of all the same building blocks, the same LEGO bricks. Those beautiful variants of that same alphabet—accents and umlauts making the script all the more rich. Though Murakami describes destiny as a thing of the past, detached from the here and now, if I would declare eighteen years of cumulative experience to amount to a single instance of being: this is that instance. It is the consistent addition of past selves which amounts to the current self, and this current self will determine the next me, and shed my skin to breathe that self free. Now I am this, and this self is one I've climbed towards since I first learned *hallo*, since I found my first stories. Books, words, language. Surrounded by everything that will determine the life ahead of me, and I am the catalyst for all to come. I choose which words to speak, which to write. I inhabit my own vertically cylindrical tank, my own universe, my own bubble of existence. My palms press against the cool glass, eyes wide behind my glasses, staring out at the world in awe. I turn away. I propel myself onward through infinity.