

Honeyeater

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p 9-10

Topos

This here is a place where people melt like candlewax. Where they wait, dripping, collapsing onto the endless rows of seats in the terminals. Where they instantly solidify when a voice over the intercom reads out their flight number or announces yet another delay. Here is where the hours are undone, nobody knows for how long.

They don't know it, but by constantly following the arrows, they end up walking round in circles. From point A to point C without even noticing point B and arriving back at A again. Heads tilted slightly upwards, the default position, they search the void for clues, an endpoint, a gate to a destination. And should their eyes drift down, there will be people in strategic places, ready to give directions with a routine, rehearsed choreography. Their arms gently sway to the left and to the right, gracious like the wings of swans. This here is a place where getting lost has been elevated to an artform.

Airspace may seem infinite, but this place is demarcated like a giant labyrinth. Everything propels the passengers in the right direction. To a departure or an arrival, but nowhere in between. They wander round on autopilot. Quasi-sleepy, because they could be startled by a distress call any minute: Attention, Beware, Careful. An alphabet that burrows beneath the skin. To not leave luggage unattended, to be aware of closing lift doors, to be suspicious of seemingly abandoned trolleys. The language of the airport is one of fear, so well camouflaged that it blends in seamlessly with the noise of background music and jamming suitcase wheels.

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Departures Gidiş

• REC

Just then, in front of the information panel, I'd wanted to ask her where exactly in Belgium she's from, whether she speaks Dutch or French, or maybe even German, who knows. But

she didn't say a word, never made a sound. For a split second, I thought she might be deaf, although she appeared to be listening very attentively, as if nobody had spoken to her in years. It reminded me of how I'd learned the Dutch language when, an eternity ago, I arrived in Belgium as an eighteen-year-old to work in the mines. It feels like a lifetime ago. That boy was a different person. I'd earn good money, build a nice and independent life in the West, I'd be happy. That was the promise.

I remember the bitter wind stinging my fingers those first few months, the acute longing for my childhood friends from the village, the smells from my mother's kitchen and the call of the village barber who always cut my hair too short, as well as the many things beside the language I didn't understand in Belgium: the people, the landscape, the weather. Until I met a woman who taught me the language and made me forget the weather, the landscape and the people.

What's more, she gave me a daughter, who helped me forget pretty much everything, including my home country. Our child helped me learn the language even faster. With touch and feel books we made the words our own, kneaded ourselves a world. Those years made the mining tolerable. In bed at night, my wife and I would read to each other from the same book. Sometimes she pretended to pray with me, without knowing how and often ending up feeling dizzy. I tried to teach her my whistled language and we'd roar with laughter on the carpet. During dinner we'd put down our cutlery and dance to Brel's melancholy in front of the television, until we forgot how and all we could do was tread on each other's toes. Until my wife and I forgot each other's languages, down to every last letter.

They were loving years, but they were nowhere near as long as a lifetime. After the divorce, I no longer knew anything or anyone in the land of the Belgians. The people gave me funny looks, the landscape was flatter than I'd ever known it, the wind even more bitter. I left abruptly, even disappeared off the radar in my home village and told myself that I'd visit regularly, be a father to my daughter, a distant friend to my former colleagues, until I forgot that too and I didn't even have the courage to phone my daughter on her birthday. I could only hope that in my absence my daughter would hear stories, at bedtime, in which I never returned because I got lost in the mines, turning me into a fairy-tale character. She was still only a toddler when I left, perhaps not yet ready to store her earliest memory of a father, of our hands reshaping the pictures in the touch and feel book. Yet after all these years I can say that the idea that she's forgotten me is preferable to the shame I've carried since.

Her mother's face faded but my daughter, she grew with time. In my imagination, her face became a little sharper and wiser every year. In my mind, I watched her go to school, where she excelled in arithmetic, because she hadn't yet discovered her knack for languages. She never thought of me, until she went on playdates and wondered who that man in the house might be. Was a mother not enough for her friends? Had she waited for me to return? Did she hate me? Did she have a child of her own? And did she tell that child the fairy-tale of the grandfather lost in the mines? The woman pops up on my screen again. She's sitting on a chair, staring at the ceiling. Does my daughter ever look as lonely as she does?

ALPHA

The irony of a place called 'duty-free', literally 'free from obligations', is that in this gigantic shop you actually feel obliged to buy something, seduced by luxury items nobody needs. Perfectly orchestrated, the sales assistants offer you a chocolate truffle you can't refuse. I'm no longer shocked when, like a walking cliché, I find myself sauntering over to the chocolate

section, the Leonidas concession to be precise. It reminds me of that flat country where I was born, and I don't even like chocolate all that much.

I go into the duty-free shop for a daily spritz of perfume. When I do, I picture myself as a hazy landscape, another characteristic of that flat country of mine. The blend of the different scents is noxious, like a sickly-sweet, wilted bouquet, and often leaves me with a migraine that lingers for days. Splendour, decadence, can be found lurking in every corner here. It's smelly.

It's quieter, almost solemn, in the corner with the amber-coloured beverages. The liquids seem to be waiting patiently for their rightful owners. Here, too, the air is hazy, as though the bottles are slowly exhaling their liquid. A man next to me touches a few bottles, turning them and studying their labels. A catchy tune spills from his lips, he even hums the guitar riffs: *'Layla... got me on my knees... Layla... darling please... Layla... ease my worried mind.'* His voice is resonant. It must be one of those classic rock songs, it sounds so familiar to me.

The man turns to me. The alcohol on his breath is sweet and sharp. Feeling uncomfortable, I look away. If I don't look back for long enough, he'll go away. It's an irrefutable fact. Everybody will go away. Don't look back, never look back, and everybody will disappear.

'This one's really good.' His deep bass voice trails off.

The looking away appears to have no effect. Why's he still standing there? His eyes are burning holes in my shoulder blades and I see him staring at me in the penultimate letter of the Jameson advertising mirror on the wall. His forehead knits itself into a frown. The gilt O perfectly frames his face, like a tondo. The smoked glass lends his face the morbid complexion of Caravaggio's sick Bacchus. He squints at the bottle of whisky. Strangely enough, it gives him a certain appeal, an aura of being overworked. The bottle dangles from his hand as he keeps nodding encouragingly, as if I need to be won over.

I breathe out loudly through my nose and pluck up all my courage, turn round, take the bottle from his hands and pretend to read the label. He eagerly tries to make out what my eyes register. Until I chuckle and show him that it's Belgian whisky. He grins back and points questioningly in my direction. I nod.

'Pleased to meet you.' His Dutch is less bassy. It sounds like the language you hear in a dream and are never able to recall the following morning, a language that always escapes definition. He holds out his hand. His sleeve is pilot-blue with three ochre stripes stitched on. The fabric looks hard and unyielding. The hand that sticks out feels like smooth beech, soft and dry.

'Aeronaut.'

I squeeze gently and let my hand slip from his. 'Ventriloquist.'

He left me in the duty-free shop with my voice in my stomach. It would once again nestle deep inside and not emerge for the rest of the day. I'd sounded hoarse when he spoke to me. After a lengthy silence, a word scrapes past the roof of your mouth, the first few letters seemingly in silence. Until the tail of a word, a sentence, comes out broken, and you have no control over the exact sound, the number of decibels. Luckily, the song he'd just hummed continued to resonate in the right key. Did it mean anything to him? He'd sung it with such quiet conviction, like a well-kept secret.

Did I let him pass me by? Isn't that what you do with passers-by? Back. And forth. Back and forth, again and again. In an airport, communication is purely functional. Even saying goodbye is simple here. Saying goodbye is just not looking back. Then again, I did do it; I did look back. He waltzed away and was absorbed in the crowd of passers-by. Endearing and a

touch awkward, his long limbs in those flared trousers that were far too formal. For a split second, I'd even opened my mouth, believing I might call after him. But I remained muted, not unlike the way he'd laughed without a sound earlier.

As I let the whisky bottle slosh in my hand, I try to work out why I looked back. He wasn't that remarkable, and the uniform hung on his body in a strangely ill-fitting way, not unlike the way a suit hangs on a mannequin. Perhaps it was the cloud of kerosene he left behind. The smell of distilled petroleum, which I'm so familiar with after all these years. The same chemistry that keeps anchoring me in this airport. Without thinking, I return the bottle to its original place. It settles with a dull thud. On the shelf lies a folded piece of paper, gaping invitingly open. I snatch the sheet from the cabinet and unfold it. Wernicke. The word flashes mysteriously between the ochre Lufthansa logo and the words 'pilot schedule'. Wernicke. There are months and numbers on the paper. The numbers keep skipping a day and have been checked off chronologically: 11, 13, 15. I work out that it's January and that the pilot will be wandering round here again the day after tomorrow.

• REC

The past few nights, I've been woken by the tinkling of a solitary piano. The dog seems to have heard the song many times before and carries on sleeping, untroubled, its ears still. The melody sounds familiar to me, too. The voice that accompanies the piano harks back to a bygone era, when my mother, feeling nostalgic, would watch black-and-white images on her favourite French channel. 'Those teeth... *dégueulasse*', she'd mutter with an eye on the screen.

Ne me quitte pas... The person operating the cassette player doesn't wait for the song to finish, and appears to have his finger on the rewind button well in advance, to avoid any kind of silence. The magnetic tape rewinds. *Ne me quitte pas*. When I get up to have a look, the dog stretches, keeping its eyes closed. *Ne me quitte pas*.

It's dark in the corridor. A sliver of blue light stops just short of my feet. I walk down the corridor until I get to the half-open door. A pair of men's shoes stand side by side on the floor, it's what the Turkish do before they enter somebody's home. Out of habit, verging on nostalgia, I take off my shoes too. When I push the door to the video room open further, I'm blinded by the wall of screens. I know it's him, the man who showed me on the panel where I was. He doesn't turn round and remains calmly seated with his back to me. His eyes are closed. They must be. *Ne me quitte pas*. I mumble along. I can tell from the back of his head that he's smiling.

My eyes are still adjusting to the darkness when he swivels round in his desk chair. Only his cigarette butt turns into a deep-orange dot with each drag. The resemblance to the blinking red lights of the security cameras is striking. Again, it feels as if I'm not allowed to be here. Yet he beckons me closer.

'Jacques Brel.' He pronounces it with a rolling R, like a veritable chansonnier. This is the first time we hear each other laugh. In the dim light only our teeth and eyes are visible. The whites of his eyes gleam and his teeth sparkle. They look enormous, like Brel's.

'Ömer.' He puts his large hand on his chest. I hesitantly tell him that my name is Sibel. I say it quietly, hoping he doesn't hear me.