

Bodies

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Once there was black.

There were flashes like echoes of a thunderstorm below the horizon and then everything went black again.

How long ago did the dust settle in the room? And how long since that dust was first enriched with pollen, the spores of mosses and ferns, the particles of a great tit that sat on a branch to preen its feathers? Mixed with a few molecules of space dust and the sand from the Sahara that floats in through the open window. A layer of dust on the corners of the table, the arms of the chairs, the kettle. First the horizontal surfaces and then the chinks and cracks and holes and dents and hollows. After a while the layer grows velvety, making sharp lines vague. Dust clumps together as fluff that blows through the room and becomes entangled in new structures. Motes teem in a ray of sunlight. The room becomes a spinning mill where patient threads interweave as curtains of dust. Walls are coated with delicately rendered dust paintings – the slightest breeze brings them to life, swaying, breathing in and out. Shoots push up out of the parquet floor and grow into dust thistles, sprinkled with plaster snow that whirls down from a damp- riddled ceiling and crunches underfoot. In a room that leads to a door.

whispering voice: Where are you?

A hand pushes the door open.

A milky beam cuts through the completely black room and detonates on a face.

An off-white nine-storey block with twenty-seven units. Attached to another, equally boring block, which is attached in turn to yet another identical block, and so on....

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In the bathroom the metallic blue paint is cracked and curling – did something heat the walls? Over the bath the shower curtain is slipping off the rail. A trail of rust runs over the enamel to the plug hole. The wall looks like it is covered with blue butterflies.

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A sharp pain in my shin, I've stumbled over some exposed nails – the boards have been ripped off the joists. I pull open the lace curtains. There is a pile of leaves in the corner of the room, a rising patch in the plaster. Or is it a decaying blanket? The legs of the bed have been positioned on the joists so it looks like it's floating in the room. Exhausted, I sit on the edge of the mattress without taking off my rucksack. I slump down on one side. Close my eyes for a moment. Breathe in. The smell of wet plaster. Breathe out. What are those butterflies called again, the ones with the metallic blue wings? What is that blue called?

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On the way here I saw trees that had laid siege to a villa. They had grown closer and closer to the house, pressing up against it, encroaching on the foundations with their roots and levering up the walls. Cracks had shot through bricks and roof, windows had fallen out of their frames allowing dust to blow in and seeds to sprout. Saplings had shot up in rooms to piercing ceilings and make them porous. The branches of different trees had found each other and entwined. Strangling walls until they fell.

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A great tit is preening its feathers on a branch of an oak. It is a glorious morning after the restless night – the night that has been my beloved time and space for so long, endless and bottomless and full of the promise of joy and tension and sweet danger. Through the open window I hear the rustling of the oaks that have screwed themselves up through the bitumen of the roads or between the concrete paving stones in search of the sun. With their elephant-skin bark.

I clear my throat, swing my legs over the side of the bed and push myself up. When I shake my shoulders to make the rucksack settle on my back, the tit shoots off its branch. I step carefully on the joists to leave the room. Without making a sound. I need to develop curved vision so I can look behind every wall, every door, around every corner. I mustn't forget that the sun shines in here until after midday – how delicious it is to soak up the sun. A breeze tosses the scent of blossom in through the open window.

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A vibration, as if a helicopter is hovering somewhere in the distance.

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No idea how long I've been in the building.

What I do remember: that one taxi driver's disgust. No matter how much money I offered him, he shook his head without looking at me and then he spat through the open window on the ground in front of my feet without looking at me. A matt-black handgun on his lap. When I kept pressing him he drove over the tip of my left shoe before racing off.

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Astonishing how much food is still left in the building. Tins of tuna in oil, ravioli, corned beef, peas with beans, peas without beans, pineapple rings, apple sauce, pears in syrup, king crab, red kidney beans, sliced gherkins...

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A burnt-out unit. Everything covered with soot.

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There is a small animal with bulging orange eyes that leaves one of its many nests high in the trees at night to look for food. With a long, bony, ultra-thin middle finger it percusses the trees in search of hollows which it then bites open before sticking that needle-like finger through the hole in the bark and wood to pick out the hidden larvae. The animal is a lemur, according to Roman tradition an evil spirit.

First I measure all of a unit's rooms. That allows me to imagine it as a revolving geometric structure that grows a little with each additional room: I can almost see it, almost feel it. If I notice that the sum of the parts is smaller than the whole, I go in search of openings, cracks, chinks that grant access to concealed spaces. I set about it like a lemur, tapping the wall in search of hollows. I move furniture, if present, to the middle of the room. I pat down each room systematically, starting low on one side of the room and moving up, and after reaching the top, I tap my way back down again, advancing one metre at a time – my fingers and toes in every crack and grasping every protruding brick like I'm on a climbing wall. Sometimes I feel like an archaeologist laying things bare with a brush and trowel – here is what we lost sight of so long ago. Am I searching for cuneiform, hieroglyphics, potsherds, animals packaged in small wooden sarcophagi? I find money, jewels, plastic bags of narcotics. I pick up the objects between my thumb and middle finger, check them, put them back and reclose the cache, all anonymously. Then I brush the dust off my trousers and resolutely swing my pack over my shoulder.

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Painted on the wall are a woman and a man. The woman is wearing a white dress so vivid its whirling pleats seem to gush from her body. Her blond hair is fluttering in the imaginary wind, full of drama and ecstasy. The man is wearing a cosmonaut suit, including a fish bowl on his head. Beaming widely, he raises a muscular right arm in a vigorous greeting – the prosperous future has begun. Behind and around the man and woman are flashing squares, diamonds, circles and rectangles in blue, red, green, ochre, yellow and burgundy, a swirl that suggests dizzying speed, utopia, optimism, voyages of light years. The promise that we are on our way to the very best.

This mural is located in a hall the size of several units, a place for speeches and applause. The windowpanes have fallen inwards and are scattered over the floor in turquoise shards, covered here and there with strips of mint-coloured wallpaper that has peeled off the walls. A rectangular hall. High ceilings with acoustic tiles – most of which have come loose and are lying in a pile. A side aisle with arches and pillars. Under one of the arches, beneath a large iron hook that has been driven into the arch, is a chair, warped from the damp. The only object present that is scaled to the human body. As soon as you step out of the hall you see a girl squatting in the gloom just past the angled light that shines on the doors. She's making herself as small as possible and reaching at the same time for the buttons of the lift. Long black dress, plaits in her hair – she's tumbled out of a fairy tale. The girl has been sprayed with matt-black paint, so black it looks like it has been burnt into the white wall. Next to

the stainless steel doors of the lift. A fairy tale in which a shadow has torn itself free of the body it belonged to and gone off to lead an independent life.

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Millions of cicadas creeping simultaneously out of the soil.

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Walls covered with morpho butterflies. Slowly they open their wings – the scales diffracting the light as radiant blue – while other butterflies close theirs and look like spots of damp with their brown camouflage. Each butterfly has its own rhythm, the walls are teeming.

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Everything is reflection, flickering, gleam, glitter, explosion, eruption, mist, plasma. Matter seeking order.

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The building I am in has been perforated by almost invisible roots, gripped by green claws, overwhelmed by moss and mould and algae and creepers and parasites and bacteria and miniature birches. Like a sunken boat is to fish, the building will become the ideal hiding place for creatures, winged or otherwise, whose way of thinking has nothing to do with Homo sapiens sapiens. Later. When all the stories have died out.

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What is the skin of loneliness? A door opening on another floor of the building. You hear footsteps. You wait, but the steps come no closer.

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Before breakfast I've already walked up and down the stairs to strengthen my heart and sharpen my focus. I've strategically placed my solar batteries so I can charge my phone. I've checked my matt-black pistol: magazine catch in, cartridge clip out, fully loaded, clip back in. I've kicked in a door. The confrontation with decay never fails to shock: the smell of mould, the shards of glass, the scrawls of dust and damp. This high up there's a constant wind and something is always moving in that wind, creaking, flapping, rattling, rustling, clattering, tapping, swishing. But like a constant whistle, silence still drowns out everything. I yawn to reduce the pressure on my eardrums. Sometimes I sit with one shoulder against the wall or press my ear to a radiator to listen to the building's music – wallpaper peeling off walls, rust gnawing away, doors banging, curtains swaying. Empty sounds. I mean sounds with no content. Without the sound of a human being communicating with another human being.

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The silence of a vacuum.

The loneliness of the universe. As dark as the cosmos. Flash.

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So tired.

whispering voice: Where are you?
