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The fool of Sandy Point / Tristanides

The starting point of these ten short prose poems is the journey that every human being makes in his life. Not the sightseeing expedition, not the voyage of discovery, but the migratory movement that is specific to each existence, the movement that takes place between birth and death. In “The fool of Sandy Point”, an “I” sets out, but the journey to his old age also unfolds in geographical space: the older we get, the further south we trek, something which should not evoke olive trees and Mediterranean suns, but a slowly darkening horizon, cold, greying seawater, the blinding whiteness of ice, wilderness and emptiness. The first-person character is en route, many have preceded him, including his own mother. Like a frail migrant, she has already reached Antarctica; he will follow her in due time, but he won’t meet her there, because in the meantime she will have moved on already, god knows where:

(...) I’ll be able to have a drink there, where she is now, but she won’t be there anymore (...)

When Hölderlin asked himself “Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit”, his own poetry will have embodied the only possible answer. And the poetry of countless generations after him. A possible reaction to this question – an incomplete answer and formulated outside poetry – could be: “jeder Zeit ist dürftiger Zeit”. Each life is in a state of crisis, everyone is on the road, fleeing or migrating, and no one knows where he is ultimately to find refuge and sanctuary; in the rare moments of personal peace we tend to formulate our dissatisfaction – as Hölderlin did – and then to see it as a part of ourselves. It makes us realize all the more that we are inseparable from dissatisfaction.

That we, even during those scarce moments of peace and happiness, must travel further southwards is conveyed in these poems in a way that is both compelling and absurdist. That a

grand nature catches us off guard in the process and purifies us seems almost self-evident. Like the thought that we will perhaps appear again on the other side of the world, en route to a warmer north and a restored conscience.

How could we not recognize ourselves there? But it will probably demand some effort, because, as another poet once put it:

(...) That will no longer be us (...)

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The fool of Sandy Point / Tristanides

I

I can't forget to go by Sandy Point later. What am I looking for there? Shelter, it offers the only shelter on the windblown island. It offers shelter, near the fruit trees. Apple trees, we make cider from the fruit. The cider is cold and sourish, just like the gusting wind which picks up just beyond Sandy Point: where were we, dear listener, bruised listener? The story is far from over, it is a thick book and the continuation is secured on a steel-grey horizon.

II

How long have I been here? Too long to get excited any longer about the small circumference of the island. Everyone was here for me. Forgive me, I'm being somewhat vague. Everyone who is not here today was here, *before* me. Including my little, shrunken mother. My mother was here, but now she has gone further south, the necessity of an urgent saving demanded this. Her departure was hastily ranked in the tables of the eternally murmuring or roaring wind. I am looking from the most southerly point of the island. Southwards. But the south is not here: Portugal, Greece, the Azores; is not the tiara of that eternal *Méditerranée*. The south is here: Antarctica. That is where my mother is now, on Antarctica. I cannot see it from here, it's another couple of thousand kilometres across open water. But I know she's there, with her bottle of liqueur – a concession of the institute. Whoever has to travel to Antarctica is given a rucksack with a single bottle of liqueur. Grand Marnier, I think.

III

So the island is small, but varied in its landscapes. It has gorges, cliffs, a volcano like a chilled mouth, opened in apparent death, its frozen admiration expressing itself in a wispy plume of smoke that never entirely wants to leave the island. There are also a few beaches. Behind them lie the potato fields, where everyone in turn goes to work, including the women and

children. Even when working they practise their language there and try to expand their limited island vocabulary with neologisms. One sometimes wonders how potatoes taste which are cultivated within reach of the salty sea. They taste good: full, floury, with a hint of that spicy salt with which the water has sown its warehouses. Sometimes the gusts of wind are so hard that the salt beats down on the potato fields, and then a lightly creaking, crystalline structure takes shape in the heart of the potato. But what, that's just my imagination again. If you cut open a potato, you will see two yellow ovals in your hand, and you won't find any brackish – let alone creaking – wind in it. Only our wounds suffer and writhe in palaces of brine. Only our mind is marked by that salty constellation, the immutable.

IV

'He sends his most tender love.' This sentence came to me, just like that. Who could that 'he' be and who is his tender love addressed to? ... He sends his most tender love. The island reduces all sentences, all lines of verse, all utterances to pebbles. And the magnificence of nature, the vast truths of geography, the fact that a small island lies hidden in an ocean that slips from blue to ash-grey and from lemon to dirty marble white, like an enormous, breathing chameleon – the fact that the small, hidden island systematically reveals itself to the dogged traveller – what does that have to do with tender love, which is addressed to nowhere or no one? Why does a person think up such words? Out of what ether do they drip onto him, in that soaked-through lacework of his imagination? And in the meantime nature dreams out its truths before us, and in the best case we can give an account of this strange tenacity. And yet I couldn't rid myself of that sentence about tender love. Leave it! Who wants such a thing as *punctuation* in the roaring waterfall?

V

If you stare for a long time into the wind you will get cold, dry eyes. It seems as though my eyes have been etched in my head. If you stand even longer in the wind you will feel the cold spread along the back of your eyes with a soothing ointment. If you stand still longer in the wind you will feel how the wind gives you a place in its patterns and movements. I want to stay standing, in my almost see-through coat. Mother is over there. Perhaps she is appealing to the gusts of her own affairs.

VI

There are small penguins on the island. I've often seen them on the road to Sandy Point. Friendly little fellows! And they're not as clumsy as you'd think. Sweet penguins! Macaroni penguins, I think, with their saffron-coloured eyebrows; it looks as though their short-sighted little head is on fire. Or are these yellow-crested penguins? I've got to learn to better

distinguish between the sorts. A couple of weeks ago one of them was under our window, deathly still, like a stone. Imagine, the whole night, as if he was expecting something to fall out of our window. Perhaps it was a she? But by morning the mist from the mountainside descended and rolled over the motionless little figure. I would have liked to raise it through the window, that cold penguin-stone, which the mist swirled over in rippling nitrogen rags, but in fact you shouldn't disturb them. Somebody once entrusted a letter to such a creature. The letter never arrived.

VII

I would have liked to have had a drink with mother, but it won't be possible. Not *before* my time, I mean. I will be able to have a drink there, where she is now, but then she won't be there anymore. She'll have moved on. Into the heart of Antarctica. People say that a child lives there all alone, in the white plains, surrounded by rushing blizzards and that everyone must look for that child. But people say so many things. What I do know is that it's now dark there. A half year of night. And then a half year of day. Two eternities, or eternity cut in two. Eternity is an earthworm. If you cut it in two you get two new eternities. Each fragment is the whole. My head is spinning, and I think, intensively, of Sandy Point, of that pleasant little spot where apples grow, where trunks stand, out of the wind. Thank God!

VIII

One day you wander around here, or you trek across the island, along the volcano and the little heart-shaped lake in the interior. It's not so bad here. It rarely buzzes in the only townlet of the island. The fish factory lies half in the sea, this facilitates the production process. I am standing on an elevation, I see the roofs of the townlet. Roofs are optimistic. Roofs want to fertilize the sea with shadow. One time I really should count those roofs.

IX

At last, Sandy Point. I can rest. My favourite apple tree seems to groan with pleasure, but that's my imagination of course ... Will there ever be a bridge to remote Antarctica? Possibly. But that high, white architecture will have to be raised insect-like under the steel sun, and then it will start swaying, and that over a distance of some thousands of kilometres ... No, I'll have to go there the old trusted way. But not yet. I give my apple tree a kiss. I sometimes ask myself how deep its roots are here. And whether it tastes salt through them. And whether the sea, along those underground roads, is trying to tell it something. And, conversely, whether it is trying to whisper something to the sea. But the latter, strangely enough, seems even less likely than the former.

X

I dreamed of the child on Antarctica. It had no face, or rather its face was covered with an inhumanly pure, cracking tulle, frozen textile. Beneath that the face made frantic attempts to compose itself, features came to help from all over, but the face did not complete itself, like an ever-faltering computer update. It never completed itself. Then it struck me that there was no child on Antarctica. There is no child that awaits us there, no face that turns, completed, to our smile. It is Antarctica itself.

Antarctica is the child.

Peter Ghysaert, February – April 2015

Translated from the Dutch by Patrick Lennon