

When I'm in London, I sooner or later end up at the canal. I'm always in the same mood and the people I meet on my walks are exactly the same as me except that I don't know where I am for the most part. Usually I walk alongside the water trying again to find the canal-side bistro where I once ate toast with melted cheese on top which for some reason the gods of my memory rendered unforgettable. On both sides of the canal there are a lot of new buildings with pastel-colored balcony balustrades and solid window frames built into burgundy-colored brickwork with a shimmer of lilac and outdoor lights of polygonal design. Then a gap with a crane in it. The older houses have balconies piled with trash bags and beaten furniture. A flipped-over buggy stuffed into a roofless plastic doghouse, something like a television cozy chair next to it with its cushions slashed.

The sight of a turtle swimming in the canal makes me stop. The turtle dives unperturbed amongst plastic bags and duckweed and through rays of sunlight that almost make it all the way down to the bottom of the canal. I stand and watch. As a person who grew up in the countryside, I could never take the nature of the city seriously. It always had a second-rate feeling to it.

But where I come from, a turtle is a rare sight, something exotic and exciting.

I stood and spoke to the turtle: What are you doing here, turtle?

I was told by the local authorities that the city is built of concrete, plastic and artificial wood, materials entirely stripped from their origins and natural ways, a gray conglomeration glued together with the infested urine of the lost souls who live there and who like to go and see theater plays to culturally soften their stoned hearts for the duration of an evening. I learned that the city is a magnet that drags all the dreaming trash from the country into a big wasteball of desires, pressed so hard that dreams and dreamers are crushed just the same.

This is no place for you, turtle.

You and me, we stem from the land of hard shell, not hardcore, we keep things inside, keep them safe, soft and valuable. Keep them true.

You confuse me.

Because I never saw a turtle where I am from. Also, where I am from, I never ate a piece of toast with melted cheese on top so delicious as the one I am trying to find again.

I really don't want to go back to where I am from.

I used to be afraid of the shadows of the city. Of people that would cut your throat when they saw you were driving a rental car. This was common knowledge about renting a car in America. German tourists robbed and gutted by shadows emerging from metal trashcans, looming and rising around you like the steam from the manhole covers, greedy for all your belongings hidden in your neck pouch. These visions fear-shaped generations of Germans trying not to look lost abroad.

Me, I just board any bus in London, no idea where it's going, just to sit on the upper deck with my urban pokerface. I would never ask the way, I couldn't. Orientation means mimicry. A lot of effort goes into looking truly at home everywhere and not like you've just rented a car with "Kill Me" embossed on its number plates.

Now I am afraid of the silence in the countryside. In the city, things stop speaking, fall silent like a factory at night. In the country at night it feels like nothing ever spoke at all, birds cease their singing too and clear the stage for this monstrous black silence. This silence does not come to talk about the day's shift.

When my inside falls silent, it feels like this, and I am very afraid of it.

Turtle, I don't stick to the city's magnet and I can't go back to the barn, help me turtle, where should I go?

The turtle dives again.

I can still smell and taste the rural promise of the toast I ate with you that morning.

It came with homemade raspberry jam and I put clotted butter in my coffee. That toast spoke about decent people raised by shoemakers in an old windmill, with animal legs and pre-fascist motorcycle seats hanging down from the ceiling. There is a binding contract written on the hide of I don't even know what beast, between the generations that live so long that at least six of them meet. The contract is signed in deep crimson. Linen sheets and drapes, cosy rooms plain-heartedly decorated with vintage metal signs of roads named after modestly blooming flowers. Shy petals in earthenware pots that don't ask much of the beholder, who has to focus on the respective task at hand day in, day out.

I see myself, scratching my fingernails on the outside of one of the mill's lattice windows. "Millers and Milkers! Butchers and Bakers! Takers and Makers! I lost my way and the honey-colored light of this mill's lit window guided me. I am cold and weary from my wanderings! I have no place to sleep and I am tired. Can you tell me how to get to Quality Street?" But the millers and milkers laugh like hippos, a butcher and a baker with ballooning bellies boom at me simultaneously: "Go away, you hag."

Lightning flashes and thunder rolls and I move on limping, down the hill again.
 Curse that mill.
 I want to set that mill on fire.
 Or tie all those butchers and bakers by the neck pouch to my bluesmobile and treat them to a wild ride to the city center.
 That bistro had looked so recent. Well, relatively so. I vaguely remember a sign saying that it was established in 2012, kept in a style a Rotarian would use to write his diary on the class blackboard for everybody to copy.
 It can't be that I can't find it again.
 I wish I didn't feel so betrayed by the passing of time.
 The meals and feasts I enjoyed most I had in places that drove local businesses out of business. This toast kills city life. Still I am hungry for it.
 I wonder how long a turtle can stay under water. It must have died down there, trapped in an old rusty letterbox.
 I walk on. Around this part of the canal there are also ancient watergates which are still in use by people who travel in historic narrowboats or other small ships. Do you know how a watergate works?
 Well.
 In order to travel a river in a vintage-style boat, either upstream or downstream, you have to make sure there are no waterfalls involved and that the water is of even depth. A watergate takes care of that and gets you over the geographical kinks on your route. Let's say you arrive on the lower side of the watergate: you park your boat inside it and close the watergate door behind you. You then open the gate in front and the water comes in and pushes your boat up to the next level, where you can continue your journey to the following watergate. That is how it works.
 I stand and watch the sailors and their rope-pulling and -throwing.
 I see the boats come and go, at least six per hour. They transport nothing straight up to anywhere, but their crews have to exercise their skills under my unblinking eye, with my face rinsed of any emotion, a skipper who long ago dropped his ahoy in the duckweeds of the watergates, a pale soul beyond saving, lost between city and countryside, yes and no and me and you. A family man in a striped shirt throws me a rope. I refuse to give a hand because nature does not give you a hand, nor does the city and neither do I.