**Roman Ehrlich**

**Cards and Needles**

*“Travelling itself is not something I enjoy at all. I just drink constantly. It’s the travel-sickness”*

I was standing on the bridge in this unfamiliar small town – a place where I could certainly understand the language but outed myself as a foreigner as soon as I opened my mouth –looking down at the stream which flowed under the bridge. Eddies swirled on the surface; a branch of fern floated past. I could hear the birds in the trees and the traffic on the commuter route. The workers were on the move again, heading back to the villages and into their free time. There was something sweet about the peace of the estate which the stream whose bridge I was standing on flowed through on its way out of the town centre. Something conciliatory too. The everyday gestures of the inhabitants contained the promise that they would live together in this peace in perpetuity, if only they were allowed. But you can see here, the scene in the estate said, no-one bashes anyone’s brains in here.

The outsider who comes to the town, the guest and temporary inhabitant, the traveller moving at the slowest speed – travelling so slowly that from the outside it starts to look like staying put – this slow traveller is still and will always be a stranger here, structurally alien. People are keen to hear his travel report because it promises to report his entirely fresh and new impressions of the manifold riches on offer here, cultural attractions, tourist destinations, a very particular way of life which is not always easy, but which is celebrated precisely for that reason. The stranger is a beginner. A novice in perception, an unclarified, enthusiastic newbie. The photos I had taken in the town centre all hinted at a time in the future when I would visit everything once more, as an experience now in the past, or sharing it with someone who was still far away from me on that bridge and wasn’t there to experience it with me. Without a camera, the individual can’t withstand the decisive moment. A single individual experiencing things on their own hears the rejoicing over each and every wonderful observation echoing in their own inner cathedral (the church of fear), then the rushing in his ears closes in and over him, hissing and rumbling like the doors on a bus. And yet it’s actually quite pleasant for the stranger to experience this fundamental sense of difference, which is a constant companion in his life, his self-image as a freak or a creep, someone who doesn’t fit in, to experience this for once as something external – something offered up to him from outside. You’ll never quite belong here, says even friendliness itself, wherever he encounters it. But for a change it doesn’t feel like his own failure, weakness or self-deception. Looking is the traveller’s mode of communication, and it is the only thing he feels any obligation to. If elsewhere some kind of exchange actually manages to take place, that’s obviously fantastic, but if it doesn’t that’s entirely normal too. A traveller passing through, who is only in transit and therefore can’t really testify to anything, may well be able to observe conditions in the small town and maybe criticize them, perhaps even endorse them, but certainly can’t change anything. Someone who doesn’t stay put and contribute to the promise of living together peacefully is in a difficult position anyway. In the pedestrian zone in the town centre someone asked me whether I could vote here. Only in principle, I said, on personal principle in other words, it wouldn’t have any effect on the system.

You are invited to a debate: outline your intentions and expectations for your visit, preferably with reference to the rich culture and historical significance of the region. An attractive location. The transformation of an economically underdeveloped and depleted region into an attractive location, the self-image of the population who feel left behind and their relationship to the attraction: we’ve been drinking beer here since before your jobs were even invented. The visitor is always the harbinger of change too. And is himself changed as well by his journey through that area.

Writing behind plastic windows, scratching on paper, the fine little loops and curves, on tables in rooms which are only ever occupied, used, inhabited in transit – an impression of whether this is a good or bad hiding place, a fan on the ceiling, water stain next to it, the cries of the jungle coming from outside and the traffic pounding and beeping, the opening sequence of *Apocalypse Now*, going AWOL. On top of the small bedside table lies a copy of Bronisław Malinowski’s diaries, which tell of the time he was stranded in the Trobriand Islands, part of Papua New Guinea, from 1914-1918 when he couldn’t return to a Europe which had been plunged into war, and he went about his work feeling melancholy or irritable, sketching everyday life, and where he keeps talking about his attempts to forbid himself from reading novels. Probably because his access to reality has been revoked. Instead there are repeated attempts to describe the coastline and the sea, the mountains, the sky, the vegetation, palm trees, the light, the sand and the water, the behaviour of the missionaries and researchers, the state of his health and the progress of his work. Occasionally he reflects longingly on the people he had left at home.

*“I would start reading the moment I got up, I didn't stop while I was eating, and I kept on till midnight. Only at sunset did I drag myself from my couch, and went for a short walk along the seashore. My head was humming, my eyes and brain were [. . .] — and yet I read, read, and kept on reading without letup as though I were reading myself to death. Resolved that after finishing this trash I wouldn't touch another book in N[ew] G[uinea]*.”

So now it has caught up with you again, I thought on that bridge in the unfamiliar small town, this persistent sense of unhappiness. You’ve just been on the move too much and for too long again. I remembered a conversation with K., who had come to visit the outsider at the best time for visiting and told him that, personally, she had put a complete stop to travelling these days, at some point she had started to feel like turning around the minute she had pulled the door shut, and spent the whole time picturing the return journey as the best part of going away. And eventually that became a self-fulfilling prophecy, it escalated and intensified to the point where she had to break off her travels as soon as she had started them, because she had developed a feeling of rootlessness and forsakenness which gave rise to an irrepressible desire to assure herself that there is indeed somewhere called home and a homeland, back there whence she had set off. It takes some time, even after your return, for your own place not to feel strange again.

I walked for a bit, following the stream and past a restaurant which hadn’t opened yet although there were already people inside, sitting round a table, probably discussing a shift rota. On a floor above a window was open, someone was listening to the radio, there were reports of traffic jams and a coffee machine began to gurgle. From a kiosk next to a tram stop I was bombarded by the headline on the front page of a colourful newspaper:

*Anyone who doesn’t hate the world simply doesn’t love it enough.*

The Foreign Office issues warnings to its citizens about foreign travel: travellers are constantly invited to love more than a single heart can bear. Travellers abroad are frequently the target for wild infatuations, whenever they impart a feeling of freedom to the locals who are not travelling at that time, a feeling of being dependent on nothing more than the weather, fortune, their own mood and health, nothing dragging them down, being light and free. Travellers are advised against marrying nationals of unstable countries from outside the EU on impulse just because their company makes you feel so alive, or the sex is so good.

Artists as well as other social agents with subversive potential on the other hand should be packed off as frequently and for as long as possible. It is precisely through intercultural dialogue that one gains insight into how nice life actually is back at home. Moreover, those dispatched in this way tend to be occupied primarily with the organization, observation and categorization of phenomena relating to their travel.

*“Occasionally I long for Tośka, often look at her photo. Sometimes I can't believe that that marvellous woman — Work goes rather badly.”*

Furthermore, in legal terms the following applies to travelling, today more than ever, as an expression of utter steadfastness in keeping your feet firmly planted on your own ground:

*Members only.*

Horizons surround every space as threatening borders, beyond which loom deceptive distortions and reflections, holograms of desire, oases full of promise, and behind them darkly thundering sandstorms and the searching, yearning gazes coming from the other direction. The person who remains on shore, watching those setting off is, in some circumstances, rewarded with the spectacle of a shipwreck. In order to function, Venetian mirrors require it to be substantially darker on the side of the observer than on the side being observed. In equal brightness both sides would be able to look at each other. Oceans have always functioned like that. Humans grasped that fact long ago and have rightly feared them.

I carried on through the outskirts of the town, following the tramlines, over the viaduct, past the zoo and the large market hall. I waited at red lights along with everyone else, even when there was no traffic, ate a sticky pastry as I walked, smiled and greeted people so often that I felt like a madman, a voluntary service provider commissioned to support a generally pleasant atmosphere, where a small spark is all it takes to turn to anger and hate and loathing. In the train on my way to the small town I had travelled with a large group of football fans. When the offensive expression of an individual’s own asocial behaviour, their drinking and stinking and singing, is contained within the group, the individual drinker, stinker and singer can experience how others are confronted by him, without having to isolate himself as a lone asocial individual. However much I’m repelled, I always feel envious too. Beyond the theorising, a skinhead with sunburn bellows hoarsely, yet also slightly self-consciously:

*Cheers, you bastards*.

In a side street by the station I took delivery of the drugs I’d ordered earlier in the week from some organized criminals. The organized criminals drew my attention to the side effects in their local dialect and kindly added a few clean needles to my order for free. Then they wished me a good trip. I couldn’t work out if they were being friendly or not.

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Translation by Lyn Marven.

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