



**Edition VI.**  
*Hopes and Memories*

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## Editors' Note

One of our interviewees for this Edition asked us why we've chosen hope, such a seemingly untimely phenomenon, and memory, which feels like a "feeding ground for despondency and grievance", for our theme. Hope is indeed, perhaps the hardest thing to feel in the world right now, as we are surrounded by chaos, confusion, and collapse. That is precisely why we need it more than ever. And let memories, instead of feeding despair, be our building blocks, let our memories – collective and personal – guide us and fuel our hopes.

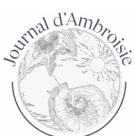
This Edition of the Journal will take you by the hand and walk you through the many faces of hope – from the utter absence of and false or unfounded hope to the small, personal moments of hope, and the grand hopes for community, and the future of humanity and our planet – hoping that we can bring about positive change through our community's contributions, no matter how small. Indeed, there is hope in belonging, in collective action.

We at the Journal give our words as actions, to influence and impact people, to touch as many hearts as possible and to induce responsibility. Words have the unique power to change people's lives. As always, we wish you a wonderful exploration of our universe. We hope you get influenced, impacted, and inspired.

*"You cannot swim for new horizons until you have courage to lose sight of the shore."*  
- William Faulkner.

Yours truly,

Emma and Dodo









**Regi Rózsahegyi**

*edited by  
Maija Utriainen*

## Why we should mind the mind

What is memory for you? An instant in time or a particular moment experienced in the past? The English vocabulary is quite expressive when it comes to mind and memory. Indeed, the latter's definition is "the ability to remember information, experiences, and people", according to the Cambridge dictionary. However, memory is something very fragile and distorted and can lead to tragedies such as innocent people wrongly accused of crimes.

What is the science behind memory? Historically, the fact that memory is stored in the brain leads back to Plato and Aristotle. Its scientific articulation emerged in the 20th century with Richard Semon introducing the term "enigma" to describe the neural substrate for storing and recalling memories. A group of engrams explain how memories are formed and in future, it should also be possible to define how memory becomes knowledge. (Josselyn, 2020)

When it comes to brain functions, the functions of 'recognition' and 'recall' are key variables when testing memory. There is consensus in research that older adults are more prone to source memory failure, which means they might remember events differently than they happened. "False recall refers to the spontaneous production or intrusion of non studied information, whereas false recognition refers to the erroneous claim that a non studied word or object was presented previously." (Kemper, 1989)

When diving into the topic, I came across Elizabeth Loftus, a professor at the University of California, and according to the Review of General Psychology, the most influential female psychologist of the twentieth century.

"In the past forty-five years, she has testified or consulted in more than three hundred cases, on behalf of people wrongly accused of robbery and murder, as well as for high-profile defendants like Bill Cosby, Jerry Sandusky, and the Duke lacrosse players accused of rape, in 2006."

She also testified in the MeToo-case for Weinstein, which resulted in her students and family turning away from her.

Loftus (2013) explains in her Ted talk the concept behind false memory through the story of a young man, who was wrongly accused of rape, because he looked

similar to the defendant, and his life tragically ending during prosecution. In fact, as a result of distorted memory, there are hundreds of innocent people in jail.

In her talk, she points out that „just because someone tells you something and they say it with confidence, just because they say it with a lot of detail, just because they express emotion when they say it, it doesn't mean that it really happened.“ (Loftus, 2013)

Why is this so? Why does the mind trick us in forming false memories? There are different answers to that. One of the false memory methods that have been conducted was the memory implementation method in which participants had to elaborate on events from which several did happen to them, but one did not. The example of Loftus was the following: one gets lost in a shopping mall at the age of six and is being rescued by an elderly person and reunited with family. One can argue that this isn't that tragic of a case, however, these false memories were successfully planted in the mind of a quarter of the subjects. In other studies the suggestion planted in participants was more severe - being attacked by a vicious animal or being drawn and rescued by a lifeguard. In these cases, half of the participants believed it was true. (Loftus, 2013) These studies showed that these suggestions can lead to false autobiographical memories. Experiments also showed that negative false memory was more easily implemented than neutral events. Following on planting false memories, new research conducted experiments and found evidence that “repeated events can be implanted in memory”.

“Influenced by psychoanalytic and hypnotic scholars such as Sigmund Freud and Jean-Martin Charcot, the core proposition behind repressed memories is that they act as a defense mechanism when people experience a traumatic event.” (Otgaar et. al., 2020)

Another so-called “forget-it-all-along effect” can explain why people tend to forget traumatic experiences. Some of them, however, disclose this memory to someone else, but forget about it.

When it comes to memory we can see how complex memories are and that the images of the brain represent a vulnerable area. In case of traumatic experience, memory can be suppressed. On the other hand, studies show that false memories can even be planted in the brain. Moreover, as we are humans that make mistakes, it can also happen that we wrongly remember events or people. Living in a world of extreme amounts of (mis)information that can fool us, let's be cautious about our own, and memories of others, and let us mind the mind.

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Lauren Bulla

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Miriam Zeglache

## Critique: Unfounded Hope as a Mechanism that will Catapult our Creative Capacities Forward

Many of us have encountered the notion that feeding into false hope is not only unwise, but also cruel. False hope is commonly understood as it relates to an unfortunate medical diagnosis and the inclination to expect a different outcome often when there is little evidence to support this stance. The notion that we should cling to hope as an avenue for positive results is highly contested. However, I want to bring this idea of ‘false hope,’ or rather for my purposes, ‘unfounded/ arbitrary hope’ into another light and consider that it is not inherently always a bad thing.

While sharing a bottle of wine with a couple of friends some weeks ago, we ended up discussing the idea of arbitrary or unfounded hope. Specifically, the notion that arbitrary hope could be the very reason for the progression of one’s ideas or a project that would’ve otherwise never taken off the ground. My friend mentioned that *not* going forth with your ideas or choosing *not* to try something new actually uses up a similar amount of energy as if you were to unwittingly go for it. The emotional energy is already being spent while you sit and agonize, wonder, or have second thoughts about that thing you never attempted and the what ifs of the liminal space it now holds. Though not inherently complex, I found this concept incredibly profound.

In that same vein, if the energy is already being spent – why not attempt to use it in a more positive sense and see what happens? This is what I mean when I mention arbitrary or unfounded hope. When it comes to a new project, there may not be any hard proof to believe in the progression of your ideas, so choosing to believe in them anyway might be the only thing that gets the wheels turning. It’s like following a path without any street signs: you don’t know what lies ahead, but by choosing to see anyway, you may end up in the most beautiful place you’ve ever been. One could argue that it may lead to a dead end, but then what? You turn around and try the next path instead; at least you’ve exhausted the potential and you can walk away knowing what lies there.

In order to understand this on a psychological level, I want to establish that ‘false hope syndrome’ is a model developed to understand the ebbs and flows of this phenomenon. Maltezou-Papastylianou claims that many experience this as unrealistic goals, and the expectation of achieving them with the accompanied deeper emotions of disappointment when they do not pan out as planned (2021). Often, many who struggle with FHS have a difficult time determining the root cause of the disappointment and it can turn into an ongoing and damaging cycle (Ibid).

Critics like Barbara Ehrenreich claim that hope can become a “quickly delusional” way of viewing the surrounding world - using it as a crutch to avoid responsibility or action (Schlosser, 2012, 173). Though I agree that hope alone will not change individual prospects, *I do argue that you need both*. Ehrenreich posits that we are better off without hope (Ibid). When responding to a quote from Jesse Jackson’s speech at the 1988 Democratic National Convention, “keep hope alive”, Ehrenreich states “Fuck hope. Keep us alive” (Ibid). I could not more wholeheartedly disagree with the second sentiment.

This ideal to me, comes from a perception of the world that assumes more power over our circumstances than we actually have. We only have SO much control - why not lean into hope when exploring new ideas, concepts, or a direction other than what we’ve known before? Deciding that the only thing that creates change is each of our meticulous, strategic decisions, completely sidesteps the fact that there are many things in our lives that we will never have a decisive choice over. This way of living that negates the value of hope completely - sounds both bleak and incredibly agonizing. Indeed, it is important to note that individual privileges do make this way of existing more feasible for some than others. Overall, I do believe that hope in the *what-ifs* as a positive is ultimately more productive than relegating ourselves to assuming nothing will come of our ideas outrightly.

In the book *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise* by Lola Olufemi, she says: “the structural limits of this world restrict our ability to articulate all that the imagination is capable of conceiving. Do not forget this” (Olufemi, 2021, pp 34). I find this compelling, as it is drawing our gaze away from the concepts of growth and success that may inevitably cause us to restrict ourselves for fear of failing in these same spaces. Rather, she wants to shift the reader’s attention to the idea that we can’t actually know what we are even capable of yet - the structures as they stand exist to confine our imagination and therefore prevent the expansion of our own capacities. Furthering this concept she states, “the future is not in front of us, it is everywhere simultaneously: multidirectional, variant, spontaneous. We only have to turn around” (Olufemi, 2021, 35). This notion of unfounded hope allows us a pathway to understand what’s possible when there hasn’t been an opportunity to yet define what we’re capable of.

Think about the turn of phrase, “one door closes and another one opens”. Now, what impact does this have if we never actually turn away from the closed door? Utilizing unfounded hope as a means of forward progression works in two steps: shifting our focus and using what others may view as arbitrary belief in our goals or ideas, but knowing when to pivot and try something new or take another step if at first we fail. *We are trained to be afraid of the unknown, that failure is worse than trying*. Therefore we may miss all of the other doors opening around us - beckoning us in - asking what the world can offer.

Taking this a step into the political: “For theorists such as Bloch and his more contemporary counterparts like Michael Lerner, Cornel West, and Robin D. G. Kelley, hope is anticipatory rather than messianic, mobilizing rather than therapeutic” (Giroux, 2004, 38). Contextualizing this further in the political arena, Zygmunt Bauman expresses that hope is part of the larger political system, that we must “keep the forever unexhausted and unfulfilled human potential open, fighting back all attempts to foreclose and to preempt the further unraveling of human possibilities, prodding human society to go on questioning itself and preventing that questioning from ever stalling or being declared finished” (Giroux, 2004, 39). It should be established that hope is not a crutch that one is to rest upon while the world passes them by; rather, hope is the shovel with which we use to dig up the motivation to keep going. The push to try something new, even if the pathway isn’t clearly lit for us, or when the unknown weighs heavy on us like fog as the sun descends. Hope rather, arbitrary or unfounded hope, is what we can utilize to seek a life worth living, for goals we have always dreamed of, for a more equal world.

Hope that is balanced with micro-goals, planning, and adjustment can actually be one of the primary ways to success for many who would otherwise let their creative inclinations sit forever (Tomasulo, 2022). If false hope rests upon issues of over-confidence, there are mechanisms we can place so as to mitigate the extreme lows and balance with more realistic highs. This can take shape as taking into serious consideration, “the difficulty of self-change, to establish realistic goals, to keep expectations reasonable” but I wouldn’t stop there (Polivy & Herman, 2000, 130). I think incorporating this is necessary especially considering that, “coping skills help us [be] content with the setbacks” but that also, we must employ unfounded hope as a means of pushing our own limits - more so than anything preventing the all-consuming pressure to limit ourselves as we phase through the unknown (Ibid).

In a world filled with what seems to be limitless creative expansion and effervescent unwavering social media personalities, it makes sense that many would unwittingly question their capabilities into oblivion. Though this can often be the case, I argue that arbitrary or unfounded hope can be the way in which we, more thoughtfully, take to the world’s potential offerings. *That there is so much more for us in the world of having tried and failed than having never tried at all.* I’ll leave us with a quote that truly rattled my bones a couple of weeks ago. At the Yayoi Kusama exhibition at the Tate Modern, I read a quote of hers that states;

*“It would be futile and meaningless to focus on the shrinking time-frame before me, or to think of my limitations, I shall never stop striving to make works that will shine on after my death.”*

(Yayoi Kusama)

Forward movement in the imaginative, the unknown, the uncharted, and arbitrarily hopeful is what will catapult us into lives we always hoped for. Steps toward understanding ourselves, our art, and the space we can occupy in this life comes down to our ability to conceptualize a positive out of unfounded hope - to give weight to the arbitrary belief that we can achieve something. *Because if you don’t believe you can do it - who will?*

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**Xhoi Laze**

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*Miriam Zeglache*

## **The Hope of a Child, after the End of History**

*“Free: A Child and a Country at the End of History”* is a memoir by author and professor Lea Ypi. The book tells the story of her growing up in Albania before the fall of communism and the beginning of the transition period to capitalism. She reflects on the life she experienced during the two different political systems and points out the contradictions in both. Although she paints an accurate and so, inevitably, sad picture of the flaws in each system, her book is ultimately full of hope for the future and stresses the importance of every individual’s freedom of agency, of choosing to do what is right.

One of the values that characterize my parents and, I believe, every other migrant and refugee in the world, is the hope we have that one day, we all will be able to make a better life for ourselves and our families, when we decide to leave our countries. Throughout my life, I internalized my parent’s hope but at the same time, experiencing discrimination while growing up, I became terrified of the world that I was living in and I started to become apathetic and cynical.

The hope that my parents had was based on the illusion that capitalist countries could offer everyone a better place to live, if one worked hard enough. My family has never abandoned this ideal to this day; they look back at their lives in Albania with a mix of nostalgia and contempt. The only person who I remember describing as having had positive experiences during that time is my mother. She told me about how she would have basketball classes or ‘valle’ or theater every afternoon after class, how she was able to travel around the country to participate in festivals and competitions; freedoms I never had.

When I thought about what my limits to freedom had been growing up as a ‘third-culture’ kid in different countries of the EU, Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands, two things came to mind: my nationality and my economic status. I am now 25 years old, I still have Albanian nationality and I still live in the EU as a second-category citizen. I can only work 16 hours a week and I need to have a work

permit to do so, which I am not able to ask for myself, as it is my employers that need to do so and pay for it. If I fail to make enough progress in University, my residence right could be revoked, and I cannot ask for financial aid from the government. Now that I am almost done with my studies, I started applying for entry-level jobs in Brussels where most of my fellow students also go to work. I even got accepted to a position, but as it turns out, they were not allowed to hire me with the type of contract they offered. I do have a right to stay and find a job after graduation, but only one that fulfills certain conditions, such as a salary threshold. Most graduate students start working for internships or traineeships that never meet those requirements. This is an example of how migrants, even the more privileged ones like me, are oppressed and denied opportunities that they deserve and have worked very hard for.

‘A society that claims to enable people to realize their potential but fails to change the structures that prevent everyone from flourishing is also oppressive’ (p. 954)

I believe that my people’s collective memory and the beliefs of hope that they formed after the ‘end of history’ in my country should shift. We have now been living in the West for about 30 years. Some have found their way, but many have suffered and continue to suffer. I think we can conclude that we were never meant to be treated as equals, and the great hope that we had for the west was mostly an illusion.

“Perhaps freedom of movement had never really mattered. It was easy to defend it when someone else was doing the dirty work of imprisonment.” (p. 587)

Hope under socialism was based on the premise that everyone was working together for a just society, whereas hope under capitalism comes from the premise that any individual can achieve success in their lives. While we have seen and understood the flaws of a dictatorial communist system, the illusion that everyone under capitalism can thrive is still very alive in Western society. The fact that this system keeps on running based on the exploitation and oppression of the most vulnerable in society, should be accepted as a fact.

Lea dedicated the book to her grandmother ‘Nini’ who told her what it means to have hope (p. 120):

“Hope is something you have to fight for. But there comes a point when it turns into illusion; it’s very dangerous. It all comes down to how one interprets the facts.”

“Success was always due to the right people making the right choices, fighting for hope when it seemed justified, and interpreting the facts in such a way as to distinguish hope from illusion.”

“In the end, my grandmother said, we are always in charge of our fate. “Biography” was crucial to knowing the limits of your world, but once you knew those limits, you were free to choose and you became responsible for your decisions. There would be gains and there would be losses. You had to avoid being flattered by victories and learn how to accept defeat. Like the moves in chess my mother used to describe, the game was yours to play if you mastered the rules.”

I understood Lea’s grandmother’s words on hope to be very pragmatic. She says that



knowing one's 'biography' or in my case, my nationality and economic status, are crucial to understanding the limits of the world that we live in, but that based on this, we are free to make our own choices and we are responsible for our own decisions. My interpretation of her words is that individual agency matters, even in the face of systematic oppression. Compared to Lea's life under Communism, her obstacle to true freedom was her 'biography' (her family's background). In my case, my nationality is a threat to the state, the terms are different and so are the values behind them, but the dynamic remains the same.

Last summer, I participated in a project whose goal was to bring diaspora youth closer to their roots. I had a short conversation with a guy who was also on the trip, that stayed with me. He was studying law and wanted to one day work for the prosecutor's office in Albania. He asked me if I would ever come back to live in Albania, to better my country. His question touched me because I am not used to people genuinely asking such important questions so casually. Nowadays, people are mostly cynical when they talk to immigrants, they usually encourage us in what they perceive to be an opportunistic endeavor. I took a moment to answer him: I replied that in fact, that had been something I had occasionally talked about with my mother and my family and that we even went back for three years when I was in middle school. I then turned the question on him and asked if he would leave if he found the opportunity. He said yes.

Growing up in Europe, I have also made it my home. To me, moving back to Albania means building everything up again and I don't see my life continuing there at any time in the near future. However, that is nonetheless the place I came from, where I formed my first memories and learned my first language, even though I forgot it and had to relearn it at some point.

What I take away from all these experiences is that political borders are barriers to progress and prosperity among different societies and cultures. My mum always told me she didn't *want* to leave Albania, she felt like she *had* to. My new hope would be that of abolishing these borders and bringing people together. People should have the opportunity to move and explore beyond their country's borders freely. 'Opportunities' shouldn't be forced by political failures, and the price to pay shouldn't be a broken country.

Lea wrote her book to "explain, to reconcile and to continue the struggle", and I am very grateful to her for having done so, for her story inspired me and reminded me that hope is indispensable. Her book gave me something that I had never experienced before, a connection to my and my family's past, a common future goal, and the reassurance that it is okay to have these ideals and be vocal about them.

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Alba Saiz Contreras

*edited by  
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## The never-ending cycle of hope in the Mediterranean Sea

For many of us, the Mare Nostrum signifies a peaceful and warm summer delight. A place of incalculable historical, cultural and political value, the witness of our childhood and the protagonist of our summer memories. However, for many others, the Mediterranean Sea represents the most dangerous border in the world.

Most humanitarian organisations claim that due to the difficult nature of identifying and recounting dead bodies in the sea, it is impossible to have a clear guess on the gravity of the emergency. In fact, some reports state that the number of people who drowned and were never found could even reach twelve thousand between the years 2014 and 2018 (*Deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea 2022, 2023*). According to UNHCR, in 2016 more than three thousand people died trying to reach European coasts (Refugees, 2016). Nevertheless, depending on the source we resort to, these figures may vary significantly. Suffering can materialise in any form of loss of dignity or dehumanisation, however, the universal value for human life has allowed a tendency to measure the gravity of any emergency in relation to death figures (Calhoun, 2010). Therefore, mortality disparities account for a particular interest of organisations and institutions to shape the way the Mediterranean emergency is delivered, and last instance, perceived by the rest of the population.

Still, most statistics agree on a general increase in the report of deaths during the last ten years, and particularly after the 2016 EU-Turkey migration deal. Migration has traditionally been a common issue between European countries and Turkey, and in fact it has encouraged the creation of several bilateral agreements. However, the persistence of the Bashar al-Assad government in relation to the Syrian conflict which started in 2011, and the European struggle to process large numbers of asylum seekers' demands, motivated the coordinated action of both governments to contain the flow of people. Through this pact, the EU committed to help Turkey, both financially and materially, in the relocation of refugees and to work on a closer political and economic relationship with their European/Asian neighbour. On the other hand, Erdogan agreed to deport illegal immigrants that tried to enter Europe through Greece and to intensify the control of his borders (*What is the EU-Turkey deal? | The IRC in the EU, 2022*). As a result, other longer and significantly more dangerous migration routes, which were already

frequently used by migrants travelling from North Africa, became highly popular among those who tried to get to Europe. The increase of demand, profited by human smugglers who overloaded the precarious flat-bottomed boats, as well as the significant number of kilometres that separates Tripoli from Lampedusa, makes the Central Mediterranean route the deadliest pathway to cross the Mediterranean Sea. In most cases, migrants do not expect to arrive on the coasts, but they just wait in the sea until a ship discovers and rescues them. Hope for somebody to come and aid them becomes their only option.

And in such dire situation, how can we not go and save them?

Indeed, this question has set the origin for multiple humanitarian projects, organisations and charities that work at sea. Proactiva Open Arms, Sea Watch, SOS Mediterranee, Sea Eye, Cadus, Jugen Rettet, or Boat Refugee Foundation are only some of the organisations involved in the Mediterranean Search and Rescue project. Many of them take migrants out of the watercrafts they travel in and transport them to the Italian port designated by the Maritime Rescue Coordination Center, while others are only entitled to patrolling tasks. However, all of them, considering the non-existence of adequate institutional rescue missions in the Mediterranean, are committed to assisting drifting migrants in distress (SOS Mediterranee, 2021).

The role of volunteers, and aid workers has been crucial. They have not only saved the lives of millions of people, providing survivors with food and medical and psychological assistance, but also they give immigrants a voice, exposing what they have had to go through and creating awareness of the dangerous nature of the Mediterranean sea. As a matter of fact, during the last years, and to the eyes of the western general population, non-profit humanitarian organisations have become the solution to distant suffering (Calhoun, 2010). Therefore, it is not unusual to encounter discourses that denounce the inaction of national governments, while spreading a feeling of pessimism and hopelessness in our political system but also in our own role as civil society. It is forever laudable that people like Óscar Casas, founder of proactiva open arms, use their own savings, travel to inhospitable places and embark into dangerous journeys to rescue those waiting for them. However, as a society of critical citizens that everyday becomes more politically demanding, we need to question to what extent we want to be content with a system that depends on the action of individual subjects to provide hope.

The migratory crisis and the subsequent 2016 humanitarian emergency in the Mediterranean Sea made evident the lack of coordination and coherence between the humanitarian organisations' rescuing endeavours and the legal and institutional framework that regulates action in the Mediterranean. The duty to render assistance in sea is one of the core principles of maritime and international humanitarian law as stated by numerous international conventions. This responds to a morally evident obligation to help a person in distress, especially when their survival is conditioned to our actions. Nevertheless, since the start of 2023, four hundred and sixty nine people have perished in the Mediterranean Sea (*Mediterranean | Missing Migrants Project*, 2023). The political connotations natural to the migration issue, the large efforts countries have done to integrate asylum-seekers, the fear of a "call-effect", the influence of mafias and trafficking networks, or the general tendency towards securitisation of borders could be some of the factors behind a loose interpretation of the duty to rescue. As a result, we often learn about incidents which denotes the failure of a official organism like the European Border and Coast Guard to respond on time to

distress calls, the neglect of the deadliest areas during patrolling works, the prevalence of interception and return over rescuing objectives, and the denial of European coastal governments to allow the entrance of rescuing ships to their ports (Campbell, 2017). Non-governmental humanitarian organisations report these actions as highly limiting to humanitarian organisations' capacities to assist and save those who hope to be rescued (Cusumano, 2017). Impartiality, neutrality and independence are the bases of humanitarian work. However, it has been proven that a common perspective that contributes to the creation of a coordinated action plan is needed to succeed. And far away from the despairing discourse that renders us good-for-nothing, we may have a fundamental role in achieving it.

Any public policy, but in particular migration policies, are a reflection of society's concerns, fears, values and aspirations. At the end of the day we participate in the election of governments that are meant to represent our interests. Therefore, we do have a say in the way the humanitarian crisis has been handled, as we do have a responsibility with respect to the policies implemented by our governments. Maybe not all of us have the resources to physically go and save them. Nevertheless, through awareness, critical thinking, accountability and political participation we can demand the compliance of the duty to rescue, and ultimately alternative measures that ensure safe migrations. It is very easy to think we are hopeless, that there is nothing we can do, or that the problem is too distant to our own reality. But as a society we can do better and we have to do better, because there are people whose hopes to survive are placed on us.

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Anja Radonjic

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Elizabeth Rose*

## The joys and tribulations of writing: how to re-discover your own voice

Before there was a first sentence to this piece, I probably glared at the flickering cursor for days. I did not even begin or delete sentences, dissatisfied with how they rolled off of their tongue, or because I wanted to write about a complex, carefully crafted topic. I simply had nothing to say. The last few weeks I've spent finishing up one zoom call after another, and trying to remind myself that I am still a decent being, even if I haven't called my family or friends long enough that I lost their notifications in WhatsApp.

In the rare moments when the world would briefly quieten down, I sat silently on the flowery yoga matt of my barren room. Eyes wide open, yet no thoughts or wonder or inspiration filled up my mind. I tapped on the parquet, thinking: "Have I written about all that I know?"; "What if those previous pieces were all that there was to my writing?". Writers' block is as humbling, as it can be excruciating; it is a journey through the murky waters you hear of in the tales of Hercules, only to find a waterfall of fresh inspiration in the least expected place, and begin again with a clear, satiated head. Some writers' block lasts for days, and for some, like American author Fran Lebowitz (and one of my favourite New Yorkers), it can last for decades.

So what do we do, if our life experiences, our dreams, traumas, or causes we care about cease to flow into words? What if there is nothing more I can share and find to connect with you?

*Back to the basics.* I take my blue notepad out for a walk, and on the tram back home jot down all the smells, the sounds, the colours that stood out. Maybe you see a lady with a TRAMP 2 licence plate, or perhaps you will notice how the majority of dogs look like their owners. Maybe someone will make you laugh, or unfortunately, disturb you with their words or behaviour. Write it down. I'll admit it reluctantly, but I do like eavesdropping (and my apologies, fellow commuters) - each person is a storyline and a mystery I have but a short time to understand and resolve, before they alight at the next stop. I scribble down what I hear, what makes me laugh, or sends chills down my spine. Sometimes the art of writing like

this reminds me of petty thievery, an unsolicited thrill. In the end, your notebook ends up full of gateways to tiny, secret, personal worlds not your own, precious seeds that watered and warmed can germinate into seedlings of inspiration. In what ways can a stranger relate to you? What are some of the hopes you share? Are your memories cut from the same cloth, have you both known the same city your entire lives? Dream up their lives.

*Family and friends.* I am fortunate enough to be surrounded by some of the most amazing painters, thinkers, writers and trailblazers; great little beans, as my lovely editor says. Your circles are what shape your own story and writing – even if they infuriate you. Maybe that’s even better – how do you write about their stories, or their words of wisdom to you – with honesty and compassion? Great way to break a writers’ block is to write them a letter. It helps tap into your honest, most sincere feelings and thoughts. When I was a teenager, I used to write letters for my friends’ birthdays. Imagine my surprise when an image of my 12 year old handwriting popped onto my screen the other day, with a message that read: “Look what I still keep around.”

*Patience.* Experiencing writers’ block, I realised something was off balance. The words, usually so dependable, would not fall into a sentence, and there was no cohesiveness to anything I wanted to share. Writing is, at best, a moment of honesty captured, a moment of intro-spection but also of extro-spection. In the spirit of that honesty, I will tell you, it takes patience – from yourself, and from your editors (:). Shockingly, you will not simply drop your pen or close your laptop forever – you may come back with new stories in mind, or with new paths you want to explore. Maybe you continue walking, after a deep breath and a quietly uttered “here we go”, exactly where you left off.

The greatest challenge perhaps, believing in the power of your own voice. Voices are uncatchable frequencies with which we fine-tune our society. Do not let go of yours – nurture it; listen to what it’s being said, and especially to the silences and words unsaid. In the words unsaid, there is a whole world of stories waiting to be written.

And I leave you with a question, a writing prompt that sits at the top of my white-board ever since I read Audre Lorde’s essays : “What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence.”





Elizabeth Rose

*edited by  
Meghan Dhawan*

## **Stubborn optimism and ridiculous, unrelenting hope: a philosophy for the climate crisis**

If you've seen a golden pink sunrise caress the London skyline, or heard the burgeoning birdsong that accompanies the coming of Spring; if you've revelled in watching loved ones succeed at something they care about with eyes wide (maybe teary) with pride, or spat out your drink laughing at something ridiculous they've said or done; if you've danced unapologetically and shamelessly to your favourite song, or eaten some really, stupidly, delicious cake, then you know at least six reasons to be hopeful for the future.

*But*, in today's frankly terrifying political climate, I argue that being hopeful isn't quite enough. In the current political circumstances, we need to be stubbornly, resolutely, and quite *ridiculously* hopeful, as well as unshakably optimistic, because the alternative isn't an option. The old adage, '[w]hether you think you can or you can't, you're correct' is not always true – for example, I assure you, there isn't quite enough belief in this mortal plane for my mere faith in the fact that I could win an Olympic medal in the high-jump to render *any* such occurrence close to reality – however, it has merit. I wholeheartedly believe that adopting a stubbornly optimistic philosophy and political view is the only way in which our generation can hope to succeed in dismantling systems of inequality, as well as mitigate the ecological crisis at hand. In this article therefore, I'm going to explore the concept of stubborn optimism and its relation to the ecological (or climate) crisis. I maintain that stubborn optimism is an essential tool for the sustainability of the movement to help decelerate the rate at which the planet approaches ecological collapse, as well as the sanity of this movement's participants.

Make no mistake, stubborn optimism and hopefulness, does not mean toxic or unrelenting positivity, far from it. It is not blithely saying 'don't worry, everything's fine', no indeed. Integral to stubborn optimism is the recognition of the gravity of the ecological crisis and maintaining, at the same time, the resilience and courage to believe in and work towards a future where this isn't the case. Dr. Deepika Chopra describes optimism as a marriage of resilience and curiosity – the ability to recognise that a situation is far from ideal, and persevere anyway, entwined with a desire and willingness to find out what happens next (2021). In

*The Future we Choose*, Christiana Figueres explains that ‘optimism is not soft, it is gritty’, and writes that ‘[o]ptimism ‘is not the *result* of achieving a task we have set for ourselves. That is a celebration. Optimism is the necessary *input* to meeting a challenge’ (2020: 54). Such a notion is resonant with Rebecca Solnit’s musings on hope. For example, Solnit has written, that ‘[t]o hope is to give yourself to the future, and that commitment to the future makes the present inhabitable’ (2004: 4). Understood in this way, optimism and hope are tools we can employ in climate advocacy to resist apathy, helplessness or, worse, despondency faced with a future that is not guaranteed, but one in which we choose to believe, and take active steps to securing regardless of an assured outcome.

But why *stubborn* optimism? Well, because the effects of climate breakdown are terrifying, overwhelming, and complex, and progress to tackle them has (so far) been slow, and the G20 governments’ commitments to a just transition entirely insufficient! Thus, determination and no small degree of faith are needed to participate in the climate movement. Especially since the human-induced concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> in the environment today is currently trapping ‘the heat equivalent of 500,000 Hiroshima-sized bombs’ every day (McKibben, 2022: 219), and food insecurity is fast becoming ‘the planet’s most significant human threat, leading the world to the precipice of a great climate migration’ (Lustgarten, 2022: 166). What’s more, climate-induced sea level rises are incrementally submerging whole island states, with those like Kiribati expected to be entirely below sea level by the end of the century, along with the homes of the 75 million people globally who live less than one metre above sea level. Unsurprisingly, mass migration levels are expected to rise exponentially as a result, with up to 1.2 billion people estimated to be displaced by 2050 (Oki, 2022) – the scale of this movement ‘will be globally destabilising’ (Lustgarten, 2022: 167) and intensify resource conflicts globally. From a human rights and immigration perspective this is especially challenging as the status of ‘climate refugee’ has yet to be formally recognised in international human rights law (‘refugee’ refers to someone with a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” who, for such reasons, is unable to stay in or return to their state of origin – as per the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees). Human conflicts have also been shown to be a direct cause of climate change and biodiversity loss, thus, not only are rising temperatures exacerbating trends towards violence but, in turn, they are worsening the climate crisis. Further extractive industries, especially the non-renewable energy sector, regularly destroy and pollute lands in ways that are both neo-colonial and genocidal to indigenous peoples, whose culture is often tied to the land upon which they have lived since time immemorial. This in turn is devastating for the environment since, although indigenous peoples represent only around five percent of the global population, they are ‘responsible for guarding and preserving eighty percent of the biodiversity’ on Earth (Guajajara, 2022: 177). Faced with these facts, optimism is essential, and the more stubborn the better. The alternative – assuming a position of apathetic despondency, assured that there is nothing you as an individual can do given the predominant responsibility of corporations and governments in generating these crises – is not only mislead, but has ‘become fundamentally irresponsible’ (Rivett-Carnac, Figueres, 2020: 50). System change is a ‘deeply personal endeavour’ (ibid: 46), and we cannot disillusion ourselves as to the impact that our beliefs and ideologies hold over the social and economic systems in which we live. As Ursula Le Guin once said, ‘we live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings’ (2014). Stubborn optimism is recognising the possibility, not inevitability, of a ‘better’ future, and then investing courage and commitment to work towards this.

Vital to maintaining this philosophy, because let's face it – it can be hard(!) – is access to evidence that our efforts are effective and have impact, as well as exposure and engagement to like-minded individuals, communities and global networks, because we are not alone! (A propensity for stubbornness will also help). I have previously written for Journal d'Ambroisie on the value of networks of support and information in advocacy, and I believe that their importance cannot be overstated. For example, anyone reading the news in the United Kingdom at the moment would be forgiven for failing to have heard of the incredible and essential new United Nations High Seas Treaty. Amid the maelstrom of coverage of the proposed 'Illegal' Migration Bill and Garry Lineker's 'uNhEIPFuL' comments about it (inverted commas and capitalisation, my own), this exciting new international mechanism to ensure biodiversity and ocean protection may not have registered in the collective consciousness of climate-concerned citizens. Although the High Seas Treaty is a long way from implementation, let alone regulation (it is still in the process of ratification), its being written and agreed upon after over a decade of debate, is demonstrative of the power and purpose of long term, sustained lobbying.

The last international agreement on ocean protection was over forty years ago, and given the rapid climate change-induced warming and acidification of the seas, as well as rampant unregulated fishing and mining, nearly 10% of marine species are in danger of extinction and the effectiveness of the ocean as a carbon sink is increasingly threatened. The High Seas Treaty however, agreed on March 4th, 2023, aims to ensure that 30% of international waters will be protected areas by 2030, in contrast to the 1.2% that is currently protected, in order to safeguard and recuperate marine life. This Treaty, in addition to the Paris Agreement, and Montreal Protocol among others before it, are the result of years of targeted and relentless campaigning and compromise, and are testament to the importance of stubborn optimism. And these are only examples of international regulations. On a daily basis, individuals and communities around the world campaign for local sustainability improvements and innovate small scale biodiversity and carbon reduction solutions. (Some local personal favourites I have recently discovered are The Conservation Volunteers and the Trees for Cities. Surfers against Sewage are also doing incredible and essential work to challenge the pollution of Britain's seas, and you should definitely look them up).

In summary, whenever the threat of climate breakdown, systemic inequality, and the political intransigence we encounter in relation to these inextricably linked issues seem too overwhelming to countenance, especially in the face of a near unprecedented scientific consensus on the gravity of the issues, we must remember our successes and celebrate each of them, then take it as impetus for our next. Where would we be without the resilience and curiosity of those past advocates who refused to endure the unendurable threat of a future that was the same as the present?

A final useful thing to remember in assuming a determinedly optimistic philosophy, is that change is not linear. In any movement and process, there are thresholds, tipping points, and we cannot predict when, who, or what precisely will bring these to fruition. We can only hope and believe resolutely that they will come. Greta Thunberg has referred to such thinking as 'cathedral thinking', explaining: "We must lay the foundation while we may not know exactly how to build the ceiling" (2019). I for one am optimistic that soon, together, we might work it out.

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Gábor A. Papp

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## Even when missiles are heading towards you, dare to look up

It is hard not to think about war these days. With news popping up on our screens every minute, detailing the latest casualties, another attack, or some new tool of destruction, we immediately think about the muddy trenches and blood-soaked fields with dead bodies all over them. War has another face, though. The side that goes against the dead and calls for the living, the one that represents anti-fear and anti-despair. So let's talk about *hope*, and its manifestation in war through the angles of the individual as part of the army, leadership, and technology.

Hope is motivation wrapped up in a fancy dress. Point. Is it real? Definitely not. Does it have to be? No. Hope is an illusion, made up internally and/or externally, and manifested in us along with our subjective perspectives. That doesn't make it less true or consequential. For instance, in *Star Wars* (1977), the two sides – the Rebellion and the Empire – are fighting against one another, believing that the other side threatens their perceived order, and hoping that their order will be better and fairer. In war, hope is a *must*. If there is none, the people will not fight. In such a state of complex triggers, one must know how to supply motivation and fuel this dreadful machine.

### *Why the army?*

We fight to survive, that is for sure. But even a soldier does not always have to fight for their life. There are three stages of motivation for them. (1) Initial for enlisting, (2) sustained to endure the military life, and (3) combat motivation to fight. Incentives include coercive (punishment), remunerative (material reward or compliance), and finally, normative power, in the form of status symbols such as promotion and everything that comes with it. Rather than thinking about them as separate entities, these powers all work together, mixed up with some basic materialism, ideology to legitimise the demands of a soldier's life, and patriotism to believe in the just cause of war and to dehumanise the enemy. According to Berkovich (2017), the cohesion and ideology of normative factors strengthened by regimental communities, which meant sermons, ceremonies, a sense of belonging, and honour of being a soldier, were the primary sources

of sustained motivation. Back in the *ancien régime*, the military also served as a counter-culture for those who could not fit into civil society. They were taught proper posture, walking, and even talking to become *gentleman soldiers*. Last but not least, basics such as free food and accommodation were also important factors. Thus, the army externalised hope for those looking for community and wanting to get ahead but could not find their place in civil society. Even two hundred years later, these principles barely changed, rather, they adapted to a new norm.

### *Leadership*

The will to fight and kill has always had a great impact on war; leaders can either strengthen it or tear it down. A great example is the battle of Poltava in 1709. As noted by Englund (2003), the forcefulness of the Swedes depended on morale and not on their superior technique. They had a will to win and faith that the enemy would break first. This was perpetuated by their king Charles XII (1682 – 1718), who was believed to be invincible due to the battles he won, even when they were outnumbered. The king knew about the power of example and deliberately ate and dressed the simplest way with the rest of the soldiers. Englund notes, “Charolous was a talisman of victory” (p. 95). That is why his wound- which he got ten days prior to Poltava after a musket-ball penetrated his foot (Boniface, 2018)- shook the army’s morale. That said, the Swedes’ failure in the battle resulted from logistical problems, and overconfidence due to their previous victories against impossible odds, which proves that hope can serve as medicine *and* poison when one becomes overly reliant. Charles’ own hubris fits into this perfectly as he downplayed the importance of artillery in favour of their own valour. Indeed, with the ever changing face of warfare one must keep in mind that there are other ways than human to motivate soldiers, which brings us to the importance of weapons.

### *Technology*

From simple sticks to crossbows, and mechanised tools of annihilation, war has served as a laboratory where humans could find new ways to increase their own security while simultaneously decreasing their opponent’s. The English longbows at Agincourt (1415) and the muskets at Waterloo (1815) provided increased lethality on the battlefield for a short time. With the First World War and the industrialization of warfare, soldiers could not only maintain this lethality over wide areas for a sustained period, but it also altered their experience (Keegan, 2011). He notes that these developments made it easier to be a soldier and kill, considering that using a machine gun is much easier than wielding a sword. Not only does it require less training, but the distance and visibility make war impersonal. This technological romanticism (Schneider, 2023), the idea to pursue ever bigger and better tools to win, is deeply embedded in the nature of warfare, but more apparent since the Second World War, which ushered a whole new era in terms of capability research and development to outperform one’s opponent. Whether it is nuclear weapons, Reagan’s “Star Wars” defense plan, which remained science fiction, or the introduction of GPS and stealth technologies at Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm in 1991 (Edwards, 2022)- which was also the beginning of modern warfare- these techs provided an edge, and thus confidence for the soldiers and the states alike.



### *Strategic importance*

Hope, motivation, optimism, or name it *the light at the end of the tunnel*, is an inherently human belief that has everything to do with our daily lives, particularly with traumatic events when we have to push through, or perish. *Hope is not a strategy*, says the usual military maxim. Indeed it isn't, but it is nevertheless a vital component. Any strategy that only builds on high ideals without the necessary groundwork that makes it into reality is doomed to fail (Weber, 2018). Strategy is not a science, but an art of big-picture thought and adaptation, where the driving force behind careful planning, logistics, and a ton of other factors is an optimistic goal. In that sense, hope is both the strategy's starting *and* ending point.

When it comes to the war waged by Russia, one cannot but admire the bravery of Ukrainians on the battlefield. This bravery derives from basic survival and patriotism, fuelled by their success against the once believed to be all-powerful Russian Empire and maintained by many of its allies in the form of money and capabilities. This war proves that hope might only be the light at the end of the tunnel, but also the tunnel itself. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the idea of a Ukraine which is capable of defending itself was carefully created and nurtured with \$2.7 billion worth of military assistance in the form of training and equipment by the end of 2021 from the U.S. (Mackinnon & Detsch, 2021). This clearly laid the groundwork for what we see on the battlefield today. However, hope is a hungry entity, and one must keep feeding it to see its full glory. With the war reaching its second year, the stakes are getting higher. The initial success against the Russians became the norm. Ukraine must end the war by inflicting a military defeat on the invader before it becomes frozen and protracted - which would enable Moscow to prepare for a counter attack. The soon-to-arrive Western capabilities and the hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers and officers trained in foreign countries will be the last pillar of hope (Rukomeda, 2023). Once they arrive, Zelenskyy will have to answer a very critical question: *How to defeat Russia just enough to deter it from attacking it for years, if not decades, without risking an escalation?*

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Vita Klimaitė

edited by  
Faustas Norvaisa

**Epigraph:** *This article is the first one of a dedicated column. It was inspired by a wish to explore the broad social impact of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. It evolved into a series of informal interviews with people of post-Soviet backgrounds (Russian, Polish, Lithuanian) whose family members support Russian invasion of Ukraine. The goal of these interviews was to understand the personal impact such vast ideological differences have on emotional family bonds. The citations that appear in the text are taken from the interviews, but due to the sensitivity of the topic, the identities of the interviewees remain anonymous.*

## Some Gaps Can Only Be Bridged by Hope: Family Relationships Amid the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict

Selective memory supported by the omniscient Internet created a hotbed for molding strong individual beliefs. People are convinced their truth is the only truth. In everyday life, productive conversations regarding social issues are scarce, facts are being misinterpreted left and right, and people who disagree are growing further and further apart. Unless your family is whom you disagree with.

Family is unconditional. You're there, despite the shortcomings, the disagreements, and the differences. But what if the disagreements are rooted in such profound differences, they evolve into despair? How short can the shortcomings be?

With the initial shock wearing off, we've learned to live in the shadow of Russian aggression against Ukraine. Daily reminders that humans are capable of unspeakable evil are far more accessible than ever. So we live in the shadow of it, but we definitely haven't forgotten about it. And even though all the facts are seemingly there, somehow we're still divided. These views are not often broadcasted, for obvious reasons, but as a result of extensive propaganda, a good chunk of the Soviet Union generation stand by Putin and render the Russian aggression justified.

Propaganda functions in complex and mysterious ways. The general outlook is that propaganda brainwashes susceptible people and turns them into mindless marionettes to be manipulated at the whim of the source. In reality, you can't

simply force people to immediately believe what you want them to believe. You have to weave the narrative around pre-existing beliefs. The effectiveness of Russian propaganda is a product of, at this point, centuries of deliberate national glorification and fact reinterpretation or denial that made people *want* to believe.

The Soviet Union did a solid job of cutting up history and social realities into pieces and sewing an agreeable aunty quilt out of it. One of those you know is ugly, but cherish nonetheless. And even though the Soviet Union is long gone, the quilt in the form of *homo sovieticus* remains. *Homo sovieticus* supports Russia in anything it does.

*Homo sovieticus* is oftentimes used in a pejorative and overgeneralized sense, but my intention here isn't to mock. *Homo sovieticus* refers to blind conformism to the Soviet regime and is a more dangerous concept than it seems at first. It can be interpreted as the inability of the average masses to think critically, but in reality it's a product of social trauma inflicted by the regime, even on the most intelligent of the crowds.

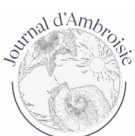
If your family members support Russian military actions, you're at no risk of becoming a reliable statistic. Few people openly speak up, so secret polls and semi-educated guesses are our best bet if we wish to estimate the number of Russians that favor Putin's actions. However, those numbers are at a staggering [70-80%](#) (Statista Research Department, 2023), depending on the source. Amid these statistics, personal family life is at a confusing crossroad. An especially confusing one for children who grew up under generally liberal influences, with complete freedom to shape informed opinions and stand in stark contrast to their parents raised in the Soviet Union, where even acknowledging prohibition was prohibited. With such drastically different backgrounds in play, conflicts occur.

The conversations around this topic are intensely personal; no one wants to see their family members publicly exposed and judged, no matter their flaws. But from the conversations I did manage to have, the despair upon realizing your family supports Vladimir Putin is met with denial, logically grounded conversation, or an emotional fight. From all angles, hope is what unites.

Hope for a change of opinion is what drives a family forward in the time of complete and utter ideological separation. But a rooted opinion is not an easy stone to move. And you can choose to nurture that hope both passively or actively. Most decide to live in denial - "It's like a public secret within our family circle - many know my dad approves of Putin's international actions, but no one talks about it. I've learned not to ask questions". And you can't really blame them; a battle with selective memory, propaganda, and a pinch of strong character that most Soviet era parents have is not an easy one to take on.

Others turn to religion. "I constantly pray for my family. I ask God to open their eyes. Because I feel like if not God, who else can?"

Some take on a much more active role in their hopes. They join anti-war protests, albeit dangerous even outside Russia, support independent press and media channels and, most importantly, challenge their family members. They decide to try and open up their loved ones to a different angle on the current events, even though they encounter walls. "We've tried to talk about these topics, don't think we haven't. It's just that my dad lived in Russia for a while and had a high level of business success. So he's convinced Putin is doing something right."



One prevalent thread was regularly sending financial support to Ukraine. “That’s the least I can do. I can’t do anything about my family, but maybe I can tip the scale this way.”

There is hardly any place for judgment on how people handle such differences within a family unit. What I’m trying to accomplish is to learn and understand, for the situation is troublesome.

Many cups of coffee, grim faces, and uncomfortable silences went into forming an understanding of this struggle within such complicated family environments. And the takeaway is this - hoping passively might be enough for coping, but it doesn’t solve anything in itself. No matter how profoundly troublesome the topic, we have to try and build a constructive conversation around it, at least in our immediate circles. That is, we have to hope actively.

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**Zsófi Lazar**

*edited by  
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## **The Frontlines – Unacknowledged Heroes**

The frontlines are where it all happens: the beeping of heart monitors, the whine of the ambulance as it accelerates, and the chatter of both the nurses and doctors as they take their breaks after gruelling twelve-hour shifts in the emergency rooms. Despite enduring the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, frontline NHS workers have been deeply undervalued. March will mark a change. Nurses and junior doctors will be on strike for over 72 hours, while ambulances bow out to help those in a state of emergency due to a last-minute cancellation of their proposed strikes on March 6th and 20th.

COVID-19 has radically changed healthcare for everyone in the industry. It's shown cracks in the system that remained undiscovered until now, and highlighted areas that require profound investment and change. This turbulent period for all frontline workers has been one characterised by major risk, a lack of protective equipment, and burnout due to overworking. While talking to Carla, a junior doctor, about her experience in the COVID-19 pandemic, Christmas 2020 marked an identifiable moment of deterioration, with the influx of COVID patients derailing teaching hours and regular ward routines – for her, “chaos was a commonly used word”. Junior doctors in particular had to step up during the pandemic to assist doctors and take charge as they would not normally have been expected to. According to her first-hand account, Carla's electives and non-mandatory seminars disappeared during her two four-month shifts in the Acute Medical Unit and the Surgery wards. Unexpected assignments to the COVID wards were not uncommon, and picking up the slack caused by absenteeism was key to keeping the hospitals running. The British Medical Journal wrote in June 2020 that four percent of all COVID patients “become critically ill and require admission to the intensive care unit (ICU) for respiratory support”, where many trainees were deployed, despite a lack of resources and training during the worst of the pandemic. (Coughlan, 2020)

The levels of burnout this entailed has been seen as hugely problematic for all healthcare assistants, marking up one of the most troubling effects of the pandemic. By the end of 2020, over fifty percent of healthcare workers felt that their mental health had deteriorated, with burnout and compassion fatigue being topics prominently featured in the report. Though official support such as counselling was available during this time, this felt ‘quite impersonal’ to most; Carla herself and those she knew rarely used it. Instead, bonds forged between



workers created the most valuable support networks. The lack of PPE, or personal protective equipment, was also reported as a major problem for those working in hospitals – though frontline workers spent up to thirteen hours in masks and visors, working with hundreds of patients, the British Medical Journal discovered that half of doctors relied on donated or self-bought PPE (personal protective equipment) and two-thirds did not feel fully protected from coronavirus. (Patterson, 2020)

Moreover, the pandemic led to a backlog of patients who needed to receive non-vital medical care. There are still recorded waits for cancer and elective patient care, with the waitlist at seven million patients, while the proportion of people receiving timely cancer treatment has actually decreased. It has been said that the target to reduce the number of people waiting too long for urgent referral will not be met. Further, the British Medical Journal has stated that NHS workers have still not recovered from burnout during the pandemic, which in 2020 contributed to over 1000 of those people surveyed stating that they would quit the NHS over the government's poor handling of the pandemic. (Lovett, 2020) This continues to feed the migration of junior and newly-qualified doctors to other European countries.

For years, healthcare professionals, such as those who have been striking, have either been denied pay rises in line with inflation, or have been met with pay freezes. This makes a mockery of a system that was once the UK's crowning glory, and is intended to save lives. This is the key reason behind the large number of ongoing strikes. For nurses, a pay rise of 5% above inflation has been demanded by the RCN, although it has been said that they are open to negotiations and meeting the government "halfway". The Department of Health and Social Care said that, "Using October's RPI inflation data, a 5% above inflation rise would equate to a pay rise of 19.2%." (Media, 2022) In contrast, junior doctors in England want a pay rise to compensate for their 26% drop in earnings that have been seen since 2008, with inflation taken into account. Although no figure has been named, ambulance workers and physiotherapists also want above-inflation pay rises – all of which the government states is unaffordable, and they use that to fall back on the excuse that these pay rises are decided by independent Pay Review Bodies. Despite this, fourteen health unions, representing more than a million NHS workers in England, said they would no longer work with such Pay Review Bodies on 2023–2024 pay. (Campbell, 2023)

Though NHS staff in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales have already received an average increase of 4.75%, with the lowest paid staff members guaranteed a rise of at least £1,400. And in Scotland, a pay offer averaging 7.5% has been accepted by some unions, with nurses saying that Prime Minister Sunak has left them with "no choice" but to strike. (BBC, 2022) This is due to shortages in pay that make current care standards "unsafe". (Doherty, 2023) Ambulance workers similarly state that pay increases will make bridging staffing gaps viable, which is a vital part of making the NHS and the service itself safer and more efficient. The importance of bridging these issues additionally can be seen in ambulance delays rocketing upwards, with figures suggesting that a quarter of ambulances were delayed for an hour outside Emergency rooms. Finally, junior doctors wanted a pay rise to make up for what they described as a 26% drop in earnings since 2008, while taking inflation into account. The British Medical Association says that the offer of a two per cent pay rise has "significantly eroded morale" and in terms of real pay amounts to a pay cut, meaning that staff are "working more than a month for free this year". (Media, 2022)

General secretary of the union, Christin McAnea, further stated that the strikes came as a result of the government's own inaction. "This year's pay rise simply wasn't enough to halt

the exodus of staff from the NHS". (Doherty, 2023) This statement, though demoralising, seems true. Despite the appreciation shown for medical professionals during the pandemic, the clapping and fruit baskets received by various members of the NHS, such as Carla, is not enough. They are still missing the most important variable in this equation – proper payment. Some measures have been taken by the government to halt the strikes, however, such as negotiations with the Royal College of Nursing; though no pay deal has been reached thus far, talks in doing so have been described as “constructive” by the Department of Health and Social care.

These talks will form the basis of the new British healthcare system, hopefully one in which the NHS workers that take care of us all will be adequately supported in return. Doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, ambulance workers, and junior doctors deserve fair compensation for all that they have endured and the work that they do every day to keep the UK population alive and healthy, and to keep the country running. They are the crucial backstage helpers without whom we cannot hope to by. All we can do now is hope that these strikes and discussions bring about enough change to alter the course of the NHS and allow it to evolve with the current times, returning it to its pride of place at the heart of the UK.

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## Draco, Causes We Care About



Linda Luciani

*edited by  
Elizabeth Rose*

### **Degrowth: The most promising recipe to save the Planet is NOT mainstream (yet)**

I am writing this article today because last December, I was cancelling weekend nights-out, wrapped in my duvet, eagerly turning pages of a book that inspired me enormously. The book in question was *Less is More: How degrowth will save the World* by the anthropologist J. Hickel. In this article, I want to introduce you to degrowth, the arguments for degrowth, and the scientific and socioeconomic foundations that support it. In addition, I wish to provide a snapshot of the future possibilities that degrowth could enable and that make me extremely thrilled about this topic.

*1. Is green growth the way to save the planet? Degrowth as an alternative.*

In one of its reports the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2012) examines the 'green economy' as one that simultaneously grows income and improves human well-being 'while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities' (Anderson, 2011). Green economy strategies mainly focus on the speed of private and public investments in green energy solutions as a pillar to transition the global economy to a green-growth model.

There are two main, data substantiated, arguments that undermine green growth. Firstly, empirical evidence shows that given the current status of technology it is unlikely that an absolute decoupling of economic growth and carbon emissions can occur within the timeframe and 1.5/2°C threshold dictated by the Paris Agreement beyond which earth's ecosystems will be damaged irreparably – unless growth rates remain close to zero while mitigation starts immediately (Kallis & Hickel, 2020; Haberl et al., 2020). Secondly and most importantly, even in the hypothetical eventuality that technological advances facilitate decoupling, in a capitalistic economy, efficiency gains will be invested in more production and overall amount of resources used – known as *Jevon's Paradox* (Kallis, 2018). Therefore, capitalism and planetary boundaries seem hard to reconcile, calling the ecological credentials of green growth policies into question.

In contrast with the dominant green growth position, “degrowth” movements are advancing an alternative position which questions the economic-growth prerogative in favour of a steady-state economy. Degrowth is meant as “a *planned reduction of energy and resource throughput* designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a way that reduces inequality and improves human well-being” (Hickel, 2021).



Figure 1.  
Self-described. Image courtesy  
of Vlad Bunea.

## 2. Breaking down degrowth

Our current economic systems are characterised by extreme greed and unsustainable consumption. On a finite planet, such models of growth are inherently self-destructive. What then, are the pathways for reduction in production and consumption? For example: *advertising and planned obsolescence* are just the most striking commercial strategies behind consumerism. They keep the hamster wheel of the economy running – the extra income which is the result of economic growth feeds into extra consumption which in turns induces more production. *The toll on the environment as well as the psychological implication* from the sense of insecurity and inadequacy in the aftermath of unfulfilled artificial needs induced by advertising are not reflected within the currently dominant indicator of economic performance, *GDP (Gross-Domestic-Product)*. GDP was invented in the US during the Great Depression and has been criticised as an outdated indicator since the 60s, yet very few governments worldwide would deliberately trade off agendas that sacrifice GDP growth with a better scoring on *alternative welfare-focused indicators* such as the Measure of Economic Welfare (MEW).

Degrowth-based agendas that get rid of unnecessary production will probably result in a *diminishing GDP at least in the short-medium term while delivering on resilient welfare metrics*.

## 3. Geographies of degrowth

Degrowth has its own geography and unprecedented distributional implications. *The Global North must reduce its environmental pressure while the Global South* still has its fair margin to bring its population to the level of satisfying basic needs and reach decent living standards (Demaria, 2019; Fanning et al., 2022). In one of the most interesting parts of his book, Hickel walks the reader through the origins and history of capitalism in Western Europe and its entanglement with 15th colonialism to *neo-colonialism*. He argues that the latter is *perpetuated through different institutional settings*, such as foreign direct investments in the Global South, along with the reinvestment of profits in the Global North and gigantic

national debt obligations leading to unfavourable trade conditions at the WTO for the Global South, due to low-bargaining power.

In fact, it has been estimated that the net outflow of resources from the Global South to the Global North may be as much as \$2 trillion per year (Hickel, 2017). *In a perspective of more equitable consumption of resources and limits to environmental harnessing, redistribution comes as a necessity. While capitalism and its mantra of perpetual growth promise that the diameter of the cake will keep growing and everyone will have a larger piece, now the narrative changes. The cake will not grow in its diameter, and whoever has been eating the largest slices until today, will have to give up some to those who are still hungry.*

It is worth mentioning a few more outstanding statistics on global wealth distribution but at an individual level. The wealthiest 10% of the world's population owns 82% of the world's wealth (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2021). The top 1% of adults owns 45% of the world's wealth, while the bottom 50% owns only 1% of the world's wealth (Oxfam, 2020). While ethical and moral concerns arise, when the lens of social science is applied to the planetary boundaries framework, it calls for the *necessity of setting social boundaries for example collectively defined thresholds that societies establish as self-limitations and conditions for a "good life for all."* The conditions to live a good life should not come at the expense of others' ability to do the same, nor at that of the flourishing of future generations or nonhuman others (Kallis, 2019).

#### *4. Principles of degrowth and the implications on Work-life balance*

As mentioned, degrowth is about rethinking all aspects of the current socio-economic structure and therefore it is worth mentioning an all-encompassing list of *degrowth principles*, which conceive the people and the planet as part of a unique ecosystem, as opposed to a hierarchy characterised by exploitation and depletion. *Useful production* (the economy of "wants" reduced to economy of "needs"), *circularity* (minimal or zero waste), *sharing* (from transportation to sharing gardening equipment), *local production and consumption* (reducing emissions from *transportation and distribution*), as well as relational goods (less material goods and more relationships), work-life balance (*work less, play more*) (Parrique, 2022).

In particular, I would like to focus on a few implications with respect to jobs and work-life balance. The reduction of throughput and therefore the need for less working hours, as well as the command to *reinvest efficiency gains from innovation in leisure time*, rather than in an expansion of production (Hickel, 2021), altogether call for policies such as the *four-day working week*, which is already a reality in an expanding trajectory. In order not to fall into the vicious circle of "unnecessary" production and consumption, *it is important to ensure that extra off-work time is invested in activities that are low in carbon intensity.* This rules out short haul flights for minibreaks, sorry! But fortunately, slow travel is becoming increasingly expansive, and the more we use it, demonstrate demand, and prove interest, the cheaper and more accessible it will become. Nonetheless, night train routes are unfortunately still very rare, while they would constitute a competitive solution with respect to the plane. Indeed, cross-nation night trains would be still affordable while emitting +80% less on the same route by flying.

Instead, degrowth suggests the *cultivation of cultural and social activities within local*



*communities and non-profit organisations* in the form of volunteering, teaching/learning an instrument, taking on a foreign language, starting a group sport or simply investing in human relationships. When it comes to organisational forms of business, *non-profit, social enterprises and cooperatives* might seem more suited to deliver on degrowth principles and objectives rather than the traditional for-profit. While this looks like an appealing scenario, industries are going through a *digital transition that adds complexity to pre-figurative scenarios and opens to more questions*. For example, how will the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) interplay with the ecological transition in reshaping future jobs? *Will efficiency gains from AI be harnessed in favour of degrowth goals?* Literature on degrowth is still in its early stages, we will have to wait to see.

### 5. An idealist's (!) final remarks

I want to leave you with the *8 pathways to a post-capitalist world* that Hickel details in his book and that, ideally, should be the target of each state government and non-state actors insofar as they can influence state policy .

- i. Step 1: End planned obsolescence
- ii. Step 2: Cut advertising
- iii. Step 3: Shift from ownership to usership
- iv. Step 4: End of food waste
- v. Step 5: Scale down ecologically destructive industries
- vi. Step 6: Decommodify public good and expand the commons
- vii. Step 7: Fewer working hours, but jobs for all

Last but not least, on a personal note, there is one idea that really got me hooked, and that is the decolonization of the Global South in parallel to a pathway of degrowth in the Global North. While this pathway might just be the only credible one to save the world from climate breakdown, it promises *two other outstanding outcomes: a global reduction of inequalities and a socio-economic system centred around human-wellbeing, while striving for their best ontological version*. Such vision could reshape the global order for decades to come, to the same extent that global leaders did at the end of WWII. There is an entire system to be built behind, and this might seem overwhelming for the International Political Economy, but "utopian thinking also means being bold in dreaming not only of alternative societies, but also of the ways of getting there, and sometimes some of them can turn into self-fulfilling prophecies" (Parrique, 2022).



Figure 2: Books on degrowth. Two recommendations to get started: Less is more: How degrowth will save the World by J. Hickel ; The Future is degrowth: A Guide to a World beyond Capitalism by M. Schmelzer. Image courtesy of Timothée Parrique's personal website.

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## Draco, Causes We Care About



Shereen Rana

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### On the Subversion of Darkness

"The darker the night, the brighter the stars, the deeper the grief,  
the closer is God!"

Fyodor Dostoevsky

There are the classic sayings: "If there be light, then there is darkness," "without darkness, there would be no light," "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that." These sayings have held fast throughout time for their figurative quality: the dark is intertwined with each individual life and through the expanse of history.

The sky and the dark have not only beckoned humans to cross oceans and measure time, but also question our own selves and what the enormity of the universe made us—enter, the "grand scheme of things." All facets of the human effort—scientific, artistic, philosophical, and geographic have been tied to the stars.

For a very long time, the Paiute of North America have believed in the North Star being a sheep, Nah-gah, that had lost its way high above a mountain, and now stayed there, a beacon guiding other sheep on their path. But now, the Earth itself risks losing direction as light takes over everything.

Jean Baudrillard has said, "We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning." Our eyes are subjected to layers upon layers of bright visual stimulation while we lose our definition of the night, of connectedness with the dark. This rings truer when we see how strong, unshielded lights, whether industrial or on our phone screens, serve to spill over and minimize the natural dark, making it deeper, more consuming.

A Globe at Night research from 2021 shows data points from 20,801 observation points across 90 countries. Out of these, 14,719—more than 70%—had a limiting magnitude (LM) of 1-3, which indicates that only the brightest stars were visible. And further research found that over the 12 years, from 2011 to 2022, the sky brightness increased by 7-10% per year, 9.6% on average (Kyba et al. 2023). This occurrence can be explained by the fact that as artificial lighting is cast up,



shining into the night sky, alongside rain and snow, which is reflected by clouds and particles causing a phenomenon termed “skyglow.” This complex system of light and reflection has thrown a white sheet over the sky, blanketing the dark realm that all life had witnessed—until now. Yet, the problem of light pollution goes deeper than merely our “right to starlight.”

For one, astronomers dread that the very anchor of their calling is now being lost, curbing new aspirations from a generation growing up without ever seeing dark skies. D.L Crawford also sheds light, so to speak, on how so much of science and its accuracy is lost because of skyglow—the city lights outshining astronomy’s subjects make them increasingly hard to see through even telescopes. For example, the Hoher List Observatory at Bonn University was, in the 1950s, a wonderful point for seeing—acknowledging—the true night sky, but is now drowned out by the lights of nearby towns.

The night is thus no longer a time of darkness. Something that has, over millions of years, been ingrained into our systems, physical and ecological, is twisted out of the blue, and has consequences for humans as well as other species. “...When we talk about ecological light pollution, we talk about the health of ecosystems, and no matter who we are or where we live, we live as part of one. Our ecological knowledge is really knowledge of our own health” (Bogard, 2013, p. 121).

Melatonin, a neuro-hormone, called the “hormone of darkness” is produced and secreted under dark conditions. Even short wavelengths of light work to suppress melatonin production (Haim and Zubidat, 2015), linked with increased tumorigenesis. Melatonin has other areas of operation too: possessing antioxidant properties, inducing sleep, boosting the immune system, helping the functioning of the thyroid, pancreas, ovaries, testes and adrenal glands and lowering cholesterol.

Paul Bogard, in his book *The End of Night* (2013), emphasizes evolutionary perspectives. “Light pollution threatens [our] biodiversity by forcing sudden change on habits and patterns that have evolved to depend on light in the day and darkness at night,” he writes. Our internal circadian rhythms that synchronize the internal processes of birds, fish, insects, and plants—just as they do for humans—are disrupted by reception of light even with our eyes closed! Largely, humans’ biological clocks determine midnight to 6 a.m as a circadian trough, a time of sleep, and darkness. The absence of these is heavy on our body. Consider the classification of night shift work as a carcinogen (Zhang and Papantoniou, 2019); people that lose such rest are more likely to suffer from obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular issues, depression, substance abuse, and, as previously stated, breast and prostate cancer.

Moreover, the pervasiveness of blue light in our environment is even more hurtful than is currently widely understood. Our eyes are extremely sensitive to it. Our quest for energy-efficient lighting manifested in LEDs comes with a trade-off with our personal health as they produce a large amount of light in the blue spectrum. A Harvard study also drew possible connections between blue light and diabetes and obesity (Harvard Health Publishing, 2020). The researchers put ten people on a schedule that gradually shifted the timing of their circadian rhythms. As their circadian rhythms were disrupted, so that their rest time became later and later, their blood sugar levels increased, throwing them into a prediabetic state, and levels of leptin, a hormone that leaves people feeling full after a meal, went down. When baby sea turtles first step out into the world on sandy beaches carefully selected by their mothers. They move seaward, given the right conditions of the moon and the tide.

They know where to go because the moon tends to be on the side of the sea, along with the brighter reflection of the moon and the stars on the water. This is how it ought to be, anyway, but when the glaring streetlights and/or local disco outshine the sea, they are misdirected, and paddle along to their likely demise inland, away from any semblance of home (Mizon, 2002).

Dung beetles, too, are another of the victims. Research has found them unable to use their celestial compass in the presence of light pollution. They followed streetlights and illuminated buildings instead. Naturally, these beetles disperse in all directions, steering clear of one another and thereby avoiding confrontation (which often leads to death), but with artificial streetlight in the picture, they go in one direction owing to polarized light and increasingly meet their doom (Lund University, 2021).

Further, the United States alone on a daily basis sees more than a million birds and animals caught in the headlights and left behind as roadkill (Bogard, 2013). Half and some more of these occur at night, given many animals' nocturnal nature. These nighttime collisions are incredibly costly to humans as well. Bogard writes, "...statistically, deer are far more dangerous than mountain lions or bears or, certainly, wolves" (2013). More light does not necessarily translate to good illumination. The generous amount of optical rods in animal eyes blinds and stuns them in bright headlights. Thus highway lighting often proves ineffective.

Illumination is important. Tackling light pollution does not deny that; it simply acknowledges that most outdoor lighting used at night is inefficient, excessively bright, poorly targeted, improperly shielded, and too often unnecessary, wasteful. Misdirected light (and electricity) spills into the sky rather than serving its purpose of well-defined illumination to increase our range of vision and, therefore, our safety.

The incessant search for light despite the costs—financial, ecological, biological—has positioned the stars into a tragic place (or role).

The 1994 L.A. Earthquake left people, in the middle of a black-out, dialing 911 at the sight of a bizarre, unexpected "cloud"—later recognised to be the Milky Way (Drake, 2019, National Geographic). People in that moment were not worrying about the dark, but about the light that they'd forgotten about, that of the stars.

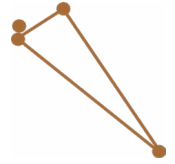
The night sky is something we, and other creatures with just as much right to the earth and the stars as us, have evolved and grown under. But we run the risk of losing our cradle as we watch the stars go out. Astronomers and their science, migratory birds, and elephants, insects, turtles and deer, and the human sense of having a place in the universe are now completely blinded. "To be alone in the dark is to drop back through the years," Bogard writes (2013). What could the very first humans have thought of looking up at the stars, so far, so inexplicable? It's safe to say, they loved them enough to eventually give them order, to name them before we truly knew them. These constellations and stories are dying now, going limp as we take the stars away. Luckily, unlike a lot of other forms of pollution, light pollution can be reversed. The International Commission on Illumination and the United Nation's Convention on Migratory Species are two of many organizations that provide crucial guidelines on how we can overturn the encroachment of light, and reclaim the dark skies.

Maybe one day, once again, we can look at Nah-gah and his starry brethren as we wonder at the skies, full again, in all their deeply dark, glimmering transcendence.



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*interviewed by  
Journal d'Ambroisie  
Editors in Chief*

## **“I want to encourage everyone to go look at art and feel”**

### **An Interview with Alexandra Steinacker-Clark**

**Journal d'Ambroisie:** You've been studying and working in the arts for the last few years, and you're an expert on everything related to the art world. So what should we hope to see in the art world in the next few years in terms of changes or developments? What do you see as the shifts happening right now?

**Alexandra Steinacker-Clark:** What I hope to see and what I am seeing a bit more of is definitely diversity and representation. And this is not just in relation to ethnicity and people from different cultures – although that is a huge and incredibly important part of it – but also in terms of economic standing. Arts is a sector where in order to garner success, sometimes you have to go freelance, you have to do your own project; it's not always tied to the stability of an organisation – and so if you look at people who have been incredibly successful in what they do in the art world, most of them come from wealthy upper-middle class backgrounds. It's a hard sector to make money in, to make a living off of, so it's rare to see someone from a more working class background or someone who hasn't been brought up with the security of a good financial standing thrive in this environment. Therefore, people from this background “making it” in this world is something that I would like to see more of, experience more of. I also sincerely hope that people within society will recognize the work that we do in the arts, that they'll feel more inclined to engage with the arts. I really believe that embracing the arts will have a positive effect on our society overall, in terms of our education levels, our empathy with one another, and how introspective we are as human beings.

**JA:** And as the host of the incredible ["All About Art"](#) podcast, is this project part of your hope for society to acknowledge the arts more?

**A:** 1000% yes, that is basically everything that my project revolves around. I started recording the podcast during the pandemic, I wanted to feel closer to the art world and to create something that the 21 year-old me starting to study Art History at UCL in London – not knowing much about the intricacies of the art world – would have really loved to have in order to gain a better idea of the sector so that I could feel more confident in entering into it.





Image 1: All About Art Cover

**JA:** You mentioned that there's more diversity in terms of class and economic background within the artist community. Is there a shift in terms of the audience as well? And is your podcast part of this democratisation mission to expand on who can consume the arts?

**A:** I sure hope so, because it's completely free to listen to. However, it is crucial to also think about who has the time to sit down and listen to podcasts. It is certainly a privilege to feel like you have the time to listen to a podcast about the art world, to get into the mindset of the arts more broadly. But it's free to listen to and you can do it on the tube while you're commuting, for example, so overall it's very accessible. Unfortunately, I don't have any actual way of measuring whether my podcast is reaching people from lower income backgrounds; that's actually something that I would love to find out more about, but as we stand now I only know where they're located in terms of cities as well as what their age is and what platform they're listening on. Even so, I've been receiving incredibly positive feedback from people from around the world who get in touch with me on LinkedIn and Instagram saying things such as, "I've discovered your podcast and I love it and it's inspiring to me", sometimes I receive them from artists who say, "I was listening to your podcast while I was painting." All of these interactions are so meaningful to me, I have a little album on my phone where I save all of the messages I receive. If I touch one person with what I do, that makes me happy, but I have been able to touch hundreds, which is surreal to me. And maybe, one day it could be thousands. But the fact that I have been able to positively influence people and inspire them to continue to work in the arts when it is a difficult sector to make a living in at the moment, – which is also what we're trying to change – that means so much to me.

**JA:** I'm very curious to hear, what are some of your all time favourite topics you discussed on the podcast? And who are some of your all time favourite guests?

**A:** I have to think about this one because there's a total of 46 episodes that have come out so far. I have to say, one of the topics that I loved was a solo episode that I did on art censorship. It was based off of an essay that I wrote for my master's degree, and I ended up giving talks about it as well at the Lansdowne Club. It was something that I researched in depth and I loved talking about it, and it was an interesting one to produce. For collaborative episodes, some of the people and topics that are coming to my mind now are Dr. Sabine Haag, director of the [Kunsthistorisches Museum](#) in Vienna, who was talking about how to direct a museum, and she was so open and vulnerable talking about the struggles they faced throughout COVID. Another meaningful one that I really enjoyed – and this is again keeping in mind this idea of class distinction within the arts – was when I did a podcast crossover with Gary Mansfield, who runs the ["Ministry of Arts"](#) podcast. Gary has been to prison and he went through a reform there, discovering art, and he has come out a changed man. Interviewing him and also listening to his podcast and just knowing him as a person, and to be able to showcase him and his journey on "All About Art" was an amazing experience. Then there was Gražina Subelytė from the [Peggy Guggenheim Collection](#), which was one of the proudest collaborations that I've ever done. But also [Libby Heaney](#), who's a quantum physicist and an artist. Or [Flora Bradwell](#), or [Lindsey Jean McLean](#), who are my friends and they are wonderful, amazing practising artists. Alayo Akinkugbe, who runs ["A Black History of Art"](#). Sometimes these are such vulnerable conversations and she was opening up to me about how she started her Instagram and how she began to gain confidence in what she's doing, which was beautiful to hear about. Holly J. Black, former managing editor of [Elephant Magazine](#) and the author of ["Artists on Art"](#). And there are plenty more that I haven't mentioned that changed the way I see the art world, and I have gained such an immense amount of knowledge through the people who have come on the podcast.

**JA:** Where would you like the podcast to lead you personally?

**A:** Honestly, it's a hard question to answer because where I always wanted it to lead me was such a flexible goal. I never really had a big finish line for it in the sense that I just wanted people to listen to it. Now, more people listen to it than I had expected or ever imagined. I'm also getting approached by companies or PR agencies to conduct interviews with people. I collaborated with the Peggy Guggenheim collection. I've had phenomenal people on the podcast who have shared their insights with me. I'm truly already so grateful with what this podcast has given me, and given the whole arts sector. Although I also have to say, obviously, I'm someone who is ambitious and who has goals. Therefore, what I would love and what I'm trying to do is to expand the podcast a bit more so that it's not just online; I'm speaking to galleries that I collaborate on the podcast with about doing a panel talk or an event surrounding the episode. Essentially, doing everything to give back to the art community through creating environments for networking, for knowledge exchange. I also have a newsletter now and I've launched the "All About Art" podcast [Instagram](#). But as I said, I'm trying to move it offline as well, doing more events, networking, panel discussions, exhibition tours surrounding "All About Art" to the point where it adds value to the sector.

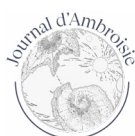






Image 2: 'All About Art' Episode 46

**JA:** Can we talk about the two year anniversary event?

**A:** Yes, one of the best examples of these efforts is the [“All About Art” second anniversary weekend](#). I wanted to throw an anniversary party, which I already did last year for the first anniversary on the [Slash Arts Houseboat](#). The collective let me have the boat for the night. I baked a little hors d'oeuvres and I served drinks and it was a very chill night to say thank you to the people who supported me throughout that first year. In the last year, the podcast has grown massively. I'm now in the top 10% of the most followed and the most shared podcasts worldwide. To celebrate this, what I wanted to do this year is create an event that is, again, something that adds value to the larger arts community. I wanted to throw a networking event where we are reimagining party games (like jenga) and creatively incorporating these into a networking structure for the evening so that people feel like they can blatantly network with one another, but in a comfortable, fun environment with barriers brought down. Here, I have to say thank you to [Kupfer](#), the project space and art gallery that I'm hosting the event at – they have given me their space for three days, and in addition to this they offered that if I wanted to do more surrounding the event, they would be happy to help. In fact, the anniversary has now developed into a full weekend with panel talks, exhibition tours, and this networking event, and with amazing professionals coming. I couldn't dream of the people who have said yes and are coming to talk about their experiences in the art world. It's so exciting, I'm thrilled!

**JA:** That's a huge milestone, congratulations! Being here where you are now, is there something that you would tell your younger self?

**A:** This is such an emotional question, because looking at my childhood, it wasn't always the easiest. I say that it's a passion and goal of mine to make the arts more accessible to people from low income backgrounds. This is also because I come from a lower income background. I think I would tell my younger self that she does not have to worry, that she will be able to take care of herself and develop

such a strong sense of self, and that she will not allow unhealthy patterns in her life anymore, be it from herself or from others in all aspects, for the most part anyway. Obviously no one's perfect and sometimes, things do still crop up. Some things I still need to work through, because I'm in my 20s, I'm far from being perfect, but I'll be working on myself when I'm in my 60s too. So young Alex, you don't have to worry, you're safe and you'll be able to take care of yourself, and you can be confident that you've worked hard enough.

**JA:** That's beautiful, thank you for sharing it with us. Do you have any people in mind that inspired you throughout the journey and made you believe that the art world was for you as well?

**A:** The first person that comes to mind – and this ties into my last point as well, learning, even when you're in your 60s – is my mom, who is receptive to my experiences, who is supportive, and who is a workaholic like myself. My mom is the ultimate strong woman, the number one role model in my life. And she never once said, “How are you going to make money with all this?” She was the person who unconditionally supported my journey from the start.

I think we can divide the inspiring people into two categories. There's the personal ones who I can be vulnerable with and who inspire me through their vulnerability, like my best friend, Emilie, or other people close to me who really allow me to grow personally and emotionally. Then there are people who I don't know personally or closely, but who really inspire me in the art world, like Bettina Korek, CEO of [Serpentine](#), or fellow podcaster Katy Hessel, host of “[The Great Women Artists](#)”, who is an absolute superstar in the art world, or like [Sadie Coles](#), a gallerist and art dealer. These people inspire me and I look at their careers and think, “Wow, this is what I'm striving towards, this is what inspires me.” Of course, then there are all the guests who've been on my podcast and shared their experiences.

**JA:** You've recently given your very own Ted Talk in collaboration with UCL, titled “Can Engaging with Art Increase Empathy?” First of all, congratulations! Could you tell us a little bit about the whole experience?

**A:** I'm going to be really transparent with you, the experience was mixed. It was panic and joy all in one. I knew I wanted to give a TED Talk for a long time, it was on my bucket list. In fact, one of my philosophies in my career is when you want something, don't keep it a secret, tell people because people are so willing to help and to see you grow if they believe in you. I have had so much encouragement and support from people and I wouldn't be where I am if I had kept everything I wanted a secret. So after receiving some great advice, I reached out to TEDxUCL and once I gave my pitch I had to wait a couple months, and then on February 5th (I can't believe I know the exact date), I got the email saying that they're inviting me to come speak on the 8th of March 2023. So I had a month, but mind you, I work full time and I also have a podcast, I also want to have a social life, and I also like to exercise, to find time for that – so I had to juggle all of that while preparing for this huge moment. I've never spoken for 15 minutes straight without looking at cards and now I had one month to get ready, so of course I had a bit of anxiety about it. My mum helped a lot with preparing, she told me not to get overwhelmed by trying to memorise everything all at once. She told me to study one or two



paragraphs at a time until they are fully memorised, and then move on to the next paragraph, without going back or going forward – just concentrating on one to two a day. As a matter of fact, with this method, I had my speech memorised within a week. Then I had another week and a half to practise without a paper, to just memorise the flow, to be able to speak in a way where I enunciated correctly. Likewise, thinking about what to wear is the hardest thing. I was at the gym when I had an idea, and I got off the treadmill and started texting artists. The idea was to wear an artwork on stage, to get my point across even better. I asked artist [Haydn Albrow](#) to tuft a work that I could wear around my shoulders, and we glued her work to a secondhand blazer – in fact, my whole outfit was secondhand. It made a statement and it was also really cool and empowering; and on top of all that, I got to work with a great artist. On the day of the talk, I got on stage, the first couple of sentences were a bit more breathy, I was nervous, and then it came really naturally, it flowed. And then all of a sudden I knew I was on the last paragraph and my brain just went, “Oh, my God, I've done it. I've done it without making a mistake. I've done it. It's done now. This is the last time I'm going to be reciting this. I've done it. It's done!” I definitely hope that I will have the opportunity to give speeches and talks in the future because this was the first time I've done it so there was a lot of anxiety around it, but now that I've learned how to navigate it and feel confident, I feel like it brought me so much joy to be on that stage. So I would love to continue to do that in the future.



Image 3: Portrait.  
Artwork by Kathrin  
Isabell Rhomberg.

**JA:** We would certainly love to see you giving more talks! To return to the theme of hope a little bit in the larger arts movement here at the end; in your opinion, what is the role of contemporary art in finding hope in what often feels like a hopeless world?

**A:** I think it ties everything that I've spoken about together, and it also references what I speak about in the TED Talk in how art will have such positive effects, engaging more with art will allow us to be more introspective with ourselves, more empathetic with one another, but also more conscientious of our consumption, seeing the changes that need to be made in this world. I can only really, truly speak from a personal perspective that I would not be able to live my life and devote myself to a full time job and project if I didn't fully believe in and love what I'm doing. That alone gives me hope in my own future. I also hope that people who might feel confused or lost or who might not be happy in their jobs or who might be struggling with the pressures of an incredibly capitalist hamster wheel society, that maybe, just maybe, they can find solace in contemporary art. Now, I'm not saying that contemporary art is exempt from capitalism, but if you're going to find things in there that make you think and make you feel, then it's the contemporary art world. So that's what I hope it will do for people because I think that we need to be in touch with our emotions and our empathy a lot more.

**JA:** Any last thoughts that you'd like to share with the Journal, the Salon, this whole community?

**A:** I guess if you're reading the interview and you're not in the arts and you don't really know how to go to museums and to interact with art, if you feel intimidated or you feel like you don't belong in these spaces, I just want to reiterate that your personal experiences and opinions on works of art and how they make you feel is what makes engaging with art so rewarding. It doesn't matter if you know about an art piece. It doesn't matter if you think it's crap or a bad work of art. Think about why that is. I want to emphasise that everyone's opinions and feelings about works of art and how they react to them is super valuable. Indeed, I want to encourage everyone to go look at art and feel.

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*Alexandra Steinacker-Clark is an American-Austrian art historian, curator and writer. She lives and works in London, UK. She obtained her BA in History of Art at University College London and continued her education at Goldsmiths University with an MA in Arts Administration and Cultural Policy. Her areas of research include feminism in contemporary art, western museum policies, as well as accessibility and engagement in the arts. She is the founder and host of the 'All About Art' Podcast, co-founder of C/20 Association for International Curatorial Practice, and a TEDx speaker. She currently holds a position at Skarstedt Gallery after her time as Studio Manager for a London-based artist and 4 years at Sotheby's Auction House.*





**“Hope is not a very happy thing to be in. On the other hand, the absence of hope is even worse”**

### **An Interview with Dr. Joep Leerssen**

**Journal d'Ambroisie:** To start us off, it would be great to know a little bit more about why you decided to research nationalism and cultural history.

**Dr. Joep Leerssen:** I grew up in a borderline part of Europe in the triangle between Liege, Aachen, and Maastricht. An environment that was deeply characterised by the interaction of different cultural influences within a strong regional culture. Growing up, as I did, in the 60s, culture was very much defined as “national culture”. And if you were Dutch, that meant that culturally you were Dutch; and if you were German, it meant that culturally you were German, etc. I'm now projecting back, as I didn't have the theoretical frame or the words for it back then, but I did intuit that it was very wrong to assign people as groups to specific cultures. This type of modularity always bothered me, and now I also realise that this was at the root of nationalism. At the time, nationalism was politically not a very strong ideology, at least not where I was from. People were dedicated to the European integration project, to transnational organisations like NATO and the UN. But I did dislike the groupism, as we would now call it, the idea that humanity is naturally divided in groups and those define what your proclivities are. I especially felt this in the importance that people assigned to language because I was from a multilingual area. I also felt that culture was often defined anthropologically as something that you *are*. And so that determined what I was going to do. Originally, I wanted to research the history of languages and the history of thinking about languages; eventually, that became more a history of literature and a history of culture more generally.

*interviewed by  
Journal d'Ambroisie  
Editors in Chief*







**JA:** In relation to the theme of this edition of the Journal, Hopes and Memories, could you give us your definition of what hopes and memories mean both to you and the field you're researching?

**Dr. J.L.:** I find the theme a very interesting one, because it is what Nietzsche would call *Unzeitgemäß* [in English we most often translate this expression as untimely, unfashionable, out of season (see the different translations of Nietzsche's *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*)]. Most of us now are dealing with trauma rather than hope, and memories are in a way a feeding ground for despondency and grievance. So just to encounter the "principle of hope", is a little bit out of time and therefore it's extremely interesting.

Scholars who are dealing with hopeful memories can still inspire contemporary activists, despite the fact that very often the movements they research did not fully realise their aims, they still bequeathed the legacy of hope through the idea that political ideals do not disappear if they fail to be materialised. And that you might define as hope. It's not the same as optimism. Now, for me as a baby boomer, I grew up in a period of intense optimism. I was born 10 years after the war, Europe was pretty much a ruin, and certainly in the West of Europe, there was a sense that things were getting better now. There was technological progress, even domestically, healthcare was getting better and better, overall we felt that after the total devastation of two World Wars, there was a real sense of hope. Or better, of confidence. And that confidence reached its peak in 1989, and for me, and my generation, since 1989, world history has been one long disenchantment. I think for generations, the idea was that the bad times were in the past, and hope was the idea that good times could unfold in the future. That relationship is, I think, tilting now. I see healthcare in this country [in the Netherlands] getting less good despite the technological advances, I fear that my children will not get as good healthcare as I got. Politically and in terms of climate, there is more pessimism

around. My best hope is, in fact, a return to the past. Now, that is a terrible thing to say, that hope should become almost a conservative instinct to recapture the internationalism and the belief in progress that we had, at least in Western Europe in the 60s and 70s. And that you don't change the world, but rather manage to prevent the terrible changes that are happening now climatologically, politically, and so on; hoping that you can stave off catastrophes. That's a very different kind of hope.

The rise of the new nationalism is also a cause of deep concern. When I studied the phenomenon in the 1970s, nationalism in Western Europe was dead, except for Northern Ireland and the Basque country. It was the Cold War, of course. There was something called regionalism, but that was "cute". And after 1989, you suddenly saw in the vacuum of communism that nationalism completely went back to the situation of the 1920s and the 1930s. We just came out of the First World War, there was a League of Nations, things were going to get better. All these countries that had broken away from multi-ethnic empires and had got a Wilsonian self-determination of peoples had their freedom. We now primarily think of those countries as having been steamrolled by Molotov and Ribbentrop and by the Hitler-Stalin pact, but as a matter of fact, between 1921 and 1929/1930, they all abolished their own democracy. All of them installed authoritarian dictatorships – Horthy in Hungary, Metaxas in Greece, Piłsudski in Poland – everywhere you get the sorts of dictators whom we've forgotten because they were overpowered by Hitler. And that is what's happening again. And that's why I'm looking at Hungary and Poland with particular concern, because Horthy and Piłsudski are still fresh in the memory for a historian like me. While in the 1980s, early 1990s the ambition was the idea that nationalism could be filtered out of our system, that it could be one of the benighted things from the past that we had outgrown, there is now a full-on nationalist war going on on European soil. At the moment, nationalism is the most powerful ideology on planet Earth, from Modi's India to Trump's America, it's all over the place. My hope is that we can prevent rather than effect changes.

**JA:** It makes me wonder, if nationalism is so prevalent right now, how does that relate to the "global youth" that we consider ourselves part of? What role does nationalism play in the younger generation's attachment to a global community and our search for identity and belonging?

**Dr. J.L.:** I think that you're basically limiting your analysis if you root nationalism in the wish to belong to something, I don't think that is the root of nationalism. The root of nationalism is the rejection of others, the rejection of strangers. In that respect, if you want to look at the global situation of nationalism, the paradox is not in the fact that people are enmeshed, entangled globally and they want to belong to a recognizable cultural community, but the fact that they are entangled economically, whereas they reject cultural entanglements. So it's the Xenophobia and the economics that are the strange paradox.

Imagine a seesaw or a set of balancing scales. We always define our citizenship, our belonging to a society in terms of a nation state; this goes almost unquestioned, it's one of the most deeply ingrained political beliefs we have. But what precisely the importance is of the first part "nation" and the second part "state" is anybody's



guess. And at the moment, what we see because of economic globalisation is a very pronounced weakening of the state. States are becoming totally powerless. As economists like Noreena Hertz have shown, large companies have a lot bigger budgets than small states. These large companies operate internationally and the state has completely dedicated itself all through the Western world (and even in some of the communist or post-communist countries) to a neoliberal agenda, which means deregulation. The idea is that a planned economy, as the communist were trying it, does not work, in order to thrive, you have to let investors and market forces do their thing and not overregulate. And this means that states bail out banks, they subsidise entrepreneurial capitalists with taxpayers' money, give tax breaks to foreign companies, and abdicate a lot of the responsibilities that they used to have through privatisation. I remember my father saying that back in the day he paid a lot of taxes, but he didn't mind because the state was maintaining a lot of public utilities with that money, so everybody was a stakeholder in the state. And as more and more public functions of the state are sold off, privatised, deregulated, the state is evaporating. And as a result of this, in our imagined seesaw, as one element (state) in the nation state goes down, the other (nation) goes up, and we get a symbolic heightening of the national element. So all these people who economically get less and less involvement with the state they live in, feel a stronger and stronger cultural, symbolic affinity with the nation that they belong to. I have a simple test for this. You look at any populist politician and you count the number of flags in the background when he gives a speech (it's almost always a he). The more flags there are, the more that politician is dedicated to economic deregulation. So there is an absolute inverse proportionality between the strength of the state and the hamming up of national identity. And this is deliberately feeding disenfranchised or almost de-nationalised taxpayers by giving them the symbolism. That's why a lot of populists are now trying to seek their political participation and their empowerment in symbol politics. They really get fixated on the most ridiculous heraldic symbolism because it's "opium for the taxpayer".



**JA: We often see a national, collective memory as part of or a tool for building this symbolism. Where does memory fit into the picture, and how would you define it?**

**Dr. J.L.:** Memory has been beautifully defined by Juri Lotman – although he probably said it in Russian, so I wouldn't be able to reproduce it authentically – as everything that one generation transmits to the next, except through genetics. That, I would say, is a fairly important chunk of the continuity between generations. Memory is fundamental to our identity. I follow Paul Ricœur here in stating that who I am is based on two things. One is my uniqueness, the fact that I cannot be confused with anybody else. The other is that I maintain a continuity between the I, who I am now, the I, who I was at moments in the past, and the I, who I plan to be in the future. The substance of what I am is my permanence through time. Therefore, you cannot get more central to identity than memory.

Even how we communicate is something that is transmitted by memory, most fundamentally of everything else, language. Language is beyond the nature-culture divide. It is something that we already begin to get hard-wired into our brains even as we hear sounds in our mother's womb. It's really, really fundamental to our synapses. Nothing will ever replace the importance of your native language, the language that you acquired before you were socialised. That is deeply transgenerational, as at that moment already, parents are passing on memories to their children. And this is the basis of a social contract that extends through the generations. So all our cultural memories, the stories we tell each other, are deeply bound up with our identity. And that goes also for the national community. The national community has monopolised almost all our collective identities. Every group that we belong to tells its stories, and these collective memories are massively important. What I find interesting as a historian is that these “collective memories” are narratives that you could tell in any way you like, since memory is something active, memory is recall, you reach into the past and you bring it back to the present. The interesting thing is that despite all this, collective national memories tend to be the totally ossified 19th century narratives that were made canonical by the romantic nationalists. And we still live with these narratives, which is, in a way, limiting. Of all the thousands of stories we could tell, we're restricting ourselves to 25 or 30, and all of them are about the same thing.

**JA: And do you think there's a way to create collective memory outside of nationalism?**

**Dr. J.L.:** Nowadays, as groups are emancipating, the first thing they do is they always start writing down their history. In many cases, it's invented or embellished, but then again, the national histories are invented and embellished as well, so you can't blame them. People are always investigating the hidden silences of the past, rediscovering the memories that were oppressed or repressed. Personally, I think getting fixated on the past might be nice, but it's also a bit limiting and I would prefer if communities could derive their sense of belonging together from a sense of a shared future. Because with all this talk about memories, we never talk about the future, and that's what hope is about. One of the terrible side effects of 1989 was a loss of utopianism. Whatever you might say of communism, it was a utopian ideology that was very much future oriented. And at its fall, people

started talking about an end of history. However, the terrible thing about “the end of history” was that it implies that we don't need a utopia anymore, there is nothing that we can work for to make things better. So the free market triumphs over communism, and the next thing you see is Blade Runner. All of this to say that maybe what we need is a new utopianism. Re-embracing the culture of little utopias that were dreamed up by people around the turn of the century, “silly things” like Esperanto, the language movement, or nudism; but also very sensible things like the women's right to vote and vegetarianism. Yes, sometimes those people were lunatics, but at the same time, I really like their idealism and their willingness to attempt the impossible. Maybe we could do with a bit of that again.

**JA:** Do you have any suggestions on how we can start thinking of our utopias in small ways?

**Dr. J.L.:** Well, I think there is a fantastically interesting potential in a future agenda of de-growth. Let's start with something approachable; the idea of getting a Europe-wide system of long distance railway travel together where on a single website you could book a ticket from Lisbon to Tallinn - if you try that now, where's Europe for you? Europe has not integrated at all when you look at the railways, the iron curtain is still very much noticeable in the railroads, there's only two or three places where you can cross from the old West to the old East. Night trains were abolished because of the cheap airfares, but now they're slowly coming back. I think what would be a fantastic - almost utopian challenge - is to have a continent that's dedicated to smooth, long distance railway travel.

And my second suggestion is to reconsider our relationship with agriculture. The last big change that took place in European agriculture was in the 1960s, when the European Union felt it had to compete with the cattle farmers of Argentina and the wheat and potato farmers of the United States, and hence, scale enlargement became the name of the game. The larger part of the entire budget of the European Union still goes into its common agricultural policy, it eats up money and it's completely dedicated to suboptimal, unsatisfactory agro-industries. If you could think of a way of diverting the incredible finance streams that we now pour into large agro-industries into sustainable, small-scale, high-quality farming - so that people get good products and farmers get a reasonable price for their products - that would be a revolution.

**JA:** I really love these answers because they feel reachable, not changing and saving the entire world, but taking a conceivable step forward.

**Dr. J.L.:** I talk to a lot of people and they all come up with ideas such as: *We need to abolish nuclear energy.* And I say: *How are you going to abolish nuclear energy?* They usually reply: *Well, first of all, we have to smash capitalism.* So they want to change the world in order to change the world - and that is self-defeating. So we will have to change the world within the parameters that are already existing and not first change the world in order to then start changing the world.

But at the same time, on the pessimistic side, I think we have to expect that catastrophes will happen. If I look at climate change, I think we're going to look at horrendous natural catastrophes that will make life quite literally unbearable for millions and millions of people. So you can try and change the world, but I think

we will also have to brace ourselves for terrible disasters.

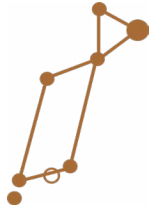
To bring it back to a place of hope, in the end, hope is not a very happy thing to be in. On the other hand, the absence of hope is even worse. Hopelessness is not an alternative to hope. Hope means that you are living in an unrealised, imperfect situation and what the actual outlooks are for achieving that realisation might be slim. At the same time, I think there is something marvellous in that you owe it to your humanity that you do not become despondent.

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- *nationalism and the history of national movements*
- *the survival of 19th-century cultural nationalism as 20th-century banal nationalism and 21st-century ethnopopulism*
- *the rhetoric and history of cultural and national stereotyping and ethnic characterization*
- *the history of border regions and cultural minorities, especially in the Low Countries*
- *the history of the humanities since 1800, especially philology*
- *digital humanities: the database-assisted capture, analysis and visualisation of complex communicative networks, cultural practices and ideological diffusion patterns*

You can find his list of published works here: <https://leerssen.nl/publications/publ>



Anja Radonjic

*edited by  
Elizabeth Rose*

## Before the elephants learned to speak

Before the creaky thumbling of the town's watermill would wake the sleepy heads of Mir, Gen Anesis began with light chores around her home. Moving like a graceful ice-skater, Gen moved in eights around her father's desk, arranging the few loose papers. She tip-toed over the mopped floor, and slurped up her licorice tea resting on the kitchen counter. The family was still asleep, and Gen enjoyed the morphing of night's blue into bruise-coloured dawn. Gen always moved like a dancer, each gesture of her body graceful and exonerated.

Gen did not know the kitchen, her father's office, the living room, and the bathroom had been cleaned the day before. And the day before that. Every morning, Gen deep cleaned her family home. She simply followed her instinct, and where her long strides took her. Inexplicably, the townspeople of Mir had no memory; within their city walls, history, story-telling, and memory were unknown words - words that felt foreign and uncomfortable on their tongues. They were empty shells of words, all letters, no meaning, and not one person in Mir would care to impart such upon them.

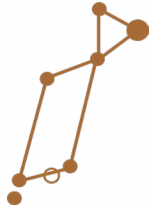
Mirians would spend their days as they pleased. Some were passionate cooks, and around noon each day, the smell of onion and bell peppers would fill the serpentine streets. Some loved to paint, so their houses and pavements often changed colour (sometimes even during the same day). Frankly, Mir was a chameleon town.

Naturally, the townspeople often fought - whose turn is it to take the piles of garbage? Why are the people of Rattar, their first neighbouring town, threatening with war declaration again? Gen giggled at the havoc of a day in Mir, watching her neighbours dance, stumble and run around. They reminded her of worker ants stuck inside a formicarium, busy with themselves, serving a queen with no name.

“Darlings, I am off for today!” declared Tobias, with his thunderous voice. Tobias avoided calling his wife and daughter by their names, since usually in the mornings he could not be sure which one is Gen, and which one Teresa. Yet he was certain they were his family; the walls of the Anesis’ house were covered in family images, with three wide smiles gracing each photograph. The house shook as Tobias slammed the door, and Gen got to her room for a morning of people-watching, and perhaps, sketching out the map of Mir. She must have been working on it for some time, as each morning the pens, brushes, and charcoal neatly waited on her desk.

Gen watched as her father made way - passing *the florists* (as occupations of Mirians were never the same) with pulled daisies, neighbours’ apple flowers plucked out in their bloom, pots of orchids loosely hanging underneath their armpits. Tobias excitedly watched *the fighters*, making a circle around two young men whose golden skin was etched with red marks, marks of their expertise and credibility as street fighters. With her room on the last floor of their four-story house, Gen could see the town’s skyline and enjoy an expansive perspective of the world below. She looked up sunwards, and closed her eyes, floating between the worlds of her town and the one so strange, and yet familiar, the one visited in her dreams. She looked upon the town’s skyline - emerald clock tower on the right, glasshouse for strange creatures, and the planetary observatory, and then. Gen scratched her eyes. Was that a man on the roof? The “fliers” were always a problem during the day, and someone had to always beg them to come down; but this strange figure seemed too calm and certain of their steps to be a “flyer”. Gen lowered her head, like a wildcat praying on its catch. Or was she prey, hiding from a predator?

*Gen comes back in the next edition of Journal d’Ambroisie.*



Anja Radonjic

*edited by  
Elizabeth Rose*

## Loving you, loving me, and other acts of hope/lessness

My M.,

You always say if the first sentence does not captivate you, you won't give the book a chance. I hope dozens will read this letter before it ever reaches you. Archived away, lost in the sea of online documents. I hope you never see the crossed-out lines of poetry, and safely stored letters I wrote to you, wondering how I am able to feel deeply and hold a whirlwind of emotions again, after so long. You may be my last sentence, M. The one person that splits a life into before and after, that person we sometimes wish we never met, and curse ourselves for not meeting sooner. But I still have a whole book to write, and within it a life of twists and turns to experience. So please do not read this letter, not just yet. I cannot let go of the sweet torturous what ifs, buts, and maybes - the imperceptible direction of the lines we choose to tread, wherein each junction offers a horizon of possibilities we may never walk.

By nature, I am not an impulsive person, and spontaneity is not my modus operandi. To put it simply, and for the modern audience - too much of a Virgo, not nearly enough of a Sagittarius. Being always tactful, trepidatious, with my words and averting from conflict at all costs has muted my ability to fully feel the scope of emotions - I quickly rationalise injustices inflicted, and am consumed by the guilt of hurting someone else. I am best at standing still, while you run a marathon. A person of calm demeanour, but one wearing an armour of cautiousness, making it hard to move, making it excruciating to act in curiosity, in wonder, or explore the "why not" situations. I avoid risk. Then November weekend came, spent under a blue umbrella with you, attentive and seeing, smelling, tasting the world more profoundly than I have ever known before. As you studied carefully each burgundy tile of the cityscape, I felt the ground shift underneath my feet.

I get goosebumps when you say I've changed your life. If you could only know what utter havoc you've released in mine, and the enamouring new melody you've introduced to my fine-tuned orchestra. Whenever those golden-tinted



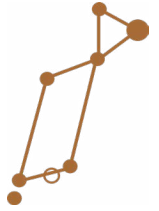
green eyes meet mine, I feel peace. Loving you became about freedom, and wishing for the one you love to spur further and higher, and to fulfil even the smallest of dreams. That's not the love I have ever known before. Yet despite the connection between us, I never think we could be together. I often mumble beneath my breath, "likelier to walk on the moon, than hand in hand with you." I do not like to risk what I have; if life were a gambling game, say poker, and changing in any way the current limbo I'm in, even for better, each time, I would choose to fold. I am left standing still, my feet won't move an inch; once you leave, warm beads of tears will run down my face, and I shall shake like a reed in the wind, a missed chance at a whole new path of life. Hopelessness is a lack of bravery; and before you I stand a coward who loves you.

All of my words, said and unsaid seem like old-timey cliches. Back at university, analysing the works of Dante Aligheri and Francesco Petrarca always made me cringe; how can one write tomes of work filled with love and desire, based on a glance? How can one write without for once locking eyes in a shared understanding of the strange world around them? Ironically enough, perhaps I share a thing or two with Dante and Francesco. Neither Beatrice nor Laura knew about the intentions of their respective admirers. Dante and Francesco were masters of poetry, but hopeless men nevertheless. How can love on paper ever amount to words said as a leap of faith, as an act of bravery, ready to slip and fall face down?

Loving you taught me that my own heart has mended, and that love can be beautiful, and calm, and giving. Loving you is pushing me out of my comfort zone; and I am dreaming bigger, and writing more than I did before. And maybe, I secretly hope you come across this letter. Maybe it makes you laugh, or it hurts your trust. Will you hate me, if I hope our story is the one yet to be written?

Yours,

A.



**Blanka Pillár**

*edited by  
Laurine Heerema*

## February

Somewhere, there was a crossroads near the border, in a child's smoky face with round eyes. Low blue and yellow brick houses and dark green pine trees surrounded it, and, in summer, the purple statice opened in the garden, in spring, the hot sunlight stretched across the forest canopy. The first memory of these round eyes was of this landscape, where years of warm embraces and happy barks were repeated over and over again. They called this place - 'Life'; it was as they imagined in the world of fairy tales. Until now.



Figure 1: Martin Widenka, Unsplash

Something shook the earth. It shuddered, deep and angry, as if the gray sky had fallen. Now, morning dew covers the blades of grass, and a thick mist has descended on the cool ground; even the air is swirling backwards, and the birds are flying far away. They run out of the brick house and stare at the Thursday shadows. The button eyes watch as the spring, summer, autumn, and winter gather into two grey canvas bags, as the faltering zipper is pulled on the resin-scented warm wool sweaters and the smiling stuffed elephants, as Mother and Father pray in whispers, as they lock the door of Life without a key. Lacking a vehicle, they walk away from the crossroads, the low blue and yellow brick houses, the dark green pines, the purple statice, and the memory of warm embraces and happy barks. The child's round face fills with hot tears, with the helpless sorrow of incomprehension and lack. She doesn't know where the touch of silky grey dog tails and the fresh scent of the short-cut lawn has gone; before her and behind her lies an endless sea of concrete surrounded by barren trees. All around her, words she had never heard before, harder-sounding names of unfamiliar places are repeated with terrified powerlessness in harsh voices.

Meanwhile, as time's arrow marches on, the wind picks up, and the horizon bends to a dark blue. The Mother takes a brown bun from her canvas bag, caresses the child's cold face, and then holds the tiny body close to her, cradling it and humming the song she used to sing when the family was ill. The melody rings sweetly, filling the lonely night and drowning out the deafening noise of strangeness. Twilight and dawn meet; the dust is heavier on the feet, and the eyes look wearily into the bare winter. Farther lies Life than the darkening child's face and the shrinking round eyes could possibly look back to.

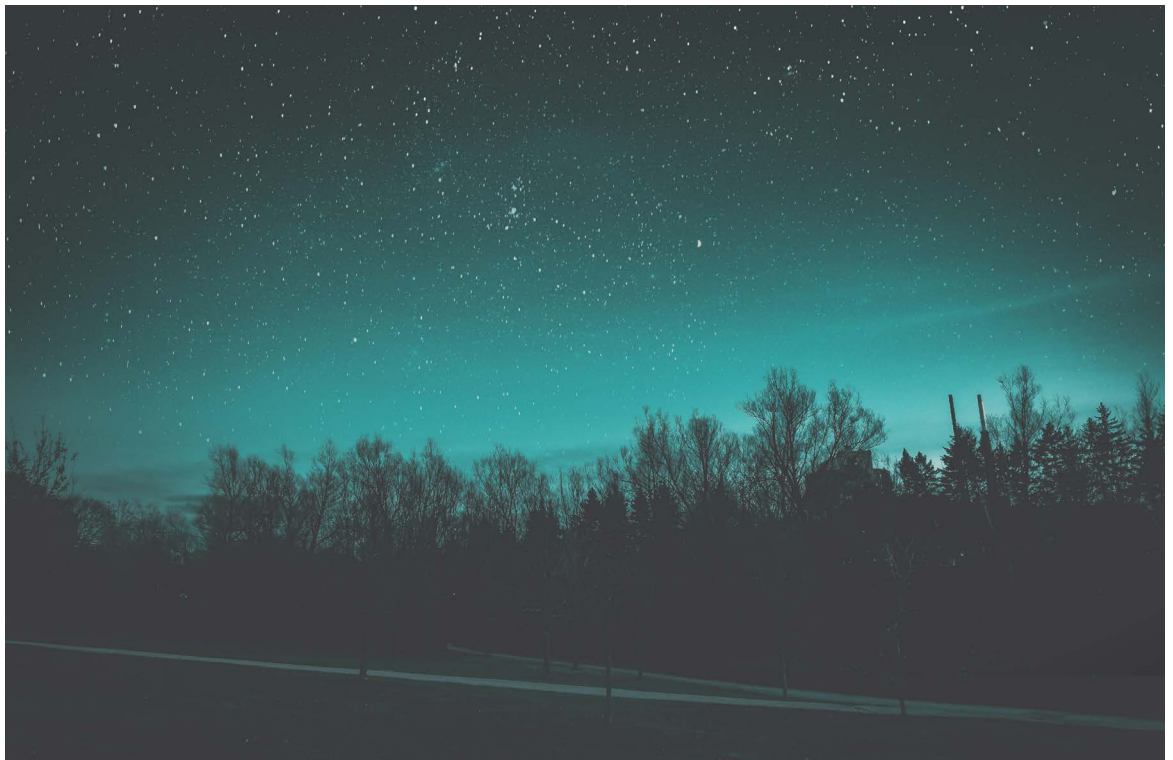
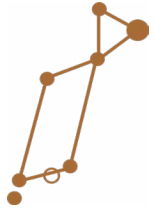


Figure 2: Suvin Vengilat, Unsplash.

They can only guess where they are going as they leave fading footprints on the edge of towns, hoping to cross something larger soon. They dare only believe that the sun will come out the next day, that there will be night, and that the clear sky stars will shine with the same piercing light.



**Sanobar Sabah**

*edited by*  
*Miriam Zeglache*

## Ugly

So I turned 43 on February 14th.

Contrary to popular opinion, being in your 40s isn't as bad. It's like climbing a mountain, reaching its peak and enjoying your victorious, hard-earned view from the top. It's nothing short of breath-taking. You're brimming with confidence, you're aware of what works for you, what doesn't; you know your likes and dislikes and by now, you've learnt to say no.

Just as you're relishing the view though, a nagging feeling makes you uneasy. Something forces you to become acutely aware of the other side of the mountain view. You think to yourself: "It really is downhill from here, isn't it?"



Picture of me clicked in February 2023

My insides hurt at the thought. Someone knocks at the door. I open it; shocked to find Ugly.

Ugly was an old friend - a friend I had a fallout with many moons ago. I thought I'd never see her again; Ugly was a closed chapter. Or so I thought...

My life flashes in front of me hauntingly, making me feel dizzy. The school exams that made me feel suicidal, jobs that paid well but made me feel worthless, nights

spent crying, the number of times I was a disgrace as a mother, as a partner, the rolls of fat, the stretch marks all over my body, the skin-whitening creams that never worked, the mistakes that cost me my respect, my dignity...Urgh! How I despised Ugly!

Healing, they say, can be quite grieving. One regrets and mourns the time, energy and opportunities lost over the years. And then you suddenly find yourself racing against time because you want to make up for the past.

I chauffeur my kids from one playdate to another, hopping like an excited bunny, basking in their adorable little experiences that they innocently share with me. My heart swells with love. I change my career, study for a new degree, feeling like a brand-new kid. I have a new lease on life; I feel empowered. Eating healthy and working out for years has paid its dividends...

I binned the skin-whitening creams when I became a mother to a beautiful, brown baby girl; we enjoy our time on the beach together, hugging the sun for all the love and warmth it showers upon us. I make time for family and friends that matter and savour every quality time spent with them.

I'm running as fast as I can, as hard as I can. And yet, I lack peace. How many likes, views and approvals before the hunger in me feels satiated? When will the grotesque self-loathing go and why is it still there after all these years?

Turning 43 makes me feel drained; exhausted. Adulthood was supposed to be my ticket to freedom. Freedom from school. Freedom from the pressures of grades. Freedom from having my life being choreographed by adults at all times. Freedom from society's beauty standards set for women. Adulthood wasn't supposed to be hard. I did not sign up for this.

I find myself running out of breath just thinking about it.

Dad passed away recently - he's gone far beyond my reach. He was my loudest cheerleader. Mum's slowed down - mentally and physically. She was the fast one, the quick thinker.

This wasn't supposed to be.

Regressing against years of hard work, I'm spiralling downward into a self-sabotage mode. Sugar is my best friend these days; after calling off all my training sessions, I've gained back all the lost inches and some more. It's as if I'm knowingly stalling my own progress, with a vengeance.

A prisoner, trapped in my own body.

Suddenly, I find my body covered with my mum's scars! The scars she inherited from *her* mum. They gnaw deep into my skin - red and raw. How can that be?! I've tried so hard not to be my mum, not to make the same mistakes. How are we bearing the same scars?!



And, oh my god! Are these scars contagious?! Would I pass them on to my little girl too?!

Scrub! Scrub! Scrub! I must scrub the scars away quickly.

My skin's peeling off. I'm bruised - inside out. But the scars refuse to budge.

Nauseous, I want to howl for help.

Ugly watches me calmly from afar as if to say, "The scars are here to stay. No-one's coming to save you from them."

I want Ugly to shut up and go away. Please.

But, what if Ugly's speaking the truth? Is there really no-one coming to save me?

I want to collapse on the floor and cease to exist. The voices in my head are way too loud for me to bear.

I ask Ugly to sit anyway. I need closure.

There's awkward silence as we sit ourselves down.

Funnily enough though, soon Ugly makes me feel comfortable - just like good old friends do.

Ugly is my oversized pink and white striped shirt that I want to wear every day. Ugly is my baggy black, fleece-lined joggers that have pockets in them and a tiny hole made by my cat's claws.

Ugly is freedom from judgement.

What if Ugly's earned a bad name simply for speaking the truth? The bitter, uncomfortable truth I've been running away from all my life?

I have so much to say to Ugly. But more importantly, I want to listen to Ugly.

I let Ugly hold my hand. Maybe, just maybe, I could give Ugly a chance.

Besides, I don't owe the world pretty.

Ugly asks me to visit the top of the mountain again and soak in the stunning view. I've made it so far; I've been so brave. It's time I own it and allow myself a break.

Perhaps the scars don't need to remain hidden anymore. The scars, passed down from generations before me, have shaped me for who I've become. Why erase them?



What am I running away from? And how long will I keep running like mad?

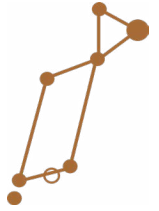
Ugly suggests I need to stop trying so hard and slow down a bit.

“You can’t rush destiny,” Ugly says, warmly.

I feel a slight smile lighting up my face. I’m breathing better.

Ugly makes me want to put on my reading glasses and type my heart away on my laptop - with my legs folded - in my baggy, black joggers.





Shraddha Gulati

*edited by*  
Meghan Dhawan

## The day I was adopted

After a scorching summer, the winter came. Every year, I am surprised as to how the winters are worse than the summers, and the next summer is even worse than the winters. This cycle has continued endlessly.

In India, especially where I come from, people are always ready for the wrath of the seasons. In just a matter of 365 days, the weather can take you on a roller-coaster of an adventure, through hot days, rainy days, spring, autumn, and dry, dead, cold days. I remember that specific day, it was one of those cold, lifeless ones.

The new year had come and gone in a blur, and the gloom of the winter still remained. I was depressed. Most People may refer to it as “seasonal depression”, which is caused by prolonged winters and exposure to very little natural sunlight. I was in bed, I hadn’t cleaned my room, my bedsheets were filthy, I didn't care to bathe, and I was covered in layers of rags.

Then, the morning of Friday the 13th in January, the sun God showed me mercy. After those many chilling cutthroat winter days, cold, dry winds, and lifelessness in nature, that morning, I saw the sun come out after hiding away behind the deep, dark clouds for days. I woke up in the morning, the same as usual, so late that it was almost afternoon, and opened the door to my balcony. I stood under the sunlight, hoping that this would cure me from feeling low. I could feel the photons from the sun hitting every part of my body, and I soaked it all up. Then, as I looked around, I noticed that I was not the only one enjoying the sun that afternoon.

A ginger cat seemed to be doing the same. Laying down in the sun, bathing in its warmth, his eyes were closed. “Meow”, I said, asking for attention, and he opened his eyes, looked around, then found me. He gazed at me with his sharp eyes and golden gaze, as if another sun burned inside them. He had a long body, but his voice sounded young. I had no idea where he came from. I did see many cats around my house, but none of them ever noticed me. In fact, they would always run away if I got closer to them.

I looked back at him and blinked. He did the same, and immediately, I felt as though we became friends. I rushed into the kitchen and poured some milk in a plastic bowl. I have to be honest, I was dreading today, as I had been depressed for a long time. I hadn't been out for three whole weeks, it had been beyond cold outside, and worst of all, it was Friday the 13th. Yes, I am superstitious. I was obviously prepared to have the worst day today. However, that didn't happen. I remember smiling that day, after a very long time.

I brought the cat the bowl of milk, and just like that, he walked up to my balcony, jumped down from the railings, and started gulping the milk from the bowl. Then, he climbed over my air conditioner, and slept off. I went inside my room, and slept as well. It was as if we both knew we needed to rest. After a long time, spending countless days in bed and still being tired, I was finally able to rest that day, and it seemed like he did the same.

When I woke up, the cat was gone. I immediately missed him, but there was nothing but hope left in my heart, that I would see him again.

The next day, I woke up to see the cat waiting on the balcony for me. I was pleasantly relieved. He was napping in the same place he did last the day before. He had gotten pretty comfortable on my balcony, and would jump around, wag his tail, sit outside my door, watch the birds, and soak up the sun. Every day, the same thing happened. He arrived, waited for me, ate, napped, watched the living creatures dancing in nature, birds, squirrels and flies, and as soon as it got dark, he left.

Then, one night, I remember, I ordered cat food. I had a feeling that I would need it, given that I had just made a feline friend. I used my laptop to find some basic information on what cats need, what they eat, what they shouldn't eat, and so on. I had always felt connected to cats, but for the first time in my life, I had a cat who felt that way towards me too.

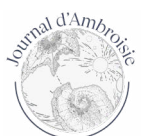
"What to do when a stray cat comes to your home", my Google search looked funny to me. "What to do if a cat comes to your home", "What does it mean if a stray cat follows you", "What to do if a stray cat adopts *you*."

Adopt? How can a cat adopt *me*? Shouldn't I be the one to adopt?

Apologies to the cat lovers, I wasn't aware of the proper cat lingo at the time, and I didn't know they adopted us humans.

For the next two to three weeks, this became a routine. The cat would come, and meow outside my room to get my attention. I'd feed him, he'd nap for a bit, and I would occasionally go out to the balcony to check on him. Sometimes, he would yawn like a little baby when he woke up, and look so precious. Then he would leave in the evening. Every time he left, I wasn't sure if he would ever come back to visit me again. But every evening, I hoped he would.

One day, I spoke to the cat as he ate, and I said to him, "I think I'll call you Mark", and stroked his head as I did so. He said "Meow" in response, so I knew he liked the name. And so, he was christened Mark that day. Pretty soon, he began responding to his new name. I would call him out from a distance and he would come running towards me while wagging his behind, his tail curved up in the air as he walked on the edge of the walls of my building. Man, is he graceful!



One morning, I forgot to latch the door to my balcony. It was shut, but not secured. So, naturally, I woke up to Mark sitting inside my room on my bed. "Meow", he said loudly, early in the morning, much sooner than the time I usually wake up. I woke up, a bit flustered by this stranger in my bed with the morning sun shining on my face, that I had pretty much forgotten the looks of. I then recognised him, petting him right away. "How did you come in here?", I asked him. He looked towards the door. Call me crazy, but by this time, I had started to feel deeply understood by him. Even without speaking my language, somehow, through his body movements, gestures or eyes, he responded to me every time. It felt nice being understood for a change.

That day, when he invited himself into my house, and my bed, and woke me up because he was hungry, for the first time, I understood what that phrase on the internet meant. That day, I knew I wasn't my own anymore, I now belonged to Mark. That's when I knew that he had adopted me.

One time I was having a bad day, my "seasonal depression" hadn't vanished overnight. So, one fine day, when I was crying alone in my room, I heard a noise outside my front door. I opened it. You'll never guess who was sitting in front of it. It was Mark, I was now crying even more. He looked at me, and I cried harder, because I suddenly didn't feel so lonely after all. I gave him food, and then he left. That was the first time he showed up at my front door, late at night, and I still don't know how he managed to do that. Even the food delivery partners have trouble finding the way to my house, I always have to tell them which road to take, which door to enter, which staircase to climb. But here he was, a young cat, sitting outside my door, waiting for me.

That wasn't the extent of Mark finding different ways to show up inside our home. He had somehow found every single entrance to our home, and from one or the other door, he would always enter. He would roam around as if the house belonged to him. One day, he hid under the couch and didn't come out until I called his name out from the balcony, and then he showed himself from under his hiding spot. We laughed because he had a mischievous look in his eyes, and we knew that we had indeed been pranked. He would roam around, meow loudly, ask for food, and even sit on the kitchen shelf, looking like a pack of unopened brown bread. If it was not for his tail, my mother wouldn't have differentiated him from the pack. He became good at fooling all of us.

Two months later, we are still friends. He comes around for food every day at his usual time. I play with him in the evenings, and he jumps, leaps, and runs about. One day, he purred at me as I stroked his chin and neck, and that marked the beginning of our friendship.

Mark came into my life unannounced, almost like a miracle. I still consider it a dream, a good dream in which I became friends with a cat. And not just any cat, but an orange tabby cat with stripes, one that largely resembles a tiger. But there is always a constant fear I have, of losing him.

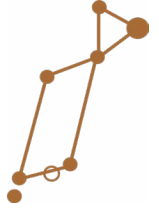
I've been told, "Stray cats don't live that long, it's better to not get attached to him", "I had a cat once. I fed him, took care of him, and one day, he disappeared completely, and I was hurt."

People tell me all sorts of things about their encounters with cats, especially the pain of losing them. Everyone has told me that cats don't care about us or our emotions. But, every night



when Mark leaves, I have nothing but love for him in my heart, and even more, unending hope to see him the next day. A part of me knows that this will end one day. He will either grow up and leave the neighborhood, or I would have to move. There is no way that this is forever, and I know that.

I know that one day will be the last day I see Mark, and after that, I will only be left with these beautiful memories of fun, laughter, play, adventure, love, care, understanding, and my friendship with him. I will grow older, and I'll meet his sisters, brothers, and cousins around the world, and maybe I'll become friends with them as well. But all my life, I believe I will always hope to see him again. And one day, when we depart this world, I hope to see him in another. Cat heaven maybe, if they would allow me to visit. Or perhaps, maybe in some other place in another dimension, under a different sky, where he would be sitting on a tree and watching the birds. And I would call out to him, he would turn around, wiggle his ears, recognise me, and run to greet me. And that, I hope, will last forever.



## even the water is harder in the south

**Martha Aroha**

*edited by  
Robert Isaf*

somethese days my head is full o poems, but  
today is not somethose.

met mum, climbed a hill, and kissed her  
goodbye, passed a quick sketch of  
late spring ferns, waist-high,

shaved my legs for the northern line and  
Liverpool might even  
win the league this season.

some of us look for reasons  
in the frothier details:  
i'm staring down the plug  
w my toothbrush in my mouth,  
the sink soaks up all the foam

& all my imaginary kids still  
have big noses.



## smashed salt shaker

Martha Aroha

*edited by  
Robert Isaf*

in a rush, i paint  
a new starry night  
on the kitchen floor  
wearing nothing but  
home knickers w  
tears in the fabric

i  
want to feel  
every mineral on  
g\*d's green earth  
but

dinner is burning so  
i sweep  
the milky way  
into a dustpan  
before the thought  
crystallises.







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