

Year of the Fox Travelogue: Airborne & Earthbound

"Be mindful of your eyes. For even the wall may tell lies."

They told me I must be losing my mind; those mountains I love could never be seen from inside Berlin.

"The airfield," I told them, "Tempelhof at sundown. I saw mountains whittled by lightning, lullabies by thunder. They were there. Hinson saw them too, right?"

Hinson nodded, though they did in a way I had never seen them move their neck before.

The elusive they: "shh...don't wake the angels."

Hinson: "Hey, let's get something to eat."

The elusive I: "But the mountains—Berlin has another axis no one believes in. And if no one believes it, it doesn't exist, does it?"

I sat down upstairs, first at a café table, then, once they vacated, the living room couch. Too early to repel the cold or welcome Hinson to Berlin, I took refuge in a warm, lengthwise café that had a taste for hygge and whose staff tolerated my English. Hinson's plane would land shortly after noon.

I tipped to the sweet side of breakfast; lady justice rubbing the shoulders of the savory—sausage, eggs, buns—while my ever-dwindling euros ate away. There was cause to be nervous about this, but warmth can get us through so much—no, we mustn't take it for granted.

I remember seeing a guy with ripped clothing who looked at home here. We didn't speak, but I watched him—was he a Berliner? Or a traveler? Regardless of who he was, he is now just a memory of a man my brain held onto to be recorded here on this page (enter the elusive he).

I finished my pancakes and then walked to Tegel Airport to scout the terminals. Once I knew where to be in two hours, I left and found a patch of grass cut wide open by a roundabout. Let's picnic here: cheese and crackers, a book, the whirl of aircrafts, and a storyboard paneling the masterplan for Tegel's euthanasia as an airport and its resurrection as an outdoor mall, vaguely cultural experience. These are popping up all over the world, and my openness to them depends largely on my own suspension of disbelief. I could be depressing what could have been prospects for an art exhibit, and, in the rotisserie of my memory, turning it into a terminal advertisement—I'm sure at the

time I was curious about what would crop up at Tegel, the new, old airport. My favorite part about it was the picnic spot.

Hinson was in the last third of passengers to disembark the plane. I rushed in to hug them and brush out their stupor. It wasn't a peachy flight, but it got them here.

We had met in high school, in our 9th grade English class. Their name was Alexandra, but I don't remember calling them that. They reminded me of my brother's kidney-close friend Jenny, whose family lived in the house just above ours. They had long hair the color of wet sand; they moved seats when I instinctually sat next to them on the first day; they were soft-spoken; they laughed when I eventually got to speaking with them myself.

We worked on a manifesto together and prided each other on our motif of beginning every section with "it's no secret..."

We were friends, just the two of us, for four years on that campus. We plotted our lives in Portland, Oregon; we found it confounding how virtue sincerity was kept in such low esteem; we watched a vampire film on a baseball field and walked up a hill where we learned we didn't want to kiss each other. Over many years we peeled back more layers until our first impressions of each other were nothing more than dead skin.

Now Hinson and I were exploring a city neither of us knew on a continent we hadn't spooled enough yarn to reach in our adolescence. That's what happens meeting a familiar face in an unfamiliar setting—we become new, old friends.

Upon arrival in the country, Hinson's first move was to check into their dormitory in Reinickendorf, the banlieue where they'd be living for the next four months and I'd be crashing the next three days. We didn't time our adventures abroad; they overlapped by consequence of actions neither of us took towards the other. Hinson was one of the first to enter this student-housing block, which could be mistaken for an abandoned building if you weren't paying attention. There was a consultant dishing out paperwork in the lobby. Hinson and I were the only ones seated in those armchairs listening to her debrief the terms of their residence here. She asked questions that lagged in Hinson's brain, a brain which had to work double-time to pick up the hours clocked by propeller action.

Once the next four months were signed away, Hinson and I were allowed up to their new room: a micro apartment with a kitchen and a foldable bed-sofa. It was not large; nothing in it was. For three nights we shared a mattress, and I don't think Hinson and I had ever gotten so close, so far away. The clouds came in and our origins blurred. Holy, smoking beings perched on distant mountains whispered in mist tones: "we're coming for you"—mystery-makers of this new, old world. Or so I believed.

The following day Hinson had to attend the first of many orientations for their study abroad in Berlin. I took to more sleuthing of the city, beginning first at the Berlin Wall. A once trenchant divide now a strip gallery, the murals one can see on this historic palisade signal to life and times remote from Germany's affairs: A Varda Carmeli poem that sharpens personal mantras, apocalyptic pleas to "save our Earth," ominous humanoid figures in gas masks and reflective ponchos inspecting a black landscape, a prescient signboard alerting me "Detour to the Japanese sector." Quite the detour indeed: two and a half years later and I still haven't made it to Japan. The Wall conveys revelations and schemata with untimely delays for the viewer. I would guess many of its messages have still yet to be received. Downloading...

I wandered through Berlin like I had every other European city, and I found that there was nowhere I couldn't be given the right push or pull. I was drawn to a neighborhood of schrebergartens, or garden colonies. Imagine uneven hedgerow hives of huertas and sheds, blocked in the rectangular divots nearby the U-bahn station. You can walk a bashful path through the colony without overstepping on anyone's property; the locals are only tending to their plots, and don't have much to say to you, and you don't have much to say to them, do you?

I get mistaken for speaking the mother tongue more in this country than any other. Do I look German-speaking? And if so, what about me suggests this? Perhaps Fernanda could tell me, if only I opened the last remaining unread WhatsApp message she sent to me two and a half years ago (In January 2022 I opened it. She wished that we could talk to each other more frequently. I've unintentionally and quite regrettably denied her request, and I'm not courageous enough to send her my delayed response. Fernanda, me perdoa por favor).

On one of those three days I spent with Hinson, we met up after one of their plentiful orientations to explore Tempelhof, Berlin's abandoned airfield. If Tegel had one picnic spot worth an afternoon nap, Tempelhof was overrun by sites for daytime dreamers.

There are many paths through desolation, but Hinson and I followed none of them. We decided to sit in one of Tempelhof's ample glades where the grass dryly persuaded us that life dies and death lives. I don't remember lounging on a blanket, so we may have just been cross-legged, or I might have been propped up on my right arm, but certainly not my left. I recall my orientation to the field but not one line of dialogue between us. We were talking about service animals and the complicated laws surrounding their admission into businesses or onboard planes. Surely they had a right to be here now; humans had given up on old Tempelhof.

Except they hadn't. Tempelhof was a settlement with the city of Berlin: it no longer has any duty to the sky and can now recline into its grave. The bipeds who roam Tempelhofer Feld are welcome to skate, climb atop hay buns, or, god-willing, fly kites. That afternoon, before finally letting go of the sun's gleams, Hinson and I came upon a kiosk on the periphery that sold beer. They had set up logs and deck chairs in the field to sit and watch the sky with our refreshments. With our partially invented German we ordered beers and took a seat facing the sea of field. Our line of sight ran parallel to the wings of planes, and our backs were to the city while the twilight summer exhumed its spatial vibrato of colors.

Tempelhof dimmed to the skylight in the clouds, and the clouds dimmed to a penultimate distance, just before the farthest back the eye is able to descry. The foamy horizon appeared like mountains behind the city; bottoms of rose clouds rose from where no one saw where. The base of these mountains was imperceptible to the earthbound. The longer I gazed, the more my mind mistook them for some great, hovering mountain range. Or rather, my mind began to agree.

My eyes followed the mountains rolling in. They were etheric and amorphous, deep, magenta silhouettes, and through their cumulonimbus corpus coursed chasms of shadow and pink space dust. "Look at those mountains." As purple as those lavender evenings in my home of sunsets.

I rose from my seat. I had backpacked for two months across Western Europe, dumbfounded yet coalescent to the many tributaries of travel, but when the channel opened, and my eyes betrayed the mob of reason, I trusted them. Airborne and earthbound, the atmospheric, geologic interplay of mountain and mountaineer—we are not a green earth, or a blue dot, but a violet gem. I looked to Hinson and saw they hadn't noticed me rise. Mist pooled in their eyes, not yet overflowing. I began to hike the dying sunlight to the distant mountains behind Berlin, where the Valley of Four Drafts fills its bowl with liquid nitrogen, and lunging to the next hold is a flying devotion to perilous feats, and the electricity in the body flashes in and out until our inner ferocity warps heavens and earths in a single bolt of lightning.

I was no longer in Tempelhof; I had followed the path of mist. It was like walking on snow that had nothing beneath it. The air was newly minted 'the ground.' I took on a hoppity gait the topsy-turvier the path became, and the farther up I climbed, the more I noticed how translucence and opacity were losing their distinctions to altitude. I was wrong to assume I was on a path—I was inside a path. I was of one.

When I reached the mountains, the clouds greeted me. That purpling of distance persisted up close, and the wind split the thicker, sturdier-seeming juts of cloud I hiked

by, altering the physics of the ascent with every gust. Can you imagine? Rock climbing where all the holds are hidden beneath several layers of vaporous silt; mountaineering where the only necessary equipment whips around you, shoving you on the trail, blessing you with the tailwind to scale what ought to be hollow, static friction. I shuddered to think of what show a lightning bolt might give if it were both charged and discharged all in the same crater. Remarkably, I was able to keep moving, my body as balloon.

There's rocking the city to sleep, and there's rocking the city awake. But there's also rocking the city to death. I hadn't carried any stone with me, but the clouds' moisture almost felt like something I could grasp and turn over in my hand, as if readying to strike someone. I started to wonder if the mountains of Berlin were a hostile place, and maybe I was rash to trust the mist. I always believed it had protected me like a bird protects its hatchling, placing a perimeter on circumspection for my own good, but now I wasn't so sure. I was unable to see through mother's wing how assailable I really was—my sheer defenselessness—but it crept closer while I held what felt given to be a weapon. The mist had armed me, but to face what foe? Reveal yourself, or be obscure and pathetic.

"Hey, let's get something to eat," Hinson spoke.

"What?" I looked over and there they were, in the chair. We had both finished our beers. It was getting dark, and the mountains had vanished with the sun. I didn't know what to say to them about them, what worth there was in the telling. I thought I must be hungry, so we turned around and left Tempelhof for the Bavarian tavern that trapped us like the tourists we may well have been.

The next morning an angel levitated by our window getting ready to throw the first stone. Before the angel could act, however, Hinson stirred awake, warding it off. When I eventually came to, neither Hinson nor the angelic being was there, and the air was not dry, but dried.

I decided to go to the Forst Grunewald to the west of Berlin. I took the train, stopped and purchased snacks at the mart near the trailhead, and then began to walk through the woods, like I did in Monsanto, Roc de Chère, Epping and Olivacci.

The afternoon light shone through the forest and colored the ground in maple graham. The green itself was higher up, so I made my way up fallen logs to get closer to it, eating sweets in the trees. Grunewald is hugged in the west by the river Havel, and once you find it you can't ever get too far away. I hiked along the shadowy edge, napped by an abandoned campsite, swam at the river's widest and watched others from the grass get in and out and sit like me. I knew my time in Europe was floating by the

exit, so I did what I had always done: I let it scream through my eyes as I observed the world from where I sat. In the morning my clothes would be torn and I'd no longer be mistaken for a Berliner; I had had my posh lunch in someone's backyard, eating fish and nodding in a German no one knew I didn't know.

On my way out of Grunewald I lingered in a circular clearing. It was approaching dusk, and through the dwindling purple drops of decaying photons I saw a figure on the other edge of the tree line. The creature emanated an ineluctable patience and looked to me like a white fox quickly turning lavender. I walked towards it, but the clearing felt like a drowsy eye that had seen enough for one day and was ready to cap it. The light in the sky kept changing, and every color in the grass wanted to say goodnight. By the time I made it to the center, thoughts flooded in of finding a way out of Grunewald before all the dark was summoned. I felt another presence in that clearing which rivaled the fox's serenity, poked at it. I felt for the stone in my hand but there was none there, so I picked up a pinecone and waded back to the trees.

I followed signs to a bus stop—not how I had entered the woods but at that point what did it matter? The cat bus from *My Neighbor Totoro* could be coming to pick me up and I would use my pinecone as bus fare.

The thing is: a bus did stop, and I boarded it. To my surprise it was carrying quite a number of passengers, all of whom did not speak. They looked around at me though, and I noticed that some of the people on the bus were a bit distracted, involved in what was not there. A woman stared at me and smiled, some pity she had baked and handed out to children left on her face. The other passengers were now muttering faint remembrances of creatures and shapes they saw in the dark. I kept my own observations private. The glass on the windows reflected the interior of the bus, and I could see myself, semi-wet from the Havel, eyes cloudy but still, always, gazing.

The bus had wound its way out of the woods. When I got off at the closest U-bahn station the town was enshrouded with a luminous fog, as if the day's moisture had been pooled expressly for evening matters. It was a refreshing mist that comes from deep, sylvan breaths. I woke up a little and found a seat on the train.

Aboard that carriage there was a pair of cyclists slung over their bicycles sitting diagonally across from me. Their body hair was spindly with moisture, and the poses they relaxed into were artfully reflected by the surrounding glass. I gazed at them, daring some traveler inside me to go over and talk to them. It looked like they were beat from an ages-long ride and could only sit quietly in the remaining energy stores they dutifully shared. I was craving them, their bodies, their companionship. The train tore through the mist the whole way back to the center of Berlin.

It wasn't too late, so I decided to take a stroll from Friedrichstraße along the Spree. The bridges in this part of the city were magnificent crossings. By one such 'death by water' people were tango dancing down by the river. I smiled in recognition and stole along Am Kupfergraben to a large dome-roofed building that forked the Spree in two. I sat on the steps there and joined a group of young'uns listening to a man play his guitar on the plaza. I gave him a couple euros and then stood by the sculpture and watched Berlin be Berlin. My eyes watered with premature farewell. Tomorrow I'd board my last European train and finish my trip in one final city. I sat in this ultimacy for a second more before dallying to purchase currywurst. Then I took the U-bahn to Hinson's neighborhood.

I arrived back at their room before they did, so I stripped to my pajamas and took a breath. Outside, the mist filled the window in with a solid impression of a wall. The night sky somehow peeked in above it and looked on me with a glint. The glint wasn't large enough to be thrown, should I need something to defend myself. Finally, Hinson returned, and with a vivifying temperament enough for two.

I remember that night they spoke vehemently of the fellow students they met during their onslaught of orientations and I of an inspiring mathemusician named Vi Hart who gave me the brains I needed in middle school and the guts I'll always need. I told Hinson how much I admired Vi Hart for her genuine, sound efforts to become a better person. At the time I could not attest to very many people being like that, and I find this still to be true.

Three hours passed before Hinson and I caught the draft of sleep and got on the dream gondola. One of the trademarks of our friendship has been the unguarded nocturnal encounters. Hinson used to be characteristically an insomniac, and I admit to taking advantage of their insomnia whenever I felt feverish in the night and ached to speak freely or get something off my chest. They always listened and took me seriously, even when I played the parapoetic lyre to a broken timepiece or blew a smoldering ash that used to be sun.

The next morning when we said goodbye was the last time we said goodbye. I had always been wrong to assume that Hinson had changed more than I did over the years. I think of who they most resembled when I first met them, and now I think of older friends I could see Hinson emulating or growing into. These figures, however, are mere estimations of which points their equation might strike. I ought to be cognizant by now of the other cone in Hinson's hyperbola, that there's one airborne and another earthbound. They are yet unsolvable by math as it stands, and I bet my own characteristic ellipses have disproved their own theories about me and who I portend to be.

I took one last U-bahn to an international train station. Pacing by the track I felt a pile of loam in my shorts pocket. Had I been transporting dirt?

I rustled the earth in my pocket when the train arrived at the platform. A frantic boy came up to me and asked where the train was going.

“Prague,” I told him. He looked worried, like he was running from something.

“Will there be mountains there?” he asked.

My jaw dropped.

“Mountains...? You don’t mean—”

“There’s no time. I’m being chased. Quickly, let’s get on.”

I watched him board the train confidently; he possessed a vaporizing assurance that all would end well. With only the remains of a stone in my hand, I had no choice but to trust his brazenness. What could I throw but a brave face to the angels; what else but the fox’s cunning could I wag?