Philipp Weiss



On the edge of the world man sits and laughs - Novel

(Original German title: Am Weltenrand sitzen die Menschen und lachen. Roman) 1.064 pages, five volumes with cover flaps in a box Publication date: 10 September 2018 © Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin 2018 Sample translation by Jeff Wheeler

From Volume 1: Paulette Blanchard – Encyclopedias of a Self (Pages 7-9, 13-14, 221-226)

To the Editor, Louis de Neufville

Paris, August 17, 1880

Dearest Sir,

Allow me to submit to you a peculiar little manuscript, with the somewhat impudent request that you employ your well-versed mind in reviewing it.

It was the year 1870, I was a young girl, when twofold fell into my hands: one an empty diary, and the other the splendid *Encyclopédie* by d'Alembert and Diderot, whose heavy volumes I found covered in dust in the attic of my ailing grandmother's house. You, as a man of words yourself, will probably understand the euphoria that must have overcome me as I ruffled through those tomes that contained the entire world. Internally I decided then and there to become an encyclopedist myself – however in the end I just became an annalist. I commenced writing in my journal, page after page, enraptured by a secret celebration of the Self of which no one would or could ever know. In the years that followed – with the impressions of a war, of a rebellion, of an illness, of a world's fair, of a marriage, of a journey to the far Orient – there came entries across thousands of pages, an overwhelming mass on which I for a long time did not lay a finger again, rather kept it hidden away in a remote corner of the house such that I would promptly forget it altogether. This past year, however, as my life crumbled and disintegrated, I retrieved those chronicles and began reading them,

systematically, steeped in a longing to sort out and eventually to understand how it could be that the sum of all these excitations and effects was but the inescapable condition in which I found myself. I began grouping my entries around specific terms, as I felt the urge to know how this Self had transformed, how at various times it had taken on inconsistent, if not outright contradictory appearances. In short: I cut and rearranged anew. Just as Duchenne de Boulogne in his studies had dissected the human face, itemized the underlying mechanisms of physiognomic facial expressions through the electrical stimulation of individual muscles, thereby isolating the muscle of joy from the muscle of woe from the muscle of lechery, and consequently rearranged them into a new, monstrous grimace, so did I too begin dissecting and redistributing the muscles of my soul. They became objects to me that found a home within the alphabet. And this organization, it seemed to me, which placed everything into an interwoven juxtaposition, as opposed to a mere sequence, could do better justice to the constantly interspersing happenings and stirrings of this muddled era than the pages of my diary, which merely clung to one another in a never-ending chain, ever could. Only then did I realize I had become an encyclopedist, just as I had dreamed when I was a girl. Yet how different my encyclopedia was! And it was not just one, but rather many of them. Diderot said: "When one considers the immense material for an encyclopedia, the only thing one perceives distinctly is that it cannot be the work of a single man." I eventually concluded: "When one considers the immense material for a human life, the only thing one perceives distinctly is that it cannot be contained in a single encyclopedia." So I created more encyclopedias - or rather alphabets - each covering a different segment of my life. These I furnished with comments, the individual entries became linked through citations, and the words were revised here and there as I saw fit, though without skewing the meaning in the slightest. Thus the original manuscript came to be, comprising four-thousand large-sized booklet pages. A thousand of those alone dealt with the dreams I had chronicled. Certainly you can imagine how much labor it took to sift all of that into an utmost concise manuscript. The task would have been unthinkable, if I had not had the ball, a Malling-Hansen writing ball, for which I spent many years saving, and which I was finally able to acquire at a liquidation in Paris. This machine alone allowed me to completely disassemble my entries. Where handwriting always connects, the machine dismantles. It turns thoughts into distant mercenaries that stare up at me strangely from the page, like they have come from another world and have not the slightest to do with me. While writing with a quill forces me to constantly follow the succession of lines, of letters, of words, with my eyes, now the writing is cut off from me. Far away from the pressing, hammering hand that emulates the rhythm of our times and, obscured from the eyes, the

letters are slammed into the paper as one. When I finally remove the finished page, I read the words of a stranger. Where my diaries taught me first and foremost to write myself, the encyclopedias have taught me to view myself as though I were standing outside of me.

And so emerged the manuscript before you, which you may now understand why I have labeled peculiar. I now count myself among the romantics who dream of a world where the peculiar has its place in the light and will not be condemned to be crushed in the grinder of assimilation. Hence I am sending you this manuscript, not as a document of the intimate or a celebration of sentiment, nor as a work of science and even less so as a work of art, but rather as one that could be all those things combined, alternating and interchangeable. Perhaps, as I do, you can discover something universal therein, namely those moments when the world descends upon the Self. But perhaps this Self has already collapsed under the world's weight, its vision askew, seeing figments of its imagination where in reality there is only emptiness. If this is the case, you may destroy this little manuscript. It shall be no burden on you.

Yours sincerely,

Paulette Blanchard

First Alphabet

Yerres, June 1870

After the much-desired end of the boarding school years, which the Self concerned here spent at the Sœurs de la Congrégation de Notre-Dame du Grandchamp in Versailles, thus after a time of pious study which was supposed to prepare one for the life of a housewife and mother, but which for the boarder internally represented but a prolonged period of boredom and tedium, the young woman awaited – she had just turned 17 – the return to her parents' home in Paris. Her father however had other plans for her. He denied her homecoming and sent her to Yerres to her ailing grandmother. In this time of perceived exile emerged the first entries in the diary. At first hesitantly, but soon with the fever that came to define the coming years.

AÉRONAUTIQUE (Aeronautics)

- 1. Now, finally, I can write it down in hopes of thereby preserving it and at last be free of the childish fear I might someday simply forget it. How many times before have I repeated the story to myself, at night, before falling asleep and thereby bored my mannequin terribly! ever since Uncle Eugène told it to me for the first time when I was a little girl. I think thousands of times! And still I am visited by doubt, of whether the story is still the same, or whether here or there I have added or removed some detail where my imagination bore me away or my memory forsook me. For it does not at all seem to me to be fashioned after reality, rather like a fairy tale and almost like I myself invented it so I could prop myself up on it again and again the story of my great-grandmother Marie Madeleine-Sophie Blanchard, the emperor's aeronaut.
- 2. And there are two pictures, superimposed on one another inside me, which have embellished themselves over the years in my agitated imagination, ever further, evermore urgently, and which are now firmly implanted in my mind! The first is of the ascending balloon that night over the *Jardin de Tivoli*, that exceptionally little *Charlière*, sewn from white, richly embroidered silk cloth, a splendid flying machine hanging over Paris like Phaeton's chariot of the sun. The nacelle is made of but a silver bowl so one can almost see the entire beaming figure of the aeronaut as she ascends. She looks like an angel as she rises into the sky, her white dress hanging in folds and her hat topped with the feather of an ostrich, this little woman, dainty as a child but with an otherworldly, spherical beauty about her

reminiscent of a bird, with her pointed nose and her small piercing eyes. (I must have inherited those from her, no doubt!) In her hand she holds a white banner that billows in the wind. And as the balloon continues to rise into the gloomy night sky, the whole sight appears illuminated by a radiant crown produced by the Bengal fires beneath the nacelle. She, who even without this magnificent costume, as she descended in her balloon into rural pastures was perceived as the Virgin Mary by the nescient farmers, now, in this first picture, stands before me as a truly superhuman apparition.

The second picture is of silver rain falling over nighttime Paris, flickering stars and fireworks like countless suns that cast their light over the earth, even down into the throats of the joyously roaring crowds. Paris has never seen anything of the like before! And even the mouth of the aeronaut is wide open, though in horror. Her fists clench the ropes, the hat is scorched, the hair beneath it too, for the whole balloon is in flames! Like from cracks in the earth the fiery gas billows forth. And she falls, she falls over the roofs of the *Rue de Provence*, her vessel smashes into the red brick slope of a roof with a loud crash, skids along it, a chimney knocks it aside, and the angel, torn from her mountings, plunges down into the *Rue de Provence* with an echoing scream and shatters on the cobblestones.

Tenth Alphabet

On the Steamboat to Japan, November 1873 to January 1874

It was a short letter in the fall of 1873, in which the young women apprised her family of her impending marriage to Monsieur Otomo. There was a great surge. And over the weeks not a day went by without a furious letter from Paris. But the henceforth fiancé stubbornly refused to revoke her decision or even to pay a visit back "to confounded Paris." Eventually, the father consented to send his daughter away with a shameful dowry, but on the condition that she could never return to the house of Blanchard.

And so the woman, who now called herself Madame Otomo, boarded the Austrian Lloyd steamer Vulcan in Trieste with her husband in November of 1873 and journeyed forth via Port Said, the newly opened Suez Canal, the Red Sea and Djibouti to Bombay, then with the French Meikong further via Colombo, Singapore, Saigon and Hong Kong to Japan, where she came ashore in Yokohama on January 26th, 1874. For that Self, it was a time of jubilant opening. It was a departure into the sheer endless breadth of the open sea, which promised nothing less than a new life of freedom.

Yet on the second-to-last of the 63 days of the voyage —not far from the coast of Japan — the Meikong blundered into a typhoon, which held the ship in its clutches for more than twenty hours. Two people fell victim to the storm. Glasses, plates, countless pieces of furniture, and a grand piano were dashed to pieces, and large portions of the halls, the cabins and the cargo hold were completely flooded. The diary covering this period, comprising several hundred pages alone, which that Self had stuffed full to bursting with experiences, was seized by the water and rendered completely unreadable.

TYPHON (Typhoon)

1. I am writing on scraps of paper. The ship is still swaying. My script is still running out of the rudder, and yet it seems the worst is over. I can write again. And I just partook in some dry bread, I cannot stomach anything more than that. They brought out a breakfast in the dining hall, even fruits, freshly brewed coffee, as if in consolation, and yet hardly a pallid face among the passengers showed itself. The whole lot is unwell, lying flat from seasickness and speaking the last syllables of prayer, no matter to which god. The cabin windows are open again, the sun is making halting attempts to reveal itself through the clouds and whispers: It was all just a bad dream. Yet, two wooden coffins stand on the forward deck. A tiny one with the inscription: "Victoria Felicitas dos Santos Valdés, five years old." An overturned armoire crushed the little girl. It is just awful! How much more could this little creature have lived and experienced? She and her mother had been on their way to her father, a Malaysian trader doing business in Yokohama. The family had planned to travel on to Manila, living

out the rest of their days forever inseparable. The second coffin belongs to a Chinese seaman: "Yiu Chanming, 22 years old." I was told he had fallen from the rigging while trying to repair a sail. The English Reverend Dixon is supposed to hold a funeral speech. They've weighted the wooden boxes down with cannonballs, before they are tipped into the waves.

2. The sea is calm, as though nothing happened. And now everything truly does seem like a fever dream to me. I had a sparse midday repast and feel stronger. Tetsuo too no longer looks deathly pale, and I feel distinctly relieved by that. He has resumed work on his translation. And so I too wish to sit down and record the recent events. January 23rd, about two hundred nautical miles from Shanghai. I am woken by the heavy sea at 4 o'clock. (Even the day before, as we were departing the harbor in China, Monsieur Favières' parrot began screeching incessantly. An unmistakable sign of the coming storm!) An oil lamp is burning. Next to me, Tetsuo vomits into a bowl. The ship is now tossing so violently, I have not experienced anything of the sort so far on the voyage. As though gravity itself were swaying back and forth, for one moment a strange force pushes me to the ground, as if I had the weight of three sailors, and the next it seems to lift me up, and I fancy I am truly about to fly. If this game were not so terrifying, it would certainly be a delightful experience. There is nothing left for me to do but grab at Tetsuo's ashen face, who in turn is clinging fiercely to the cabin door so as not to be hurled out of bed. In doing so he lets out a quiet whimper, almost inaudible, because the sounds around us are of the grisliest nature, as though the whole body of the ship were about to burst into pieces. Or as though two sea monsters are tearing each other apart in the belly of the steamer, which my feverish imagination conjures up for me in dark colors. So we lie there. I stare and breathe heavily. Someone closed the cabin windows. Is this already a coffin? Meanwhile the curtain, when the ship is tilting at its deepest, reaches a 45-degree angle. I become frightened. From the corridor there is the sound of a terrible howl, and suddenly our door smashes open! A creature leaps franticly onto the bed, and for a moment I cannot perceive it as anything but a tentacle of one of the ferocious beasts that have just crawled into the belly of the ship. What else can I do but scream for my life? Only then do I recognize the unexpected guest. It is the monkey that Mister Parslow brought on board in Hong Kong. It is now sitting next to me on the bed, shivering, its teeth chattering, the tiny eyes flashing with unspeakable horror. I fondle his shaggy head. He even endures it. Then there is a loud bang, and the poor creature startles and runs shrieking out the still open door. Tetsuo's condition though is getting

worse. He vomits up only acrid stomach juices. And at some point someone will have to take on the task of securing all our worldly possessions, before everything comes crashing down on our heads. And so I stand up as well as I can, hold my balance a moment, then fall back onto the spot from whence I just arose. Tetsuo's appearance however is so miserable, the affections of his gastric nerves and the nausea so intense that I am finally able to pull myself together and undertake finding him some soda powder, seltzer water and bread, come what will. So I set forth. And I am more than a little startled to find the floor of the hallway wet. How did this water get in here? Someone spread out sand. It does not make walking any easier. The walls are leaning toward me, and all around me there is such a dreadful creaking and rumbling I cannot imagine the gateway to hell to be any more terrifying. Someone has hung ropes on which one can try to pull oneself along with great effort. Then suddenly there is a ghostly quiet. The ship, which is still leaning to one side, seems pinned to the bottom of the sea, remains motionless, time standing still. But in the next moment it lurches to the other side, such that I think it is doomed to capsize! I cry out in horror as a dreadful crash shudders through the storm-tossed vessel, leaving it moaning and quaking. In my fall I smash my elbow and see blood. But what is a damaged joint when I must fear that we have crashed into a reef in the uncharted waters of the East China Sea? I can already see the pierced hull, the water streaming in. But the ship continues rocking like before. It rattles me. I breathe a sigh of relief. And I pick myself up again, continue on my way, even make it to the ship's surgeon, where already a queue of injured people is waiting, silent and wide-eyed. I allow myself to be bandaged, pocket some soda power and a little bottle of remedy, and commence making my way back. I pass the stairs leading up to the deck, hear the roaring outside like a distant call, see a twilit brightness, and cannot resist. The sea seems somewhat calmer, yes, now is a good moment, certainly it is favorable, I tell myself, and although it takes quite some effort to suppress the thought of Tetsuo languishing there, I eventually dare to go upstairs. And what a view awaits me! It is dawn. A sun must still exist somewhere beyond those dark clouds! I admit, I have never seen anything more impressive. And the dizziness of a peculiar happiness overtakes me. The grayblue mountains of water rising before me! The gigantic dark waves, from whose peaks the white foam sprays. This image of a monstrous battle between the elements stretching out into eternity, here darker, there lighter. No horizon to be seen. Where does the whipping sky end? Where does the mighty sea begin? At times the shape of a valley yawns open on one

side, down into which the ship pitches, then another mountain of water towers overhead higher, ever higher - obscuring all prospects, as though forever. The steamer, like a tiny paper boat, nothing more, tossed about by an unfathomable force, as though it weighed little more than a sack of feathers instead of thousands of tons! And I am small. How small I am! And soaked. Then there comes a mighty wave and tears one of the longboats away unceremoniously. It twitches away over the brine-splattered decks and then disappears into the dark maw of another wave trough. I am drunk! I am drunk on this force of nature! And I begin to shout, scream aloud, without hearing the least of my own calls, so deafening is the rushing and the roaring around me! And in so doing I convince myself, I could further provoke the sea, incense it. Yes, come on, come! Come get me, you beast! If you dare! Then someone grabs me from behind, drags me away. It's the first mate, Monsieur Hakim. "Are you out of your senses, Madame? Come below deck, or are you tired of living?" I find our cabin in unholy chaos. The water has forced its way in, with crates, chairs, tables rolling about with loud bangs. The bed still looks dry - a miraculous little dinghy. Tetsuo looks at me, deathly pale, yet at the same time unusually calm. He seems alien, like I do not know him. Do I even know him? I grab his hand and find it dreadfully cold. I pour the medicine into his mouth. He says a few words in Japanese. The smell of him nauseates me.

3. In those last few days I had longed for the peaceful hours of an impending future, in Tokyo, when I would take my diary in hand, read it from the beginning, re-live my journey day by day. And now? It is like everything has been swept away, as though not just the writing but even my memory has been lost to the waves and dissolved by the salt. More than that: my own self. An entire portion of my life amputated. The school of flying fish; the dolphins; the albatrosses before Shanghai; the red winds of the Sahara; the whimsical prima donna, the Towers of Silence in Bombay; the crying Hindustani bellhop; the blind Bengali; the cholera; the boa in Colombo; the Chinese wedding; the coal carriers in Saigon; the bedbugs, the fleas; the children's story with the white elephant; the unsuccessful portrait; the hunt for the buccaneers; the sudden snow; the otherworldly singer in Victoria Harbor; the floating city; the opium den; the Siamese straw cigars; the groaning machine in the boiler room; the smells of coal steam, the future and the sea; the hours with Tetsuo, reading Stendhal together or Goethe's *Werther*; the conversations, the dances, the landscapes! All of it, gone!

From Volume 2: Jona Jonas – Terrain Vague (Pages 95-101)

35

I awoke, naked, next to a young man, Japanese, whose posture in sleep exposed his sex blatantly. I awoke with a throbbing headache, confused, and in a desolate condition, filled to the brim with vague memories, pictures of the night which composed themselves only piece by piece and then just as slowly collapsed again: Skin, tongues, touches, whiskey, cigarettes, condoms, glances. There was a remainder of that relief that I had felt as I was able to vent all the pent-up desire and longing on the ingenuous body of some boy who was at least tangible, present, real. And shame I felt too, and disgust, which rose up in me simultaneously. There was Chantal in these pictures, a phantom, standing there in a dark corner of the room and watching us as we escalate one another's lust, Chantal, like a ghost, contorting her face at each sound I make, then she turns away and leaves.

To my alarm it was already afternoon. Quietly, in order not to wake the stranger, I tried to dress myself, but couldn't find my slip, then finally found it, jammed under the smooth, shimmering body of the Japanese man, so that I, cursing to myself, had some trouble freeing it. I regarded the sleeping, naked man. He was so irrelevant to me that I was taken aback. He had nothing to do with me. He did not even have a name. I didn't know where I was. I didn't know if I wanted to know. A look out the window showed me high-rises, towers, glass facades, steel structures. I was up in the sky.

My knees buckled a moment in shock when I saw her. Abra. She too was naked and lying asleep on a sofa. I almost screamed out loud. There was a scarring. Something was missing. From the knee downward it was Abra's right leg that wasn't there, and instead of a left arm there was just a stump. I stood there, in this unfamiliar apartment, and stared at her body, at her papery translucent skin, at the little pale blue veins and the stubs that had once been whole limbs. On the floor lay two prosthetics. I then turned away. (From Abra, from myself, from the world.) It was in that moment, as I stood in the foyer of the apartment, just about ready to put my shoes on, and looking around for my jacket, when it started. I trembled. More than that: I swayed. I had trouble standing upright. Perhaps it was dizziness that had overcome me, but it was not dizziness. I feared I would lose consciousness at any moment, fade out. I expected a darkness and following it a gentle and soothing dream. But no dream came. Or it had already started, and I had long been ensnared in it. I looked up at the ceiling and saw that the lamp above me was swinging back and forth, had gone wild, in sudden ecstasy. In a groaning and creaking the things around me came to life, freeing themselves from their torpor, shaking off their thingness and their lifelessness, roaring and quaking, as though all at once a seething desire had gripped them and woken them from their thing-sleep, rattled them awake, injected them with a thirst for the world and a change in their perspective, such that shaking and creaking they set themselves into motion, involuntarily, without any other choice, vibrating, jumping, falling, and performed an excited dance before my eyes, no, with me. Like the bookcase, which approached me, first slowly twitching, then staggering, then finally with circling bounds and crashed thunderously to the floor, missing me by millimeters. The flower pot of orchids, the straw sandals, the old umbrella, the bottle of sake, the chairs, the table, the flat-screen TV, the pictures on the walls, the dishes in the cupboards, and the old teapot, everything began to move, in an epileptic, ecstatic shaking, of which I did not know if it was angry or joyful. No, it was not me that was moving. It was the things around me. It was the building and more, the entire city. I ran to the window façade, tripped, stood up again, held myself up on the wall – for a moment I thought it would give way – and looked outside. I saw the buildings dancing, incomprehensible, swaying back and forth like blades of grass in the wind, melancholic, languid, a drunken city, a world in delirium. We need to get out of here, shouted Abra, grabbing me by the shoulder. I looked at her a moment. She was still naked as before, wearing her prosthetics again. Her artificial hand moved, like it too had awoken to a fitful life of its own. The young Japanese man was talking agitatedly to Abra. The fear was in his face. I understood nothing. He shoved a silver backpack into my hand. What am I supposed to do with this? Safety, he said. Sirens blared outside. What holds up? What withstands? What doesn't crumble, once you knock on it a little harder?

I tugged at the door, jolted or was jolted by the door, as the quaking seemed to proceed into my core, or originally came from there and spread out into the world in concentric circles. The door had wedged itself, wouldn't let itself be opened. Behind me I heard the young man speaking, perhaps to me, though unintelligibly, who then touched me, on my neck, then embraced me, trembling, as though there was an intimacy between us, as though there was a secret bond that had originated in this night but had still extended beyond it, as though he sensed that in this moment I wanted nothing more desperately than to be embraced. Though not by him. Not by him. He held me tightly. It was Chantal who held me, Chantal, whose arms wrapped around me from behind, pressed me to her, safe and close. At last. So that the world around me disappeared. And everything went quiet. Still. Alright. For a moment. Chantal. I shook myself free, or was it the floor that did it? Then the door was open and I was in the stairwell, staggering, to the left, to the right, to the right, to my knees, and up again, onward, just onward, next to a gaggle of figures that were streaming out of the doors, out into the hall, into the stairwell, altogether silent and concentrating intently on staying on their feet like a caravan of drunks on a walkway after midnight.

What happened next, I don't know. I think I fell. Whereto? On what? And then it really did go dark.

Sirens wailed all around. How I got out of the high-rise, I don't know. Someone must have carried me, despite the ongoing quaking and the danger of finding oneself buried together with a stranger beneath the rubble of a collapsing house. (Since when did houses collapse? Since when did the ground not hold up anymore?) A few heads were bending over me. "Are you alright? Are you hurt?" "I'm fine. Thank you."

I lay on a patch of grass next to a pond, a tree, in a small oasis between skyward-straining structures of glass and steel, in an impossible world of shapes, as I perceived it in that moment, depicted to me in the reflections of the facades, where the buildings grew into one another as well as into the sky and the sky itself stretched into the buildings.

I shut my eyes to escape the dizziness, though without success. This peculiar word passed through my mind again, that word that Chantal had sometimes used and that all of a sudden seemed to me like a secret, ancient formula: Refuge. I longed for such a place, as I stood up and started walking, or rather stumbling, with my bag on one shoulder and the silver backpack on the other, out of the surreal garden and onto the - so I hoped - real streets, which were full, overflowing with people, as though called to an assembly of the clueless did they stand there, arranged in a secret order, with bowed heads, crowded together on the broad plazas and yet isolated, staring at their devices, typing, shaking them, holding them high in the air in search of reception, or speaking, not to one another but rather each on their own, in a quiet dialogue with the safe haven in their own hands. Still others stood there looking upward, perhaps in the archaic fear that the sky would fall on their heads, some were running franticly through the crowd, exasperated, toward some distant destination, many just stood there, waiting, listening to the voices that – one couldn't tell from which hidden corners, or were they coming from the sky? - drowned out the sirens and blanketed the crowd in a reassuring cadence and unintelligible words. A pointless, yet suggestive chant. I asked a passerby, who translated for me: "Leave the buildings. Keep calm. Aftershocks could follow." And they did follow. I glanced down at myself and determined that I was trembling. And although I felt completely calm, if anything strangely protected, I figured, since the confusion and the tremoring of the outside world were now suddenly in harmony with those of the internal world, that the trembling of one must neutralize the other and make it disappear. So I went, while the buildings around me swayed again, the sirens wailed, the people sat or laid on the ground or held tight to one another, or to objects, alone, light-footed, calm, through the broad street whose traffic had come to a complete standstill, practically floating, up a few steps into an artificial park, sat down on a patch of grass that lay on a hill next to an abstract art installation and two high-rises sparkling in the afternoon sun, and looked up at this now static dance of the staggering that, it seemed to me, were gathering together in even formations, like on the terrace of a café, between cars lining multitudinous streets with some space between them, a safe distance from the mighty pillars and structures of the overhead railway that ran in between, they stood there so, tottering, choreographed by the architecture of the city. Only now did I notice the giant telescreens on the

houses across the way, that, as though they belonged to the whole production, were running parallel scenes from ideologically glorified, sensationalist Hollywood disaster films, pictures of crying children, of demolished houses, of raging floods that dragged not just cars, buses, ships, houses, bridges with them, but rather whole swaths of land, scenes of a strange swirling, black mass that rolled over the earth like an unleashed Leviathan, tearing everything away in a stubbornly unfolding indifference. And in that moment I actually felt an outrage, an indignation at this exorbitantly inappropriate exaggeration, as if any real catastrophe was never enough to not still be trumped by the media, as if terror incarnate was in a permanent competition with the imaginary, as if the latter had always to prove that every reality lagged far behind it, in the illustration of happiness as well as in the formulation of destruction. I was not the only one who felt this way, because others too, as I now realized, stood there speechless, stared at the pictures with raised, pointing arms or hands held over their mouths in shock, like in confirmation that the unreal special effects made them shudder far more than did the world swaying around them that had come to a standstill. But then, in a watershed moment, as I saw the same white helmet on a Japanese newscaster on the telescreens that people were wearing around me, before me, behind me, in the street, as that helmet multiplied itself in this way, serially on the TV screens that all showed the same picture multiple times, and scattered on the heads of those standing all around, so the picture and the world around me suddenly became one, this word reality collapsed in my head and, in a sudden dizziness, dispersed itself in all fathomable directions. And since the white helmet was on the telescreens, just as it was around me and seemed to be inside of me, and the disaster pictures were on the telescreens, just like they must have been disasters elsewhere and also became a disaster within me, the crying people really were crying people, the destruction really destruction, all of a sudden the strange swirling black mass, which had until now just been on the screens like an unleashed Leviathan rolling over the earth and tearing everything away with it, struck me over the head with deafening sound.

From Volume 3: Chantal Blanchard – Cahiers (Pages 73-86)

2

There is essentially nothing. There is nothing. That is the fundamental insight of theoretical physics. The consequent is even more auspicious. It says: Nothingness is unstable.

In August of the year 1952, the attendees of a piano concert in Woodstock, New York, became witnesses to a tremor in the history of music. An artist went to the grand piano. He sat down and remained sitting in front of the closed fall board for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. During the piece, the pianist raised his hands three times. The then-premiering composition was 4'33" by John Cage. It is without a doubt one of the most radical and most beautiful pieces of New Music. Initially it was called a four-and-a-half-minute silence in three movements. The listeners at the Maverick Concert Hall were irritated, spellbound, or else bored, some of them started conversing, others left the hall. It was generally professed that the piece consisted of four-anda-half minutes of prolonged silence. That could not have been further from the truth. In the year before the recital, John Cage visited the anechoic chamber at Harvard University. He later spoke of this curious experience. In this room with no acoustics it was everything but quiet. Rather, he heard two sounds, a high-pitched humming and a pulsing droning. They irritated him considerably. As an engineer later explained to the famous musician and mushroom expert, the high-pitched sound was his nervous system, and the deep sound his bloodstream. At the recital of 4'33" in August 1952, as Cage remembered later, during the first movement one could hear the wind outside, during the second movement raindrops began pattering on the

roof, and during the third the people themselves made all fathomable remarkable sounds. "There is no such thing as silence. What they thought was silence, because they did not know how to listen, was full of random noises."

It is that perpetual rustling which, by means of these three silent movements, becomes audible. Chance itself becomes music. Every clearing of a throat, every restless squirm in a chair, the wheezing breaths of the elderly people in the front row, the sirens of the ambulance driving past outside, the cry of a hungry baby, the barely noticeable humming of the overhead lights. Silence, that is henceforth the ensemble of all the sounds *not* noted by the composer. Fickle and unpredictable, at any arbitrary spot in the concert hall with a different concentration and variation. It is the most complex piece of music that has ever been conceived. One listens to it like a sonata by Bach.

Physical Nothing resembles this Cage-ian silence. On the sheet music for 4'33" there is not a single note. It is a stubborn succession of measured emptiness. Now in a physical void, the quantum-mechanic equivalent, which is performed not in concert halls but in laboratories, there is not a single molecule. All matter is removed, even more: all light and all heat. Only a profound emptiness remains. With the exception of isolated floating subatomic particles and a bit of electromagnetic radiation, the vast majority of our universe actually resembles this condition of a vacuum. It is the fundamental state of the world. It is, as you might have already noticed, cold and empty.

But now quantum physics exposes something outrageous: *the unrest of Nothing*. This is namely full of puzzling energy. The Cage-ian silence reveals the restless sounds of the world. Physical Nothing reveals its relentless vibrating and twitching. It is the chance music of quantum fluctuations. Or in other words: The billowing of emptiness. The quantum vacuum is a space of perpetual unrest, a turbulent seething and hectic reeling of virtual particles that appear out of Nothing and then disappear back into it. They do this in such immeasurably small intervals that no eye will ever behold the process. These virtual objects are agitators. They defy that law of conservation which states that energy can be neither created nor destroyed, only transformed. They taunt this law by stretching Nothing, expanding it here into a positive, there into a negative, potentially infinitely long and wide, ere they annihilate themselves in the collision of the poles. Masters of the zero-sum-game, thieves of the microcosm, who pilfer their energy from emptiness, even though with such elusiveness, that this scandal can remain unnoticed. The Nothing of modern physics is a Nothing of possibilities, an ultrahigh-energy, creative Nothing.

Recognizing and describing this required a theoretical frontal assault on our conceptions of reality. At the beginning of the twentieth century, quantum theory dealt rational humanity a metaphysical shock, a jolt, which even now, one hundred years later, still affects us, leaving us floundering. Since Newton, people had thought of the universe as an indeed complex, though determinable, interplay of bodies and forces, of causes and necessarily resulting effects, unfolding from the foundational constants of space, time and universal natural laws, in short: a mechanical, ticking, rattling clockwork that in principle could be discerned in every detail and into all eternity, calculable, and thereby above all: predictable. Quantum mechanics, however,

introduced something hitherto inconceivable to the world of physical delineation: uncertainty and chance. The nightmare of every classical physicist, and my secret joy.

The uncertainty principle, which Werner Heisenberg devised for the first time in the year 1927 describes this exact radical deficit, characteristic of our reality: the absence of certitude. It was the world of the smallest particles that disrupted the understanding of physicists so badly. If one measures the rough location of a particle within a microscopic area, its speed remains necessarily unknown. On the contrary, if one measures the whereabouts of a particle, *it has no location*. Rather, it remains in a wondrous state which physicists call a superposition. It is a state of possibilities. The particle, which behaves paradoxically like a wave as long as it remains unobserved, resides *in different locations at the same time*. (Can you imagine the despair and the delight of the physicists who discovered this fact?) Only observation, that is to say the interaction with the environment, will abruptly collapse the wave function. It breaks down and commits *to a single reality*. It does this, albeit within a particular scope, as a complete matter of chance. In short: *The world of quantum effects is malleable*. It is blurry, unpredictable, and teeming with possibilities. Wherever one looks to grasp microscopic reality, it slips away.

The Austrian physicist Erwin Schrodinger proved his capacity for the grotesque when in the year 1935 he concocted an ostensive example of the quantum physical wave function. What would happen if our everyday reality followed such principles? In answer to this question, Schrodinger imagined a perfidious, gruesome "infernal machine." In the sadistic physicist's thought experiment, a cat is locked in a steel chamber, which also contains an exquisite chance device, a sort of diabolical quantum murder machine. It comprises a small amount of a radioactive substance, a Geiger counter, a little hammer, and a flask of deadly hydrocyanic acid. If one of the atoms were to decay, it would set the mechanism in motion: The Geiger counter would go off, the hammer would fall, and the flask would shatter, releasing the poison and killing the cat instantly.

At first the steel chamber is sealed. So no one can see inside it. The probability of an atom decaying within an hour, as Schrodinger supposed, would be about fifty percent. Quantum mechanically, one must describe the state of an unobserved, unstable atomic nucleus as a superposition. In other words: The atomic nucleus has decayed *and* it hasn't decayed. Our reflex conditioned by our everyday reality immediately leads us to say: It has *either* decayed *or* not! However, the counterintuitive reality of the quantum world is different. This is its glorious punchline: It is a reality of *both-and*. At any rate the diabolical physicist waits for some time in

front of the infernal machine. He probably whistles a ditty while he waits or scribbles down some formulas. Schrodinger comes to the gruesome conclusion, the steel chamber would have to contain both the living cat and the dead cat – as he annotates: "in equal shares mixed or smeared." Only by opening the chamber – thus through observation – would the murder machine abruptly discern – either for life or for death.

Now what if I told you that you are unavoidably entrusted to this paradoxical, billowing Nothing? And not to say: "mixed or smeared with it?" Since the 1970s there has been a consistent theory about particles and forces that make up neutrons and protons. Together these are the immutable basis of matter. Our bodies, like almost everything around us, are built from these high-mass particles. Only recently have we actually been able to computationally deal with the complex mathematics of strong interaction between quarks, of which neutrons and protons are composed. To this end one needed simultaneous computers, elaborately constructed and interconnected, built from tens of thousands of individual processors that executed their functions for weeks with an endless droning and humming sound, before they revealed the following monstrous verdict: namely that the vast majority of the mass of these particles could by no means be found in the quarks, but rather in the vacuum that lies between them, in the interactive fields, in the ceaselessly emerging and disappearing virtual particles of empty space. In short: The bulk of what we are and what we call matter is billowing Nothing.

As if that wasn't enough. We are inching ever closer to the vacuum. It long since lies beneath our skin.

Symmetry is a fascination. It is inalienable from our understanding of the universe. There are physicists who, when asked about the most important discovery of the natural sciences, would answer without hesitation: "The laws of the universe are based in symmetry." But what is that, symmetry? It is an indifference to manipulation. (The opposite of financial markets.) A perfect sphere is the most symmetrical. No matter how one turns it, spins it, or shifts it, its form remains unchanged. Fluid water or empty space behaves just as symmetrically. Emptiness as such, Aristotle said, is incapable of differentiation. Inside it no stone could know what is up and what is down. Therefore one thing is impossible: The stone cannot fall.

But it is this same falling that defines our world. Indeed the fall is only possible because of a fundamental transformation. In physics we call it *symmetry breaking*. For you this phenomenon is quite familiar. It's like what happens when water freezes into ice. The super-cooled droplet

that accumulates in a nidus and freezes inside a cloud in the atmosphere breaks its symmetry. It sets and becomes a snowflake, this incredibly complex fractal crystal. An outrageous transformation! The snowflake too is symmetrical, albeit constrained in comparison to the absolute symmetry of the water: It still possesses mirror symmetry as well as turn symmetry at an angle of sixty degrees. Systems always strive for the state of lowest energy. Man, for example, prefers to lie on his couch. In the snowflake's case, this is the ordered state of a crystal. It is only made possible by the drop in temperature. Above the critical threshold, thermal agitation stands in the way of the water molecules' desired state. Hence the snowflake melts on our skin.

The heartbreaking dilemma of Buridan's ass reveals to us the role of chance. The donkey is almost as tragic a character as Schrodinger's cat. From the apparent heap of animal analogies, you might come to the wrong conclusion that I rather like living creatures. That is not the case at all. (Least of all this strange animal, people.) In most experimental trials, Buridan's ass too is sacrificed to the beauty of thought. The French scholastic philosopher Buridan imagined the animal in the exact middle between two identical mounds of hay. In a state of symmetry. And again in this case thinkers demonstrate their gruesome instincts. Namely the donkey, according to Buridan, would be incapable of deciding between the two mounds of food, succumb to starvation, and perish miserably!

In a quantum mechanical version of this experiment, the donkey actually escapes with its life. At least at first. The fluctuations of virtual flies buzzing around its head, so numerous and malicious, that only the void or hell could have spat them out, will prompt the ass to move. The mirror symmetry in which it finds itself standing between the two mounds of hay is thereby broken. That will happen completely by chance. The donkey, dumb as a rock, will jerk its head to one side to shoo away a virtual fly, will thereby find itself closer to one mound of hay than the other, and immediately move without haste in its direction – without even knowing that it has turned into a cosmic metaphor. The collapse of symmetry! The ass will munch delightfully in a state of blissful imbalance.

God does not play dice! said Einstein, who spent decades trying doggedly, though without success, to refute this monster, quantum theory and its implications. And he was right. The dice need no God at all. They fall out of the vacuum.

Not coincidentally, at my place of study the university clinic was right next to the institute of theoretical physics. One of those victims of realization who managed to escape the clinic

painted a quote from Dante's Inferno in fat letters over the gantry of our institute: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

Even the dynamic space of the Einsteinian theory of general relativity, that space of gravitation, which bends, stretches and contorts, is subject to fluctuations in the quantum field. The uncertainty principle makes sure that it is space itself that randomly fluctuates. This gently curved space that in our everyday experience appears steady, dormant and flat, it is, at the smallest level, seething and jagged, buffeted and corroded by turbulent quantum activity. It is processes that play out at scales beyond the Planck length, in a realm of millionths of billionths of billionths of billionths of centimeters, beyond the Planck time, in timescales of millionths of trillionths of trillionths of trillionths of seconds, and - this is certain - beyond the comprehensible. In the microscopic realm, the world falls to pieces. It is a world of groundlessness, unruly and irrational. Categories like up and down, left and right, even before and after, lose their meaning here. Time and space are suspended. The fields fluctuate faster than light, jumping terrifically forward and backward in time. All human terms fail under these conditions. They are meaningless. At magnitudes that fall below the Planck length and the Planck time, quantum uncertainty causes such intense distortions and contortions in the spacetime structure of the cosmos, that they – thus far – make us fall silent. And keep calculating away.

Nothing is unstable. Even Nothing can, no, it must collapse! In that way it resembles every other symmetrical system. It resembles the perfect sphere balanced on the utmost Planck-length-finest point of a cone-shaped mountain. It will not stay there, that much is certain. Even Nothing will inevitably fall into asymmetry. The symmetry of a vacuum, that is to say of the virtual particles and antiparticles that both emerge from Nothing and in a moment of ecstatic unification vanish again, so this balance of Nothing swinging toward both poles can tip. In the case, namely, when the twitching of the void drives it too far, when the fluctuations surpass a critical point and so inexorably the system begins to fall into asymmetry. So what, when fluctuating Nothing collapses? What happens then?

In short: the world.

That catastrophe we call the universe.

It resembles the audacity of Baron Munchhausen, pulling himself out of the swamp of Nothing into existence by the hair. Though, to the question of what happened before the event that we

call the Big Bang – that means: before fluctuating space! Before the asymmetry of time! – undaunted physicists provide a sleek answer. You already know what it must be: Nothing! It is mathematically plausible and even probable that our universe arose spontaneously, for no reason, without meaning, without God, without any unmoved mover, yes, paradoxically without even space and time. The abstractness of this notion shames the limited human mind. It only becomes crystalline and shining in the language of mathematics, not in our meager terminology. The world, quantum mechanics suggest, is a reality effect of absolute Nothing. A collapse and a drop into asymmetry. The first reason is only chance.

What part of your body lies beneath your feet? What is more northern than the North Pole? It appears that our inability to imagine a *creatio ex nihilo*, is of a linguistic nature. We can't help but ask about a *before*, even if there is no time. We can't help but ask about a *location*, even if there is no space. The evolution of our highly complex language has ensured us survival *in space and time*. It however fails when it comes to perfect symmetry. Language – and with it our imagination – may grasp what the case is. It may also acquire the sphere of the possible, the imaginable, as well as the ambiguous, or rather it may create those things out of itself. That is its immense creative power. But language, which itself is structure, fails to grasp what is without coordinates, without structure: nothingness and absoluteness. Mathematics by contrast is able to penetrate into these spheres and tell us about them. It is able, like the microscope which makes invisible things visible to the human eye, to make the inconceivable conceivable to the human imagination.

In a closed universe, so the equations tell us, basically in a universe that closes upon itself like a ball, the positive energy of matter is cancelled out by the negative energy of gravity. It is the law of lovers: Two bodies that are close together have less potential energy than those that are far apart, since it takes force for them to separate from each other against gravity and remain at a distance. The greater the distance, the greater the negative energy. (Longing.) It is a mathematical fact that the forces of matter and gravity cancel each other out in a generally consistent universe like ours. They equalize each other. The result of this circumstance is bewildering: *The overall energy of our universe is exactly zero.*

There is no law of conservation, no law of physics at all, which could forbid the creation of such a closed universe, of such a gigantic zero-sum-game, from Nothing. What's more: It is – according to the laws of quantum mechanics – even most likely that this is exactly what happens.

The history of our universe can be described as a history of catastrophes, as one of successive downfalls from symmetry. According to the current state of theory, the universe passed through a whole series of such cosmic breakdowns in its earliest moments. The first symmetry that must have collapsed in order to bring about the world as we know it today, was the symmetry of time. Since then it has marched unwaveringly onward in one direction. Only through this break could there be creatures that say: It was; it is; it might be.

And so time was born. History began. The universe was at point zero of an immeasurable density and heat. The four principle forces of our world today - gravity, electromagnetic force, the strong nuclear force, as well as the weak - were unified in a primordial force in a state of symmetry. The universe began to expand. It cooled off. Just as steam condenses into liquid water at one hundred degrees, and this in turn freezes into ice at zero degrees, the symmetry of the cosmos too collapsed, in a fraction of the first second of its existence and with drastically falling temperatures, into an increasingly asymmetrical form. First gravity split off in this way. There were no atoms yet, just electromagnetic radiation. And so there was light. In a wildly fluctuating and turbulent seething, virtual particles and antiparticles emerged, collided and were destroyed again. It thus came to a monstrous collapse with serious consequences. The cosmos tipped into a slight asymmetry, in which the number of particles surpassed that of antiparticles by a trifle of a billionth. As the symmetrical poles continued to obliterate each other, this measly vestige remained. It could no longer disappear. That was the origin of matter. There came more breaks, dissociations and transformations. It happened when the universe was just a thousandth of a millionth of a billionth of a billionth of a billionth of a second old, that through another break in symmetry it fell into an unstable state, in this way releasing a gigantic mass of energy, thereby generating such a negative pressure that space itself began escaping in an antigravitational flight at tremendous speed and inflating into vastness. An event of monstrous proportions that left our universe flat, smooth and steady in its wake and prevented its hitherto still probable disintegration. A gigantic balloon, a machinery of Nothing! It was the ultramicroscopic random distortions and convulsions of space-time quantum fluctuations that through this inflation event assumed such magnitudes, that the henceforth expanded universe exhibited a clumpy structure. From these slags and knots, which were no more than vastly inflated quantum convulsions, later arose through gravitational collapse the matter of galaxies, stars, planets, people, and physicists. We all come from random fluctuations of Nothing. From

inflation and agglutination. These, one must admit after considering the state of affairs, are still the fundamental characteristics of humanity.

The next time you feel a sense of weariness, like when you drive to work in the morning and look into the haggard, dismal faces of your contemporaries, when you step in a mushy dog turd, whenever you feel hurt or lonely, when you open up the newspaper with dismay or when you stare up at the ceiling on a sleepless night – then rest assured: It's nothing. There is essentially nothing. The next time you catch sight of beauty – in a body, in a product of nature, in a sound, a work of art, or a thought, bear this in mind: There is essentially nothing. There is just a rippling, a random asymmetry of an unstable vacuum. A small collapse of Nothing. The Nothing I am talking about here is in no way a happy one. It is not an eternal harmony, not a universal interconnectedness. It is not love, and certainly not tranquility. The Nothing I am talking about is noise.

In the spring of 1965, two telecommunication engineers in Holmdel, New Jersey, heard a peculiar sound. They were working on a research project, in which they planned to explore the earth's stratosphere with the help of archaic-looking echo-balloon-satellites – huge balls of glittering aluminum foil circling the planet. Through a ten-meter-long antenna horn resembling an ancient hearing pipe, they received the signals reflected by the silver balloon-satellites. However, much to the engineers' chagrin, they heard persistent, unsettling interference, an odd, unidentifiable noise, the cause for which they suspected lay in a defect in their ludicrous receiving unit. At least one could underscore and praise the down-to-earthness and the humility of this assumption. But it could not have been further from the truth. As it turned out, it was the whooshing echo of the Big Bang, the reverberation of the world's emergence from Nothing, more than 14 billion years ago.

It was one year before, 1964, when a star chart of the southern firmament fell into the hands of John Cage in a bookstore in Prague. It bore the title *Atlas Australis*. Star charts are peculiar inventions, indeed stemming from the human desire to endow a meaningful order upon the incomprehensible randomness of the celestial vault and connect the points of light – cosmologically completely unrelated objects – into shapes according to their brightness and size.

Cage spread the star chart out and drew the five line staff – the matrix of music – across the chaotic cosmos. From the collisions between note lines and recorded stars of the heavens

arose a music of the spheres of chance, the *Études Australes*. Scattered individual notes, clumps of sound and harmonic ripplings – from the unrest of Nothing they were transformed into musical notation. In these etudes the arbitrary spasms of the universe become those of the pianist. Art carries the collapsing onward. From the relative symmetry of the cosmos, as it appears to the heavenward-looking, vanishing human, from that opaque, empty sound, collapses an asymmetry of music, a tiny morsel of beauty and meaning.

From Volume 4: Akio Itō – Akio's Records (Pages 12-18)

Recording 0039

I am nine, but in one-hundred-and-four days I will be ten. That is 1 and 0, so a very nice number. Computers are also made of ones and zeros. And when I am 10, then I will be particularly smart because of that and will beat Otosan at chess and at Go. Though eight was not so bad either. That was like infinity, just standing up straight. When I once explained that to Hibaba, she said that I was right and that until then she had not even thought about it. But very few people think about that. I think it is too bad, that Hibaba is not here to listen to me. Hibaba is really the best listener that I know, although she has such small ears. Or maybe that is exactly why. But the voice recorder is not too bad either. Unfortunately Hibaba still keeps disappearing. Sometimes, when you do not pay good enough attention, then she is suddenly gone. She has wandered back to the spirits again, Okāsan always says. And then when Hibaba comes back and you ask her: Hibaba, where on earth were you? Then she just says: Oh, I was just promenading. Now that is a word that no one in the whole world but Hibaba says, I think. Promenade. But that is also very obvious, because after all promenading is something that no one in the whole world but Hibaba does. But this time she has not come back yet. She is really taking her time. Always, when Hibaba comes back from promenading, she is really happy. Sometimes she even sings. And I thought about it, that maybe this time she was very sad, and that is why she needed a little more time. On the day Hibaba disappeared, Keiko, Tatsu and me were playing on the hill.

Tatsu, that's my iguana. He's an Iguana iguana. From the tip of his nose to the tip of his tail he is already 14.8 inches, but someday he will be so big that I can ride on him, and by then he will have grown wings too, at least I dreamed that, and Hibaba says that some dreams come true. Tatsu looks like a real dragon, but Otōsan says that Tatsu is not a dragon, just a reptile. I do not know for sure, but he has long claws, and on his back he has a comb with red spikes. And the scales on his skin definitely feel like dragon skin, that much is for certain. Tatsu really loves it when you pet him, that's how I know for sure. Then he squints his eyes and tilts his head to one side. I have taken on this habit from Tatsu. And besides, iguanas have more senses than us people. For example, Tatsu has a third eye in the middle of his head. He can't see too good with it, but instead he always knows when it is light or dark out, even when he has both his other eyes closed. And in his mouth he has this organ, it has a complicated name, but anyways it's there so he can smell what's in his mouth. I think that's extremely useful, especially when Okāsan has cooked, and I wonder if someone shouldn't install an organ like that in people too. But the thing has a big disadvantage. 'Cause when Tatsu has bad breath, then he has to bear it the whole time. Holding your nose shut won't help you there. For that I feel sorry for him. That's why Hibaba and I added some mint to the garden. I give it to him sometimes to chew on. He knows to appreciate that very much. Hibaba says that Tatsu is an old soul and very wise and that he is good at watching out for me. But even I noticed that before, because Tatsu has such eyes, he always stares at me, as though he is staring out from another world. And then he winks like this. So we just dug a hole. 'Cause that's Tatsu's favorite hobby. Except for lying in the sun of course. Otosan and Okasan were at work. But Hibaba sat in front of the house, in her chair, and snoozed

like she always does, even when it's really cold outside, so that you can play fun pranks on her. One time for example we put snow in her blouse, and then Hibaba jumped up and shook herself like she was a maniac. And then she shouted: Brrrr! Well now I'm wide awake! Another time Keiko-chan and I were playing doctor and we investigated Hibaba's nose with a magnifying glass, and unfortunately that's how we discovered a terrible disease. 'Cause Hibaba has hairs growing inside her nose, and that is a rare but dangerous thing. So we gathered herbs and flowers and stuck them in her nostrils and in her ears so that she would get better again. She can count herself lucky that we take such good care of her. You always have to pay good attention to Hibaba. So we just made a hole. And then it started rumbling. A giant rumbling and roaring, like during a storm. But this time it was in the ground. So sort of like as if all the storm clouds from a whole year had gathered together under the hill and had all started shaking and laughing out loud. And I just thought: Oh no! We dug our hole too deep! Then we quickly started to fill it in again. Keiko-chan went very pale. And Tatsu was wagging his tail wildly and had inflated his cheeks in agitation and bobbed his head around so that his long dewlap swung back and forth. That looked really strange. I admit that I sort of got cold feet, but not very much. Sometimes when Okāsan allows it, I can sit on the washing machine during the spin cycle. Then it starts to rock and jump around the room, and it sounds exactly like a rocket that is just leaving the space station for the moon. I start counting down. 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 Ahhhhhhh! And already I am being launched into the sky with the speed of a rocket. But during these space voyages I found out something unexpected. I found out that when you sit in the rocket and make long noises, even your voice begins to wiggle, sort of like when you thump your chest while singing. I don't know exactly why,

but when your whole body is vibrating like that from the jet propulsion and from your voice, it's very calming. And so whenever I am sad or angry, my favorite thing to do is sit in the rocket and make long trembling sounds. The best is alternating Os and As and always as long as possible, until I run out of air, but for at least seven seconds. Hibaba once watched me doing it and said that the monks in the cloisters do that just like me and that I am probably a reincarnated Buddha and have just invented a really modern technique to reach Nirvana. I don't know where Nirvana is, but I think it's somewhere next to South America. Anyways when the earthquake started, that's why I lay down on my back in the meadow, pressed Tatsu to the left side of my chest, Keiko on the right, and made long As and Os. That worked a thousand times better than on the moon rocket. And Keiko-chan and Tatsu were not afraid at all anymore. It was even pleasant, as we lay there and the earth quaked under us like a giant massage chair. Otōsan once told me that our planet is racing through the universe at 100,000 km/hr always around in a circle around the sun and also around itself like a top going crazy. I think it's not so surprising that people are all so confused. The earth is actually a giant spaceship, just like the space battleship Yamoto, and the only reason why we aren't blown away at this breakneck speed is because there is no air in space, and besides that there is a big shield built all around the earth. I find all of this very interesting, which is why I have asked Otosan many questions about it, and that's how I found out that if the earth for some reason or other suddenly had to stop, all the oceans would splash out of their basins, and all the people and cats and cars and everything that isn't nailed down somewhere would be hurled several miles through the air. Anyways I believe that earthquakes must somehow be connected to the engine of the

planet spaceship, but I am not sure. I'd really like to ask Hibaba or Otōsan, but they are both not here. On the day that Hibaba disappeared, I thought to myself that it might be better not to wake her up, because after all she is a little afraid of earthquakes. And then when the storm clouds under the ground were finally done with their assembly, she was actually still sleeping like a little baby. So Keiko-chan and I fixed her blanket, 'cause it was really cold. Then she woke up for a moment and had to yawn, and when she did she opened her mouth so wide that I thought her jaw would fall apart at any moment. Most of the time I am not allowed to watch TV, but one time I sat down with Otōsan when he had fallen asleep, and I watched a show about crocodiles. Crocodiles have 38 teeth, and when one of them falls out another ones grows back right away. Hibaba has a crocodile mouth too when she yawns, but her teeth never grew back in, which is how I know she is not descended from crocodiles. 'Cause she has a set of fake teeth, and she takes them out at night before going to bed and puts them in a glass. I find that a bit scary, but from the very beginning Keiko was very fascinated when she saw the teeth in the glass. I believe that was also the first time that Keiko-chan did that looking thing. Because Keiko-chan is not a normal child, though Okāsan told me that there are no normal children in the world, just special children. Keiko's specialty anyhow is that she doesn't speak, but instead she is very good at seeing. Keiko-chan has very big eyes and looks very closely, even more closely than me. And when she saw Hibaba's teeth in the glass for the first time, she looked at them for a very long time. An hour or so. And when Okāsan wanted to carry her away and put her to bed, she started crying awfully and could not be calmed anymore. She was only quiet when she was standing in front of Hibaba's floating grinning teeth again. She seemed so very amused and she laid her little head on one side and then on the other as she looked. I think Keiko-chan does that so she gets a better view of the thing from all sides. 'Cause when I was watching her while she looked, I realized for the first time that you only ever see things from one side and that they are completely different depending on where you're looking at them from. Hibaba's teeth look just like the ones the women have on TV, but from somewhere else you see the screws and the brown bits of food, and only from underneath can you spy the sea monster. You'd actually need to have thousands of eyes, not just three like Tatsu, and for example you'd have to use them to look at a tree from above and from below and from all sides at the same time, just to know what it's really like. Maybe you could also do it with a whole lot of people at once. So for example a hundred people that are standing around the tree and then another hundred that are flying above the tree with jetpacks, and then yet another hundred that are burrowing through the ground like moles under its roots. And all of them would have to tell each other stories with walky-talkies about what they see. Roger, Roger. See a pink worm that's trying to nibble through the braided roots. Of course a few of them would also have to sit in the tree itself and look at it from the branches, though with all these tree researchers the tree of course would not be the same anymore, for example not an apple tree, but a people tree instead, that's also why it wouldn't work. Maybe you'd have to ask the ants too, but in what language? Better to equip them with tiny video cameras. But who would watch all those videos? There would definitely be more of them than there are on Youtube, and I heard that you would need 5,700 years to watch all the Youtube videos that are online right now, without even taking a pee break. And together with Otosan I calculated that in the meantime while you're watching 5,700 years of videos and holding

in your pee, another 6,241,500,000 years of new videos would be uploaded, and even the best bladder can't make it through that.