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Aluminum Dreams

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ALUMINUM DREAMS

I found Kafka in the canned foods section along with Borges, Camus, and Dante. Neatly packaged, with the clean, crisp succinctness of a generic brand. A black paper label with his name printed in thick, black block letters inside a tan rectangle. Borges was green, Camus off-white. I wasn't sure if there was meaning to this. The cupboard was green. Maybe the significance of the canned authors' labels didn't exceed the chemistry and wavelengths of the light spectrum; yet Kafka himself often clothed his characters in symbolism. Up on the highest shelf, Franz Kafka, wrapped in black, did not reflect but merely absorbed light waves.

This was down in the basement, in Bratislava, Slovakia, in a crypt-like space of brick vaulted ceilings painted white. There were three perfectly straight rows of authors: Blake, Eco, Ezra Pound, Goethe, Poe, and others. There was no indication of what exactly it is that's been captured, contained, and possibly condensed and salted. Across from the cupboard a camera gazed stoically at passersby, at me, routing the images to a small oval screen. I scrutinized myself in this glass eyeball—my bulging thighs, my thinning reddish hair and sun-spotted cheeks—wondering how it was that a few months shy of my 40th birthday, everyone I met in Europe thought I was in my twenties.

At the time, I hadn't dreamed in over a month—not for all intents and purposes, anyway. I seemed to awake from nothingness, to emerge into consciousness as if taking shape from a primordial clay. On a rare occasion I would wake from a hazy, muted dream of utter plainness, where I did nothing out of the ordinary—brush my teeth, buy some groceries, put on a sweater. I was terrified by this normalcy. I typically have an extremely vivid and entertaining dream life, and traveling generally intensifies it. My dream world is

one of the defining and most relevant features of my life. Generally, I can track my waking experiences through my dreams, identify all the quirky components of my dream world as representations, distortions and metaphors of my wakeful life. I spent two weeks exploring Prague all by myself before my husband joined me, each day amassing little secrets of beautiful sights and narrow passageways; I went to bed giddy from all the fun experiences. Where did they go after I fell asleep? My brain just abandoned them. During five weeks traveling from Prague into Poland and through Slovakia, I'd seen a lot of remarkable sights, learned a lot of interesting history, done a lot of different activities, but I'd been living only half a life—the waking half.

I was intrigued to run across Kafka again in Bratislava, after having spent all that time in his hometown of Prague. One can't help but feel haunted by his presence in Prague, his legacy of forging new literary ground. For one thing, the city has really capitalized on him: Kafka cafes, Kafka bars, Kafka statues and busts, Kafka walking tours, Kafka finger puppets. You are reminded of his existence perpetually, though not in the sense of an incarnate ghost. It never occurred to me that I might see him standing on the Charles Bridge or walking across the Old Town Square. I didn't feel haunted by him as a personal entity so much as by a general presence of something unique, by the potential for a rare access to a particular perception of the world, an ether subtly infusing the city air. So much of the city is unchanged architecturally from Kafka's day, I felt compelled to vault myself into the past to see what he saw. It's not really Franz making a spook of himself; it's we visitors haunting our own selves, trying to see through Franz's eyes.

Every day for two weeks I passed right by the house he once lived in above his father's store, by the palace he studied in, the literary salon he frequented. The Kafka Museum explains how he

was plagued by an unrelenting perception of duality and discord, of disgust at the superficial lives men must live in business and society, creating a schism between that world and their private worlds that was unnatural and destructive. Most people say he had a dream mind—fragmented, subtle, metaphorical. I might have imagined him a weird fellow to be around, perhaps intolerable, and that he lived a lonely existence. But that was not the case at all. He had numerous lovers and engagements and social circles, friends and associates. He was adept at maintaining his duality, at containing each self in its separate sphere, though this is precisely what tortured him.

I always wonder about geometry, about circles and lines. I've gone on several ghost tours in various cities, not because I believe in ghosts but because I like tales from the dark side. I like to look at the city and see the invisible scars of the past. On such a tour in Victoria, BC, the guide claimed his city to be the most haunted in all of Canada. He mentioned theories of "ley lines" running through the earth along which various paranormal or spiritual activities seem to lie. He pointed out the preponderance of ghost stories that happen in geographically straight lines. For instance, ghosts might live at 5, 18, 33 and 43 First Street, while over on Second and Third Streets there are no ghosts at all. Some ghost enthusiasts say that ley lines already exist in the earth and spiritual phenomena align themselves to them; others say that ley lines are not preexisting but are defined by the phenomena that seem to converge like ducks in a row.

I wonder if there could be different kinds of ley lines, attracting or producing other kinds of phenomena. Perhaps a line runs through Prague that's not a spirit magnet, but some sort of creativity magnet, a subterranean meridian that could have fueled Kafka's extraordinary mind. If so, it was draining the weird and extraordinary out of me, pulling the dreams right out of my head, as if absorbing light waves of my subconscious. Maybe this is the source from which he derived the potency of his thought. Maybe

somehow Kafka was able to tap into this dark line of power running through the earth's crust that sucked things out of other people—the dreams, the bizarre and undecoded symbolism inhabiting the minds of struggling men. But probably he couldn't make much coherent sense of it, and it manifested in fragmented visions and augmented metaphors. I often wonder if Kafka himself knew precisely what he was writing.

Bratislava, where Kafka is now kept in cylindrical rest, is a pleasantly strange city with an intimate mixture of architectural decay and ritz, the sparkling and the decrepit peacefully coexisting. Here, the animate and inanimate have a fondness for exchanging places. All around the city, bronze statues masquerade as living people: emerging from manholes, clandestinely taking photos of diners at the Paparazzi café, leaning casually on a park bench. And people paint themselves (with varying degrees of mastery) into a metallic form, standing stock still all day long, occasionally spooking a passerby. Whatever axis of the city's essence you consider, there is no uniformity, no stability.

My husband and I found a particularly charming bar in which a disheveled, wild-eyed Dali leans out from the wall in 3-D, clutching a liquor bottle in his hand which rests on a shelf screwed into the wall. A pair of legs are dangling from the ceiling as though someone is falling through the floor above, and other people in colorful costumes emerge from the drywall. This is the last of Bratislava I saw, because here beside Dali is where I really slid downhill and soon, barely making it back to the hotel, became violently ill.

We were staying in a tiny cell in an old communist hotel, whose many infractions against cleanliness included dead bugs smashed on the wall left hanging like hunting trophies. It's the only hotel I've been in which provides a list of financial penalties assessed for a wide array of damages. The first ones on the list were "vomit

disinfection" for tile floor (bathroom) and vomit disinfection for carpet (main cell area). I managed not to be charged for damages, despite some unfortunate decisions that had to be made when my body was expelling uncontrollably and simultaneously from both ends of my digestive tract. I could hear as plainly as if they were standing in the bathroom with me the pleasant conversation of a Chinese couple, the sound coming through the bathroom fan. They must have heard me as clearly, retching my guts out, so perhaps I myself was the topic of their conversation, as they listened to me whimper in exhaustion, in fear, not knowing how much more I'd have to endure. They might have been comforting me with their mild voices, "Hang in there, foreign devil, hang in there." I wanted to call out to them, just in case they were Chinese pharmacists who could heal me, in case they'd brought bags of dehydrated scorpions and crushed seaweed, dried tiger liver and panda dung.

My husband went down to the front desk to ask for more toilet paper. The maid came to the room before he made it back. He was stuck between floors in the elevator; the door opened too far below the flooring for him to crawl out, and he was left punching buttons going up, going down, up and down until finally the door opened correctly at number nine. The maid was calling down the hallway as she approached our door, propped open to allow a breeze to draft through the stuffy cell, "Dobry? Dobry? Dobry Deň?" Inside the bathroom, bent over with my head in the sink and my underwear discarded on the floor, the Chinese couple talking amiably through the fan, I was gripped with fear that the maid would brazenly enter the room to deposit the toilet paper inside the bathroom and witness my completely demoralized state. Did I look anything like a human being? I couldn't shift my eyes from the sink drain to look at my skin; they were bugging out with compulsive efforts of retching what was now only dribbles of stomach bile. I had a terrifying vision of the Slovak maid with a wheelbarrow full of toilet paper building a wall

at the bathroom door, chuckling malevolently as she entombed me into that pink-tiled hell.

During this eight-hour ordeal, when I lay on the bed between rounds of intestinal evacuation, my husband read out loud to me from Ursula K. LeGuin's *Lathe of Heaven*, which we'd started reading in a chata in the High Tatras in the heart of Slovakia. The title was inspired by Chuang Tse: "To let understanding stop at what cannot be understood is a high attainment. Those who cannot do it will be destroyed on the lathe of heaven." The book was all about dreams—about a man, George Orr, who dreams, and when he awakens, discovers that his dream has become manifest and changed reality. I began to wonder if I was somebody else's nightmare. Maybe even my husband's. We'd had a minor spat earlier that day which was resolved by the eating of a kabob—his suggestion—as a quick late-afternoon meal. Every time I returned from a round in the bathroom he asked, "Why are you so sick? How could you go downhill so fast?" He insisted, "You shouldn't be this sick. This doesn't make sense; I ate the same kind of kabob as you and I'm not sick." He was stuck in this loop, like those you get into in dreams, and I was stuck with him. Me expelling the entirety of my innards and he obsessed with explanation as if I were doing this on purpose and needed to account for my drastic actions. Me: barf, shit, want to die. He: why, why, why? Me: barf harder, shit worse, barf and shit simultaneously, *really* want to die. He: but why? Brazenly ignoring the explicit warning of the tale of George Orr, who dreamed a parade of new realities each time I took respite on the bed.

I swirled around that dumpy cell like a marble on glass, around and around until gravity mercifully pulled me to rest on the bottom. Finally, my last round of retching, my stomach and back muscles straining at their limits, produced two tiny strings of pitch-black material. Almost as if I had nibbled a wee corner of the black label on Kafka's can. I watched the blackness slide down the sink into

the drain, into a pipe that would eventually carry it underground. Then I lay back down into emptiness.

Those strange, nightmarish eight hours—about the length of a normal night's sleep—were my only real contact with a dream-like world during five weeks of living and traveling in Central Europe. Only then did I regain a layered existence of incongruities, extremities and circularities, dead bugs looming over me from the wall, my husband repeating that he'd like to throw the tiny television out the window, just because he could: the unscreened window on the ninth floor opened wide enough to defenestrate a TV or a body. (The financial penalty for a damaged TV was listed far below vomit disinfection, at an incongruous three hundred Euro for a circa 1980 12-inch screen.) It was as though an echo of Kafka's strange landscapes was reverberating in my hotel room, a sullen gift, like a half-penny thrown to a beggar on the street: Sure, here's a dream for you. So what if it's a nightmare, it's a *dream*; take it or leave it.

People who say they've been abducted by aliens explain that chunks of their lives are missing. You know, they're driving down the road at 12:35pm and then it's 6:12pm and all that time is just missing from their consciousness. That's what happened to me in Prague and its former Bohemian empire. There's a large chunk of my life missing from my stay there—my dream life—as if someone abducted it. They could be dissecting it or just storing it, maybe smashing it to pieces. I could be the victim of some geomagnetic or spiritual phenomenon, perhaps a biological or space-time anomaly. I'm quite afraid of the sharp blade of a lathe, and truth be told, I'm even a little afraid of Heaven, so rather than risk being destroyed by some existential machine that loathes an incessant questioner, I've tried to limit my research to the discreet scribblings of methodologically-void empiricism.

So I wonder if, in addition to the mysterious current in Prague that can drain dry the deepest wells of subconscious creative

and bizarre thought, there are other lines or currents intersecting this one, and the extracted material can shoot down one of these veins and end up in a cannery or someone's bedroom, pooling on their pillow. Kafka's gift may not have been literary in nature, but merely to be endowed with the properties of an intersecting line, ultimately an unwitting receptacle.

Regrettably, there was no list of ingredients on the canned Kafka. No vitamin A or partially hydrogenated soybean oil, no modified food starch, chicken stock, cockroach wings or Shara's dreams. I guess this is what makes him so fun to contemplate. Once I played a practical joke on my mom in which I removed all the labels from the canned goods in the pantry. I didn't want to get in too much trouble, so I marked some symbols on the metal with a marker and made a key to the contents. My mom threw away the key and preferred instead to shake the cans, feel their weight, and guess what might be in them. (She was impressively accurate.) So we're left with the prospect of shaking and weighing Kafka's can, though I didn't actually, physically do it; it seemed irreverent. Would I have been able to feel the weight of my dreams if they had been in there? Could I have recognized their peculiar sound, sloshing around in the can with thousands of others.

I'm home now, thousands of miles from central Europe. And my dreams have regained their twisted vivacity. I wake up at night inside a castle and it takes me a long time to figure out how to reach my bathroom to pee. So I'm really wondering about the line theory. Let's say there is in fact a ley line in Victoria that runs through the city giving people the power to be reincarnated as ghosts or something, perhaps improving the luminescence of unhappy souls. Now, how far do these lines run, do you think? Victoria lies at $48^{\circ}25$ latitude. Bratislava is situated on $48^{\circ}09$ latitude. This equates to a variance of about 18.5 miles. I don't know precisely how straight these lines

are supposed to be. A discrepancy of 18.5 miles across half the globe seems pretty mild. What if the closest afterlife ley line to Prague is this one at latitude 48 (Prague is at 50°05'), so Kafka turns up *post mortem*, repackaged, in Bratislava? His naked metal can would have once been shiny, reflecting light rather spectacularly; blinding you, even, if it caught a sun's ray just right as it attempted to penetrate the silver. For the brief moment that Kafka existed without clothing, a plain tin can, it must have been existentially quite painful. Again, a duality: locked inside the darkness of a can that's radiating brilliance on its other side. Then at last the black suit, glued on tightly, seducing the light into its wood pulp to be absorbed into eternity, for it will never exit the label and return to its origin.

I mostly exist at latitude 39°57'. My cabinets are some sort of golden brown wood with black grain, and a little grimy on the bottom. White shelves with flowered shelf paper. There's nothing remarkable here except in my dream world, thankfully restored. There's no George Orr to dream a Kafka-like world into reality: food here does not fall from the sky to hungry dogs. I must buy it and store it in the cupboard, then later open it with a tool, and if I'm at all civil, empty it into a clean bowl. Someday the canned Kafka might be hungrily opened with the same mundaneness, when the world runs dry of dream and bizarre and carnivalesque thought.

Maybe I'm packed somewhere far away in my own tin can and I don't even know it. All my dreams from that Bohemian period might be stuck inside a capped cylinder. Maybe that can of Kafka contains his own dreams, his real dreams from when he was asleep, a life stolen from him. Perhaps it was the unique dissolution of boundaries in Bratislava—where metal and flesh share human form, abandoned decay shares walls with five stars, libraries loan their great authors to kitchen pantries—that created a temporary permeability. For there I was, sick as a dog, in the communist hotel, my mental

state so weakened, George Orr dreaming other realities into existence in the hands of my husband, my physical state dissolved into such depravity, that for that brief time, that interlude in my travels, I didn't have to sleep to dream.