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In the morning, Augustina feels as if awakened dreamless and full of indeterminacy when she slips into the uniform of her everyday life. Between scattered, absurd dream elements the reader, following a recurring story line, plunges into a puzzling series of events which are gradually assembled into a chronological narrative.

The humorous fiction surprises with twists, changes in style, and intriguing combinations of content. Inspired by Zeno's arrow paradox, different philosophical and natural scientific world views are confronted with each other in playful discourse. As dreams sometimes weave their tangled threads into the order of waking consciousness, here it is "reality" that threatens to become manifest as a disturbance in Augustina's dream world. Thus a critical voice also speaks up in this fantastic story, referring subtly to current societal issues. Whether animal, plant, teacup, woman or man; in Augustina's dream they all represent states of being, and stand for diametrically opposed views and approaches to interpreting the world.

Elisa Asenbaum, born in Vienna, is an author, artist, curator and the artistic director of the art space G.A.S.-station Berlin. She writes novellas, short stories, poems and theoretical texts on art.

AUGUSTINAself
PASSAGEN LITERATUR

Elisa Asenbaum
AUGUSTINAself

A story with contextual traces on the net

Passagen Verlag

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Part II: Confrontation of Worlds

NOTHING HAPPENS
WITHOUT SUFFICIENT REASON

THE EXCLUDED MIDDLE

NON-CONTRADICTION

IDENTITY

After

See more: *Traces in the net*:

<http://www.asenbaum.com/AUGUSTINAselbst/Anmerkungen/fileadmin/index.html>

Part I: Before

Yes, it is true, she is standing there in front of the elevator, the mobile phone lying fat and heavy in her hand.

Beep_menu_beep_messages_select_beep_received
select_beep_opening_folder_beep_CONGRATULATIONS!
open_beep_opening_message_Congratulations, YOU have
won! THE REVELATION, way beyond cool! FREE ENTRANCE.
FIRST LIFE. 1st FLOOR TONIGHT. SPECIAL 4 YOU!

The elevator widens with her breathing out and sucks her in, our Augustina who cannot recall which game she actually took part in, where at all she is participating, is she a gamer? Is she a surfer? Does she belong to a gaming community? Did she register there? User name? Yes. Password? No, forgotten. What was her surname again? Augustina Je... Laa...joo...meee... no Suu... I forgot, no, eaten by the gorge of memory, well never mind! Although eating is important as a matter of principle.

Meanwhile the interior of the train warms her with tender orange light, and the illuminated numbers of the passing storeys dwindle. The wall of the elevator is covered with a delicate intransparent webbing, a finely woven pattern, pulsating, branching out and thickening with the upward motion. Somewhat cheesily, it blinks and twinkles in changing shades of colour. Augustina is impressed by the small, fiery explosions at the intersections which spread out, twitching feathery veins. Fabulous!

Ping! Okay, that's it, 1st FLOOR. 1st floor?

BLACK!

Is it that?

Augustina is standing in a huge hall on a smooth, milky surface, her head lowered she stares at half a walnut kernel on the floor.

Now one might ask oneself, is that revelation?

Augustina does not. She bends down to see better, nothing else. And for a long time; observes the valleys and grooves, the whorls and warps of the nut, and when she looks up again she is inside these shapes, surrounded by what she has seen, engulfed by the bulging

concavities.

Just like home, she thinks. No, not her current home. No, not her previous home with her ex. No, not even in the next to last or the next to next to last or the next to lost one, nor her childhood home, but the being-at-home one sometimes dreams about.

Suddenly, solemn synthetic music sounds, TV-show-like, and the entire floorspace lights up like an overdimensioned monitor. Tons of information in words, signs, and images flicker through the surface, flittering criss-cross over the plane. A squirrel enters the show, jumps on the stage. It smiles widely with its oversize teeth.

The jumble of sounds swells, voices, noises and resonances entangle to an impenetrable, overflowing mash weighing heavy in one's stomach, indigestible.

Augustina's body stiffens. HOLD IT! Something to hold on to, hold me! Silence all of a sudden. Paralysis, freeze frame, still.

The floor – now a giant sheet – rips, splintering into an *infinite* number of parts. With a windy, howling sound the sheet fragments peel away from the plane, rising slightly, turning upwards – stop, stop it – someone stop them! –, only to skid back again immediately into the plane with a sucking sound. Then again up and back, up back, forward and backward leap. For- and backwards in time, and up again they are rustling in the air flow. The fragments whirling through the room, turning, rushing, dashing. The speed robs her of any possibility to decode what she perceives. The shreds shrink, cluttering soppy, the noise becomes more saturated, the speed slower. A beep. Once, twice, thrice, the whirling getting wetter, a sound of bellyflopping. Spin cycle, speeding up again. Beep. Rags whacking, thwacking against the walls. Beep. Sluggishly sliding along the rim to the ground. Beep, beep ...

At 07:14 in the morning Augustina was yanked out of her dream by her mobile's wake-up call, which also tore away any memory of her dream.

Monday

Brigitta had knocked over the espresso machine, the melted-off handle still had not been replaced. When jumping away from the stove so as not to get scalded she cursed and actually was on her way to the bath already, but there was no rag, it still hung on the balcony to dry. However, she could not know that. Well okay, it is possible to

suppose so instead of ranting along, only to scald one's hands again during the renewed coffee attempt. Apparently Brigitta was not even able to mop the floor without her morning coffee! She also appeared to be late, as always, now also had to change clothes. And then found it after all, the rag. But the balcony door stayed open, so that there was a draught and the kitchen door slammed shut.

Augustina did not even want to imagine what would happen now to the unstable coffee pot. Yes, now she was awake for good, already awakened before by her wake-up call, but she always set it so that she could stay in bed a bit longer. Listening whether Brigitta was gone already.

It's nice when it's the other way around, Augustina thought, when I'm the first one who rises, the first to enter the bath, and the first to switch on the kitchen radio. It's pleasant if Brigitta comes out of her room only then. How pleasant it is to get a chance to be nice, give a sleepy-eyed person a pitying look, and be able to say nothing gracefully through a nice glance, not even if the half-present person is coming back from the bathroom and looks even more disastrous. What did she do to her tear sacs under the shower? Scrub the sleep away? Cry because she woke up?

That made sense: helping Brigitta into the day by sliding coffee prepared by means of a well-thought-out pincer grip with the help of three pot cloths towards the flatmate, together with a gentle word. And then, of course: Brigitta really had a charmingly grateful smile.

It was just such glances which Augustina would have needed every day in order to cope with the fact that getting up was no torture for her. Being tired, not wanting to get up, that at least would have been something. But no, totally fresh, but then this indetermination. Why was she never in such a clear mood as Brigitta, and why was Brigitta to change her mood at first social contact, according to need, like a hurriedly put-on pullover? As she wanted to. As you like it.

Not so Augustina, who got up, showered, brushed her teeth, switched on the radio and was thankful for every security-increasing ritual that did not require any decision. Having discarded the neutral white of her morning gown, she dressed, and generally never felt very comfortable in her clothes. For how on earth should she know then what she would like to wear? Her uniform right in the morning, no, that didn't work either. And – alas! – she did not need her morning coffee so urgently, not that either, she did not really know what she wanted, but in any case she was always thirsty. If there was nothing in the fridge, at least there was an exigency from which resulted a

need for action: someone had to go shopping. Okay, down to the supermarket. Orange juice and other stuff, just breakfast for now, in the evening there would be nothing there again. Nor tomorrow morning. But she was generally unable to imagine prospectively what she might fancy then, so, as usual two rolls, cheese, orange juice and two yoghurts? Jam was still there, always was.

Augustina's mother kept the never-ebbing jam fountain up to season. Mother had never visited her at her shared flat, if she knew in what places the carefully labelled glasses were stacked up! Nevertheless, Augustina never objected when she left and mother did just not forget her usual almost-forgotten gift.

Stop, wait a second, will you? Now I'd almost forgotten the jam, why didn't you say anything, Tini? Tini didn't say anything, but loaded up, including the extra glass for Michael.

Mother simply didn't want to accept that it was over, a thing of the past: "I know he just loves raspberry-elderberry!"

Parents like to think: it's going to be all right, only a bit of crisis, and he would certainly come back to poor Tini, who after all had walked out on him. Did not want to face facts. They prefer to think up a poor daughter to be consoled, even if they didn't say so to her face: "poor Tini -" But as soon as she was gone, Augustina knew, it would break loose at once: "did you notice how sad she looked again today, don't you think we should call him, shouldn't we call Michi?"

They had never done so, and they wouldn't. Augustina would never eat the raspberry-elderberry jam, on principle, but throwing it away wouldn't do either. Darn scruples, childhood precepts, about food and stuff, respect for raspberry-elderberry. Brigitta had also stopped asking questions, but out of solidarity had decided to find raspberry-elderberry too tangy and to reject it, too.

So when would Brigitta leave at last? Please, please, now, no forced conversation today with grumpy Brigitta, grumpy Brigitta with Morning Augustina who did not know yet how to manage her iffiness today. Waiting in bed.

When after a while the front door banged she thought she was safe. Only thought, though, for Brigitta came back again, and this time - plodplod, unmistakable - directly to her room. The door opened simultaneously with the suggested knocking.

"Ah, you're up already, I thought you're still asleep."

"Morning. Yes, yes, no, I'm up."

"Say, if the doorbell rings, it could be the mail, I'm waiting for something, would you sign it?"

“Sure, but I’ve also got to leave, just if he’s coming soon ...”

“I thought it’s your day off today?”

“No, only in the afternoon, short shift. Will you be here tonight?”

“Don’t know yet, maybe I’ll stay with Gernot. Okay, see you.”

That had been half successful. At least the kitchen encounter had been omitted. Just a lie: it was not Augustina’s early shift, nor short shift, she was actually shiftless. Swapped, because of a double yesterday. Insofar there was nothing on the immediate morning agenda again today. She had missed the news and did not want to wait for the next broadcast. The forcefully funny morning moderator, whose function apparently was to be hated by the rank and file of kitchen radio listeners, talked from the kitchen about climate change, on such a brilliant day, look who’s talking.

While brushing her teeth, Augustina not for the first time pondered the meanings of the word ‘spending’ as an adjunct to ‘day’, then sat around for a bit.

The funeral only started at two, meaning that she didn’t have to leave before one, then why should she get out at all. Why today of all days to the bank and to Mrs Hengstberger. She didn’t even have an appointment, and it clearly was no day for to-dos. Better just go down briefly for breakfast with the already compacted shopping list, newspaper, then back to bed.

In fact she had not really intended to fall asleep again.

Like a turtle Augustina retracts her head, she is floating engulfed in warmth and softness. Glides into the water, draws away from the shore, the water-turtle. The wonderful state of being almost weightless does not keep for long. Augustina finds herself in her ex-boyfriend's car. Her ex next to her at the wheel is ripping along like one possessed. Another woman she does not know yet who is sitting on the back seat seems to possess him. Their drive too rapid to turn around, to get acquainted – Augustina prefers propping her feet against the glove compartment under the airbag. Searching for the safety belt, finding it, snapping it shut, they're rumbling down a scarp. Her half-yelled plea with pounding heart, "No, don't, it's much too steep, too deep!" is cast aside as if never uttered by her ex: "No sweat, peanuts!" The lake sees her, draws her, shallow the draught into the water. The three of them roll in, losing their footing, afloat without ground in their auto-carriage. Groundless.

Bubbles of amusement ascend inside her, tickle her like those in 'sparkling', not 'mild', not 'still', where there are no bubbles. Not that, for it is grounded after all, the bare feeling of groundlessness – being free from ... Free from motivation, free from gravity or sincerity; bubbles soaring, floating with tingling ease, exhilarate her mind.

Suddenly the water level rises, forms a crystal-clear wave and takes her along in her vessel. Enormously high the wave rolls, pushing the vehicle along in front of it. Augustina's tentative giggling meanwhile has changed to alarmed excitement. Dizzying.

Shaking, she notices abrupt, grinding braking. Taken in, stranded, built into an elevated gravel sandbank, gradually realising the buckling standstill, the car mutates, spreads out to the front.

Augustina arises; amazed, she walks ahead through the expanded room. Where previously the car's snout had been, she now sees the back door of a caravan. The door is drawing her, drawing her curiosity to open it. Behind it, unexpectedly, another room, to the right leading into a never inhabited nursery with a little crib, carpet and wooden rocking horse, like a mundane backdrop in a bad movie attempting to look old. To the left yet another chamber, much larger.

Augustina breathes deeply, she is familiar with that, with entering unknown, unnamed rooms.

White, the room is entirely white, above, below, and the sides too – and wide. The far wall compactly closed, no windows, after about eight metres the long straight wall bends into a curve, into a half-arched, shorter side wall, likewise windowless. From the left side masses of light are streaming through the glass-paned front. It gets caught in the brilliant whiteness. The high, roundly curved, snow-white varnished wooden windows form an arch, and open the view to the rough sea smashing against the precipitous, cragged coast. Where Augustina is standing the elliptical windows side connects again to straight brickwork.

Impressive, that unusual shape, the size, the brightness, the emptiness, the view. Augustina marvels.

*

At 10:47 Augustina awoke. Now the apartment was quiet, like a second attempt, only that now the morning was over, or as good as, and Augustina, barely awake, was displeased with herself. One of the reasons for this probably was that she did not expect much from the rest of the day. At two p.m. she had to be in the garden for Nelly's funeral. After seventeen faithful dog's years. Augustina could understand why this wasn't so easy. But to invite friends in order to lend the farewell some funereal officialdom seemed overdone to her. What did Olga expect from this, and from her? That I'm going to deliver an allocution? Or dig the hole?

Of course, out of tact the whole thing mustn't devolve into partying. Augustina did not know for sure whom Olga had invited, but she expected Ulli, Henrik, eternal Matti and Gerda and presumably Olgamother, Mrs Schweigt, who at all costs wanted to be accosted as one of them and therefore was to be called Herta. It was Herta in person who talked to you, for she did not accept her family name as a predicate of her appearance.

What did one wear for a dog's funeral? That question was not easily answered either. Dark might make the whole business seem absurd, but colourful?

Augustina decided for an inconspicuous grey, treated herself to another coffee down at the corner, then went on foot along the tramway rails for a few stations as far as the underpass, where she got on the tram after all.

Opposite her sat a woman with a toddler, fidgeting on her lap, wanting down. The woman continuously increased the pressure of her arms around the child's body without noticeably changing her expression, almost as if she did not feel the exertion the tugging, wriggling, whining kid provoked. Sometimes one could hear, softly but clearly: "no, Katharina, we'll be there soon, Katharina", or: "you'll get something to drink later, Kati", answers to loud, pre-articulate questions.

Why are children so often called by their names? Maybe that is the reason why they say: Kati wants drink, Kati gotta pee, Kati don't want stop. Have they understood the matter of the I for ages already, yet speak in third person in order to do it right?

Augustina was glad she did not have to envy the woman, as it always happened to her in phases of wishing for a child of her own, no matter how strenuously the respective child behaved. Obviously desire tinted perception in such a way that even in no way desirable situations were able to evoke this questionable longing. When the phase was over, which never was a long time coming, Augustina could certainly find children loveable, some of them even extraordinarily charming, wave at them, ask: "what's your bear's name?" and thus prove her child-friendliness without feeling any urge at all.

During her phases of child-yearning, which had nothing to do with motherly feelings, as she often emphatically mentioned to herself, after all one could act out one's motherly feelings fully well without a child, and who could know without being one how one would really feel if after all ... actually she was more balanced in her undesiring phase, felt more free, free from all those confrontational thoughts: with or without man, parental role, family airs, how what one then organised what how if one also wanted a bit of free space, as a fully developed member of society.

In her childy phases, however, she was gruff, shunned contact with children, with parents she then classified cynically as 'child-keepers' who had simply ticked off their search for the meaning of life, and tried as best she could not to notice children in public spaces, or at least not to grant them preferential treatment. All in all she hated children when she wanted one, and loved them when she couldn't care less. She herself found this kind of anachronistic behaviour repugnant, and only reluctantly admitted to it.

In any case, here and now she felt quite detachedly capable of smiling at the mother with friendly compassion, immediately found herself thinking that the woman might interpret her smile

as mothers' solidarity, hence would mistake Augustina for one, which she didn't really object to; just as if she had gained possession of a reserved status without much effort. For three more stations, Augustina by friendly disregard of the infantine spitting and yelling and smearing-the-window-glass continued to play her loyal mother role, then got off at Gumpendorfer Strasse.

*

The funeral itself had been attended to in advance, in the rear corner near the elderberry bush, without ritual solemnities. Olga embraced Augustina at the garden fence, thanked her for coming, and whispered that she had invited the same people as when she had brought Nelly into the household. While Olga, somewhat agitated, mumbled something about conclusion and good time and good dog, the first thing that came to Augustina's mind was a calculation of the number of years: seventeen years?

That was alarming! Not so much that Olga had lived for seventeen years next to Nelly or Nelly next to Olga; rather, that Olga now really had been living in this house for seventeen years or even longer, which she had rented tentatively in the beginning, just so she could find something in the neighbourhood, and then at some time had bought on credit. Even more alarming was that she now had known Olga already for seventeen years, more than seventeen years. Just like Ulli and Henrik and Matti and Gerda and ... Mrs Schweigt, who still was Olgamother, not Helloherta.

Well, of course she liked them all and knew their phone numbers by heart, for they had already existed before one began to save them on SIM cards and was completely overburdened, contactless, cut off without a mobile phone within reach. Also, they met each other often enough not to be astonished by each other's looks. From a certain age on, a sporadic half-year rhythm sufficed for that. At quinquennial class reunions one was confronted with strange mutations presenting one either with abrupt upheavals, or with compactions of a straight development; although Augustina never was sure which of the two transformations seemed more acceptable to her. She also detested the need to present oneself at these meetings, and acting as if one were not only standing in the midst of life but also loving it – a spectacle all of them took part in and no one could escape, whatever they would think afterwards –, but mostly she was too curious to miss out on it.

At last Augustina greeted Olgamother Schweigt and had herself pressed tightly by her cordiality. Augustina felt lachrymose, and eventually was the one who started to cry, what a surprise. Olga immediately joined in, moved to tears by her friend's – as it seemed to her – compassion, and although she had shed enough tears already, her pain of loss called for an encore.

Taking Olga in her arms, and letting her cry her sadness into her shoulder, that's when Augustina noticed that formerly, not so long ago, she would have refused such a joint emotional release. Just now she simply could not imagine brusquely rebuffing Olga, explaining why her motive was an entirely different one. Also, she did not feel any desire to defend herself, and it, as something innate and not to be understood by anybody else. Impartible.

However, Olga's tears stopped her own burgeoning liquefaction. She began to analyse her staying rooted: firstly, secondly, thirdly, and perhaps even fourthly, you can always count on a good counting!

Firstly: she did not really understand herself what it was that had just happened.

Secondly: she was tired of the constant effort for emotional separation from Michael she had put in over the last two years.

Thirdly: the reason why she was crying was unclear to herself. Whether the actual reason could perhaps be put on a level with Olga's after all, on some level of abstraction, probably even quite banal?

Thus she reached the conclusion that there was no immediate need for action to disengage herself from Olga's embrace.

Fourthly, Augustina even willingly persuaded herself to believe that there was a kinship to Olga in their crying reason. She, too, did not want to stand alone with that sudden perception of a fulfilled transition, the realisation of an inevitably ripening existence. To mention this would be tactless at the moment, for 'we're only in our mid-end-thirties'. Nevertheless, for her the distance from that day seventeen years ago stood in the middle of the garden.

Instead, Augustina reflected that Olga had almost never separated from Nelly. One could never see Olga without Nelly. Even just corporeally, Olga must have been so used to Nelly constantly prancing around her or rolling up on her feet under the writing desk. The sock on her leg that took the weight, the right one, had at times been wet from dog saliva when Nelly had let herself be ruffled to sleep by the crossed legs' dangling left foot. At night Nelly had

slept in Olga's bed, except if one of Olga's short-time partners had managed to assert his authority. And if the dog was in its basket, it had also been the lover's last visit to Olga's bed. One-love for Nelly.

How the Olga smell must have changed over time because of the dog, without any of them noticing. Augustina found the thought of knowing a life in its entire duration and corporeality, from the first yelps to eventual putting-down, preposterous. Impudent. Indiscrete. An integral life, integrated in one's own. For seventeen years. Augustina pondered whether she actually pitied the dog.

Mrs Schweigt's commiserable standing next to them and even attempting to co-embrace eventually was too much, too close for Augustina, and so she disengaged herself abruptly, saying:

"Perhaps we'd better go inside?"

They went into the house all together, the long standing around in the cold was at an end, comfortable gathering was on now. How casually, conversantly everyone moved around here, or was that just answering to the rules of Olga's house and garden, which they had all known longer than their respective homes? How often had each of them in the meantime moved together, apart, or simply away? Even Augustina's parents had meanwhile exchanged their house for a four-room flat cum lift, and only kept the market garden.

Was there some customary right applicable here? Could one demand a 'non-redeemable right to a say' if Olga were to decide that she would like to move nearer to the centre, now that there was no dog. Could one raise an objection and say: no, no way, we (also) have our say in this matter? This is a berth, a haven. Here one could count on meeting one another not at all accidentally without prior consultation, on Sunday afternoons. Or forenoons. At least the current singles. Just like your favourite pub. No, that's wrong, you select your favourite pub according to several criteria. Location, style, patronage, opening hours, service, et cetera. Olga's house and garden did not have to meet anything, did not have to be liked, was an unchallenged place as the parental home had long been.

Conversation turned out arbitrary, Henrik recounted long waiting times in London on USA flights. Mrs Schweigt had also been to London, but that was even before ... Eventually he had sat out his waiting time in the green bar, sure, really, everything green, head-splitting, and ... well, Olga's mother had never been to the USA, but at that time ... For the first time in God knows how many flights, Henrik would have wished for a smokers' area again ... Matti still hadn't managed, the smoking thing, but then he had never really

liked to smoke on an airplane or train. The topic of smoking was capable of development for the time being. Not even in those new trains where you could no longer open the windows because of that horrible air conditioning – but for instance in the old, discarded ones bound to the eastern destinations, he still smoked there ... The only one to ignore the cigarette topic was Mrs Schweigt, because she could not add anything to it. Instead, the South of England coast, oh my, I don't even want to know what it looks like today ...

Gerda wanted home.

“Already?”

“Yes, we've been here since this morning, helping.”

There it was again, the dog, the dog would not be forgotten, nor buried. Olga's life of constancy had not just swallowed a dog's life, but love life, too. Trials and designs, and then dismissal.

“Can I come along with you?” Augustina used the opportunity.

“Sure.”

Brigitta wasn't home yet.

Good, good. In her room in her yellow armchair in her television blanket, watching now.

Until 23:17, then off to bed.