



09

Postscript from a beach

from a person without knowledge
to a person with.
With don'ts.
After the duration of don'ts came the dos.

09

Postscript from a beach

Anne Storch

1. Aschenbach receives an e-mail

Professor Aschenbach has sore feet. It has been a hot and humid day and they have become swollen in the much-too-tight sandals. It would have been possible to take a short walk down the to the beach and let the soft waves wash over the red marks the sandals have left on the skin. On the other hand there would have been people down there, offering beadwork and coconuts for sale, pleading and insisting. Not that Aschenbach dislikes people or is shy of conversations with strangers, but today is a hot and humid day and everything feels so heavy and vague. And so she has put her beach towel on one of the sunbeds on the hotel premises that overlook the beach and then the sea which is some forty meters away. She lies down on

the sunbed that is under the shade of tall palm trees, without bothering to take her dress of, not even the sandals, and stretches her arms and legs. A body crucified by humidity and heat. She lies down and looks up and sees palm tree leaves moving softly. No coconuts up there, not even small ones. They are removed by a gardener every other day so that they don't fall on the tourists.

Aschenbach gazes upwards. No birds, no butterflies, no clouds. No lizards on the stems of the palm trees. The palm trees could as well be disguised transmitting masts, like those in the business districts of rich cities. They are not, of course, but Aschenbach is inclined to find the difference between them very small. As if everything was suddenly bound to lose its life-giving powers around her, these palm trees

were already beginning to turn into painted steel, a prop at a staged beach. She decides to watch this closely. For who has ever seen such a thing before, a whole lively landscape freezing into artificiality, life removing itself from the picture, whereby blurred contours become sharp and contingency is erased.

She turns her head in order to catch a sight of the monkeys that are always playing by the boat shack to the left of the sunbeds. She lifts herself a bit, now leaning on her elbow, so that she has a better view of the boats. And sees the hind legs and tail of a monkey just before they hide behind the shack. She continues to watch for a while. No movement. So this was that, she thinks and lies down again on her sunbed. Should have bent over before and take the sandals off. But why bother.

Now she can see just what is in front of her. Her legs and feet and the sandals. Above the black soles of her shoes she can see the white sand of the beach where the tide is now low. A wide zone of sand, a bit of dead seaweed, and far away out there a few waves where the brownish, dead reef is. Aschenbach hears the faint thunder of the water as it throws itself against the corals. There should have been boats out there with tourists visiting the reef and admiring the colors of the sea, the band of turquoise above Aschenbach's shoes is void of any boat or person. Just blue and blue, and white sand in front of it, and the gentle roar of the breaking waves behind all that.

Aschenbach slowly turns her head to the right in order to take a glimpse of what the other tourists are doing. Has anybody else seen the incipient absence of life at the beach? She needs to be careful, she thinks, so that her movements do not raise any attention. Otherwise, who knows, she might be noticed and

removed as well. Now that she gets an idea of what is going on. And so she turns her head just a bit, just as much as someone with a broken neck could turn, and peeks over to the other sunbeds. On the few ones that are also occupied there are men and women in bathing costumes. Their bare feet point at the beach. They lie flat on their backs with their arms to the left and right of the body and their heads bent backwards. It is impossible for Aschenbach to have any eye contact with anybody, because on every face facing the sky lies an open book. They seem to sleep under the covers of their whodunits, all of them; not a single face without a book on it. At a first glimpse one might think they were reading or had fallen asleep over doing so, but Aschenbach who watches all this carefully sees the arms and legs stretched uniformly, the feet bare and the palms of their hands open, and the books on their faces resembling tiny death shrouds. No one there had fallen asleep while reading, no hand there still lies on top of a book, no one has turned to the side in order to sleep more comfortably. They seem as lifeless to Aschenbach as the reef and the palm trees. Maybe, Aschenbach ponders, they are imitations of tourists just as the palm trees might really be transmission masts that imitate palm trees. She slowly turns back to the position she has been in before, her face again facing the palm tree leaves and the sky.

Isn't this what she always wanted? Not to be interrupted, bothered, disturbed, hassled? That she lies on her sunbed, is left alone, does not have to suck her belly in and does not have to order a drink and does not have to negotiate the price and does not have to reply to a greeting. She is finally in control. Has it under control, at least as long as she does not move. Of course there is a price to pay for this, and being

crucified by heat and humidity on a sunbed is quite a price, but then her sticky body and her sore feet can finally rest and this is worth it. And isn't there a very clear correlation between these two, control and restfulness? Because as long as the beach had been the site of contingency and liminality that it might always have been it was tumultuous. The sand was moved to and fro by the monsoon, people went up and down, ships and boats passed by. What could not happen there. Whenever Aschenbach thought that something had been established or some plan might work out, it all turned out to be otherwise. And every time it involved a lot of walking and a lot of speaking in tongues to get to the next point from where she could start afresh, making another plan and finding another point of view. It was exciting, this was for sure.

But excitement didn't last that long in the end. Now that Aschenbach watches closely she sees that the process of life loss had begun quite early, albeit not in a spectacular way. Aschenbach noted it first without understanding what was happening when the beach walks took on geometrical forms. Because the upper side of the beach was now closed, the side facing the sea, where there should have been houses and gardens. Instead of offering some space for people to live there together or to rest for a while, under a shady tree and with a cup of refreshing water, it was void of any comfortable and accessible places, or any places at all. Instead it was all plots and walls and fences and industrial plants serving the tourism business. There was hotel after hotel, large resorts with thousands of uniform rooms and huge dining halls, makuti-thatched and climatized with the help of big fans that in the beginning had beheaded the remaining galagos until they

got extinct. Underneath the makuti roofs and turning fans there were buffets. So much to consume, and yet Aschenbach was often dissatisfied. There was a feeling of forlornness. These places were lonely, with their 'clients only' signposts everywhere, and it was no wonder that many of them soon turned into ruins. Often one night was enough and Aschenbach would see a fresh ruin the next morning where the evening before a resort had been: dismantled roofs and dark windows where shortly before there had been lights switched on. What remained were the signposts and fences and walls. Yet, that wasn't all. Aschenbach would also be unable to find the little paths that led from the beach to the main road, even though many of them had been there just recently. As these things happened, Aschenbach found herself more and more confined to the beach, where she finally could only move vertically, walking on a vector covered by white sand. In the beginning, somebody would come out underneath the shade of the bushes and trees every now and then, come out of a shade underneath the fenced hotel ruins, and walk down the beach, in order to meet her in a precise 90° relationship. Unlike the more contingent conversations that had existed before, language of those encounters that emerged here now was foreseeable in all its monotony. There was motion first, movement of two bodies until they met on the vector. Then a greeting, informal and performative, with elongated vowels and a voice that was still reaching out. Then some asking tasks, such as how are you, what is your name, where from, which hotel, how long are you here for – just the minimum that was needed to establish contact. Then offering things, such as the view of an octopus, a woodcarving, a coconut. Aschenbach's part was to turn all these living and beautiful

things down, saying these things were not welcome in the moment, but maybe tomorrow. This was, all in all, the brief and shallow part of the conversation. It was never enough to carry on with anything, was death-seeking and lonely. There was a way though to make it longer and thus hope for depth, for a more profound and lasting encounter. But whenever one of the two who met on the vector attempted to get into that, all they achieved were comparisons. Then they got stuck in a hiccup of a conversation, trying to find their ways out, in order to get to deeper meanings, but it went on and on without ever offering any nourishment: here it is hot, there it is cold; here you are rich, there we are poor. Or the other way around. Yours in contrast to mine, we but not you, here versus there. Never any inclusion, no trans-moment in sight. These comparisons, producing nothing but binary oppositions, could go on for a long time. Comparing lives and opportunities of two people at a compartmentalized, fetishized beach where everything was owned and commodified. No matter how long the encounter between the two would last, all they could do was to compare and speak about all that could be added to that what had already been piled up at both sides of the border between them. And with the increasing commodification of life, the heaps of dividing things between them became more and more unsurmountable.

Aschenbach felt sad and lost after these conversations had ended, instead of being fulfilled, and this was even more depressing as she had begun to assume that it had something to do with the architecture of the beach, not its people. It could all have been otherwise, and that it wasn't otherwise was a result of clients-only environments and more generally of such things like walls and fences, she thought.

Nothing in such an environment resulted in a lasting and healing relationship. Very often, when she and another person met again in one of these rectangular encounters, they wouldn't even recognize each other again and thus had to start the whole thing all over. Aschenbach was almost certain that her interlocutors felt equally lost and sad after these conversations. And yet this was all that was left to them at a beach where there was nothing more to do than to walk up and down on a vector, or to move on one of its few rectangular tangents.

Aschenbach had attempted to move out of it at several times, of course. Not to the side facing the sea, where everything was fenced and walled and owned and ruined, but to the other side, to the water. She had hoped for seashells or starfish, but soon learned that this side of the beach was possessed too. So whenever she branched off from one of her vectorial peregrinations, she would be guided, taken, shipped, toured. Not that this wasn't nice. Surely it was. For there was shade to find under a sail, there were explanations that were gifts offered on top of the shady sail. There was a breeze as well. But then it all fossilized after a quick moment and turned into a tour of exactly thirty minutes. For of course there were fences too over here. If you can turn a hospitable village into an industrial site, how much more can you turn seashells into a commodity fetish? And so, even though there were walks and explanations, it was not appropriate to ask for more, such as for those things that were here too, apart from the dead reef and the octopus. Spirits, tales, water that can be read. Nothing like that.

Language had lost its magical property here and had become a discourse tied to a landscape that annihilated and fossilized life, to a

non-place where the encounter itself had been co-opted. And as liminality and contingency got extinct in this wide white death zone, there was no possibility left for language to unfold its creativity and magic. Only the few water bottles that still came with each flood suggested other possibilities. They bore names and images on their blue bodies and came from far. Aschenbach loved their dance on the white sand. She had even taken a few photographs of it, eternalizing the wonderful figures the bottles performed on the sand and documenting all the funny things they did. She had wanted to watch their dance again, but when she returned to their place at the beach, a soft buzz in her pocket distracted her. She took out her phone and saw a new email that had come in. It had an appendix that was a form. Aschenbach put on her glasses and read that the form was in the appendix so that she could fill it. And she was asked to organize a group of twelve speakers of unknown languages to pass by at a lab for tests. And she was hoped to create interlinear translations of their contributions, but there was a deadline for all this. And she did not have a watch. And it was all written in a language that did not even have greetings. And it was clear that this was part of an evaluation. Aschenbach's head turned red and her hands clutched the phone and her glasses so firmly that they both broke. And now? Now she was stranded. Stranded at a beach where nothing could be done but to balance on a vector under the hot and humid sun. Jua kali, she said to herself. Half an hour later the flood had already taken the remains of her glasses and her phone away. Where to? Maybe to where the dancing water bottles came from.

Aschenbach, who is lying on her sunbed, crucified by heat and humidity, does not see

any bottles and phones and glasses on the sand. Only sand and glistening light. Aschenbach peeps over the dark soles of her shoes. Squints her eyes, could not process it. Lacks the word for it. Would like to have her phone to look it up. Squints and peeps and peeps and squints again. Softly turns her head left and right on her sunbed. Would be good to have a witness. But apart from the fossilized mannequins there is no trace of life, not even the tip of the tail of a monkey. No coconuts, no birds, no starfish. No life left here apart from Aschenbach's bloated sweating body and sore feet. She peeps once more and squints her eyes and tries to gain certainty. There is no doubt. The turquoise sea, void of any boats and ships and beasts and people and fish is gelling. The waves break on the sand like porridge, transparent and blue, but with a viscosity that Aschenbach has last seen in mashed jellyfish.

2. A disciple of the order of the tangent

Your shirt is torn your pants are torn your cap is torn. You are waiting in the shade, the tiny bit of shade that remains, for something to happen. There is dry seaweed, some empty plastic bottles, a few sticks, some rocks, and then you. Hard to see you from far, almost invisible, you, as you rest. Above you, on the hotel's premises, a gardener gardens and a startled grasshopper hops. Nothing new to you, you know the intervals of the gardener and the others up there. The beach begins stretching itself right from where you lie, down to the water which now is far, as it is low tide. Nobody swims down there, and you can rest.

You really want to rest, even though this deprives you of your livelihood, your income during these hours. Who knows what the hours

after these will bring. Some distraction in this monotony of waiting, perhaps. You gaze at the shallow water. There is a reef out there, you know where. The waves do not even break at its coral stone, this is how low the water now is. This is a good time for a walk on the corals in order to watch the colorful starfish and octopus that remain there. When you were younger there was snorkeling too. Now the fish and the corals are dead, so no use in putting on a mask and swimming trunks.

You liked it then. Colorful things everywhere at the beach; the brightly painted ngalawa were dancing on the waves, people were walking up and down wearing soft-colored kikois, fish in the nets was blue and pink and red. There were tourists wearing their summer dresses, many of them. And they stopped everywhere, at all these many make-shift stalls and shops, buying and buying, and laughing, and their children came running with toys and played at the beach, while their parents continued buying. The staircase leading down from the hotel to the beach was framed with bougainvillea. You are not far from the place, just a few meters. Now, there is nothing but a ruin left. The thing that really worries you though are the bougainvillea. After the hotel was closed down, the bougainvillea had overgrown almost the entire building. Then the suites and rooms were taken over by baboons and gibbons. For them, it was comfortable. The bougainvillea had crept up to the fourth floor and grew over the balconies and windows. They were always in full bloom. The once elegant whitewashed walls and timber balconies had all turned pink.

You crouch in your shade and look at the ruined hotel behind you. There is no pink anymore, no bougainvillea after five years without

proper rain. Just greyish vines and twigs rotting away. A few years ago, you think not more than three, the monkeys had died as well. There was a bad stench coming out of the broken windows of the ruin when their corpses had begun to decompose. Maybe for a week, ten days. Not more than that. They had died from the lack of water and of course from the heat once the bougainvillea had died and didn't offer them shade any longer.

The colors of the reef were gone before that. The fish that the fishermen bring now is grey and comes in frozen packages. You have no idea from where they get it, but you suspect them to be from fish farms somewhere. You don't care, as you don't often have the means to buy such food anyway.

You squint your eyes and watch out in the shade underneath the bushes and ruins. Just sand in front of you, white glistening sand. You know how it was once. Your grandparents told you how every family had a boat or two and how the nets dried on the sand after each fishing trip. Where the hotel ruin and your shade are now there was once their village. The roads were all of sand, no tar, no concrete, no heat. They had their coral stone houses and palm trees and sand roads and shady alleys and passages leading to the shore. You think of it as a time of cleanliness. You crouch in what they would have called dirt in your torn grey clothes and you rarely afford to eat what they ate, fish and pilau.

You are becoming a Babu these days, looking old after twenty years on the beach, but they still call you a Boy. The same holds true for your colleagues. Some of them have left. Maybe they are gents by now. But you have your doubts. You heard from some of them, via friends and friends of friends, and they have

She turned her head left, right and up

and fled

out of the house.

spoken about how they were living over there. If you can call that living at all. Existing, maybe. Enslavement, perhaps. No passport and no papers, and the ladies they went abroad with forced them to do humiliating work. Cam sex. You know what they like, it is what they share in their phones in the evenings at the bars, you have seen it many times.

The view of the empty glistening beach from the shade where you crouch isn't any better. Or the view you have from the other side. For when you get up and walk along your stretch of the beach you often look at the hotels, not the ruined ones, but those that are still operating. What you get to see are sunbeds with covers in yellow or white or blue. These colors. You look at the sunbeds and you say, jambo, coconut, and you wave. The sunbeds rarely respond. You will not pass by them today, it is too hot. But you have to get up and leave your shade. Someone is walking along the beach. White dress, black sandals. Face red. Jua kali, hot today, you will say to her once you meet her down there on the sand, in a tangential fashion. And you will offer her to cut a bit of aloe vera for her. Good for sunburn, you will insist. And you will be really sorry for her, for her solitary walk and red face and unkempt hair. You would have liked her to have seen the village and the nice colors and the bougainvillea and the ba-boons, and you feel sorry for her that she is too late for all that. And you will offer her your aloe vera once more, and a fresh coconut full of cool liquid, and she will say, thank you, maybe tomorrow.

3. Choir of the ballet of water bottles

We dance on the water and we dance on the sand, we are blue as the waves and gleam in the

sun. See our beauty, behold our grace. And fall for us, fall for us. And fall prey to us, fall prey to us.

Have you ever seen such a blue as mine? Am I not stronger than water and better than air? For I burst with sapphire, monochrome energy. I overwhelm them all. You do not do away with me lightly, don't you? I know you cannot help wondering about my intensity and depth. This is why I don't need to go far. You will take me right away and I will not disappoint you. I will endure a long time, multiplying in the sun, multiplying in the sun. I outshine you and I out-blue you. And then I make your eyes burst.

We dance in the wind and we dance in the sun. Kaskazini kusini, we come and we go. We make you dizzy and we make you numb as we burn away on top of your mountains of possessions.

I am so pleasant, I am so pure. My skin is porous and so is yours. Soon I will crack and lie down for you to step on me and let your ruby blood flow over my exquisite turquoise shell. I will come to life in your body and I will cut you as long as I want.

We shine and we dance and we bend and we bump. You love us insanely and we don't love you back. We dance on the sand at this desert of a beach and we don't care if you dance as well.

I have contained the water that your well once contained. I dried your ponds and starved your fish. I am blue as a caecilian and yet will betray them all. And when they dry and shrink and die and sink, it will only be me, me, me.

We dance at your beach, we dance at your funeral, we dance at the weddings of your daughters as they marry stupid men. We dance in their backyards as they silently cry. And we will refuse to contain a single one of their tears.

Just go, said the tree to the Journey.

Stones and sand until tarmac was reached,

I will make you buy me again, spend on me and get hooked. For I look so fresh and you believe it. Do you see how crisp I am? So much covered by water and ice, just what you crave for after I destroyed all your shade. I love your addiction and I hate the sound when you drink.

We hunt and we catch and we kill and we hurt. We split open and entangle the feet of a bird and make them fall off. We strangle a turtle and incarcerate fish. And when we are done, we laugh at your loneliness with our gaping scars.

I come from far. I am from abroad. I make you first wander and then I make you scared.

I lie in your face and stink in your nose.

I am nameless, just dirt and a false promise.

I make you stumble over my shape and over my name. For do I not look like a block of ice? So take me, someone will pay the price.

I am from Zanzibar.

And I come from Kilwa.

This is a lie.

I come from Mombasa.

And I come from Nairobi.

And I come from another large city.

Which one is it?

It is Guangzhou, and guess what? I saw you on the way.

I sing a song I heard in Tanga.

I bring you sand I found in Malindi.

I cheat you with my porosity.

I trick you with my blueivity.

I poison you with my artificiality.

I sacrifice myself for you to make a whole new sea for you.

I am from Nungwi.

I am from Diani.

I am of blue poison.

I am of fake dreams.

I am of unquenchable thirst.

I am from the sky.

I am from a well.

I contain a small shell.

I contain a bit of spittle.

I contain a dead fish that was so little.

I contain a letter spoilt by the sea.

I am from your hands.

I will dance on the top of the waves of your sea when it has risen so high.

We will dance on top of the waves of your deadly sea.

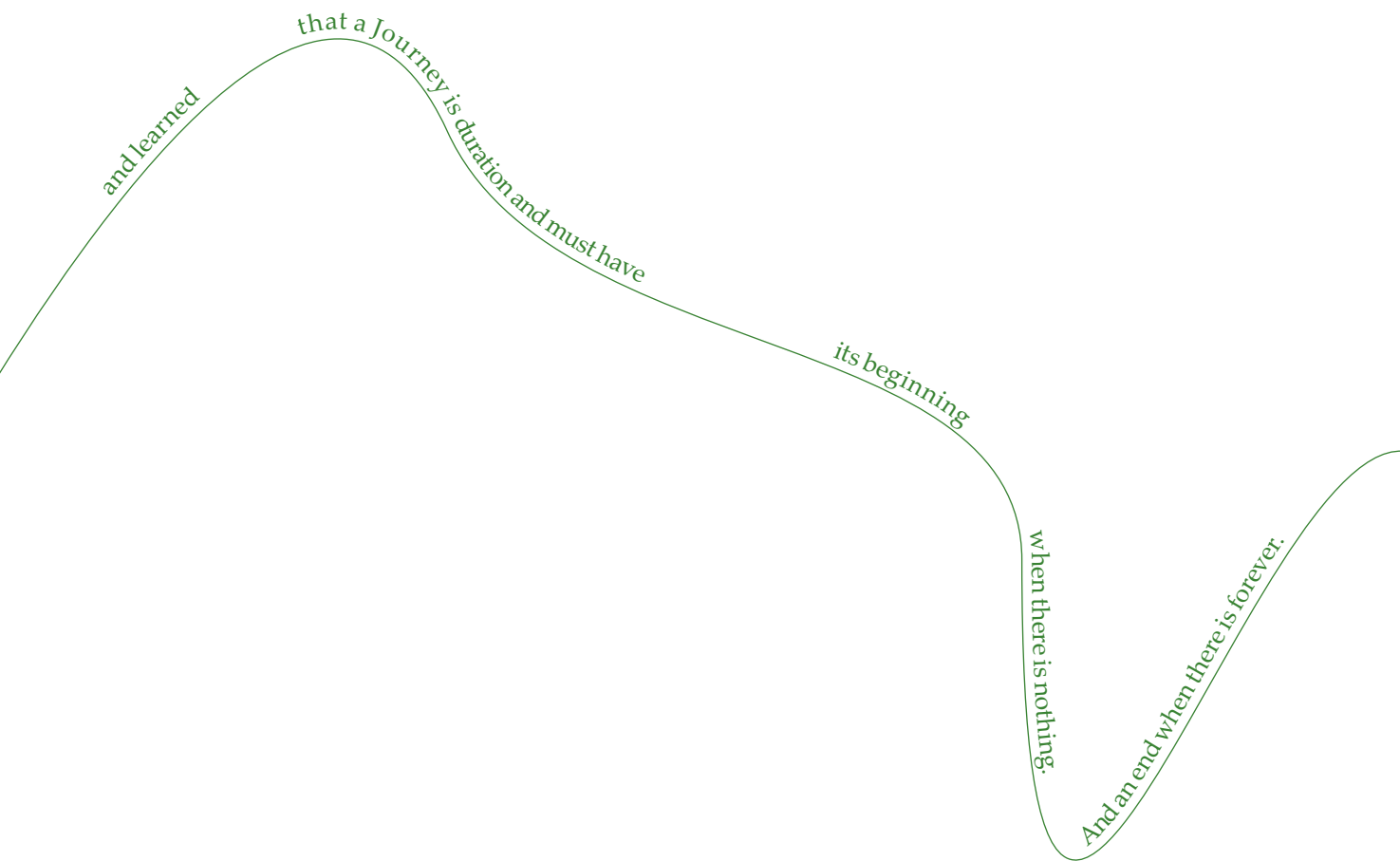
And I will not quench your thirst.

a tuktuk on three wheels honked and honked

and honked the Journey to Tiwi.

Can I stay here?

Asked the Journey



and learned

that a Journey is duration and must have

its beginning

when there is nothing.

And an end when there is forever.