There Were Three of Us

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She walked in and waited for her eyes to adjust to the dim light.

Outside, a glaring whiteness shone, sticking wetly and saltily in the spray to anything that couldn't withdraw, to the fences and life rings that sliced through the white, sliced with the warning that although visibility was good, the sea calm, and the winds admittedly weak, they had stepped onto the deck and become passengers, and passengers simply sometimes slip and jump and fall. It was nothing personal; such is their nature.

She sat at one of the tables on a leather bench that the sun split in half, claiming a part and yielding a part, as if this had been predetermined, precisely measured and doled out: this much for her, this much for now, since a traveler is never left stranded. In a small dish, glued to the center of the table so it wouldn't slide, she again found clumped sugar, just like a month ago. The ferry floor was still covered by a bluish carpet with a pattern reminiscent of waves, serving to remind you, whenever you turned your gaze from the window, where you were and what rules applied here.

Smoke only in designated areas.

Do not run, as surfaces may be slippery.

In case of nausea, contact the crew.

Children must always be under adult supervision.

Printed on sheets of paper, these were taped across the pillars separating the benches, on the corner bar’s vitrine, and on both sides of the bathroom doors. Every so often, they appeared on the

screen hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the room, which otherwise announced that during low tide it would be possible to spot seals lingering in the shallows, common and grey seals, plentiful this time of year. Feeding them is strictly forbidden, and the recommended distance is at least three hundred meters, especially if they have pups with them.

First, she pulled the equipment bag off her shoulders, then her backpack; she unzipped her winter jacket and took off her hat. A moment ago she had been freezing, but now her fingers stung from the heat, and the more she blew on them and sat on them, the worse it got. She remembered the island as milder, warmer; she remembered the evenings the two of them had spent on the dunes, with beer bottles wedged between the sand and the grass, marram grass, he had said, it prevents erosion, and she remembered feeling the battering of the wind, but not the cold it carried. Fear? Anticipation? Both.

Here and there a rabbit would move behind them, she knew, having read it on the website of the hotel he had recommended.

The blackened floorboards creaked beneath her feet. The walls glowed ochre, cracked in places, with wooden panels that were, next to the tables, carved with initials.

Welcome, said the man behind the wooden hotel bar across from the entrance. Empty cups before him, stained with drained coffee; behind him a buzzard, motionless.

How may I help you?

I have a room reserved until the end of the week, the one with the bathtub.

When she had called, they offered her a choice between a room with a shower or a bathtub, *If you'd like to relax*. I really might, she thought, it might do me some good. After she hung up, she realized that every time she wanted to wash, she would have to squat, kneel, or sit sideways; she would have to chase the soap dancing along the edges and wipe everything around her, because water would naturally get everywhere, even if she knelt.

Well, come on in, here you go, he said, pulling a notebook from under the register.

May I have your name?

Olga, she said, and he crossed something out, wrote something down, then vanished around the corner.

She stood in front of the bar for a while, shifting her weight from foot to foot, watching the bird and waiting for it to take flight, to spread its wings, to become majestic, while it returned her gaze as if trying to say, *It's coming, it's coming, just a little longer, just a moment more and* – and nothing. Trapped in the almost, keeping watch over those who would never know what it feels like to experience the lift and the sweep, to feel the rush of the descent; and what it's like to lose this.

Olga stepped to the nearest window. Theo had described the island to her countless times, he had sent her photographs, dozens and dozens of them, photographs from this beach and that one, from behind this table and that one, proof of contentment, proof that it was worth it. She knew all these images, the stories the two of them had exchanged as if they had been gifts, but standing there by that window, she felt no closer to that vastness.

Pardon me, here we are, she heard behind her. The man returned with a bundle of brochures and a map.

Look, this is us here, you see, where this little dot is, over there is the store, they’re only open until four, and a bit further on you have fried fish and chips, if you take this path here, you’ll reach the shore in half an hour. You'll find the key in the door, room 8, second floor, he said, nodding toward a guest at a table who was pointing a finger first in the air and then at a glass, smudged from handling.

Really nice of you to come.

She came? What did she come for? She had asked herself this question over and over in the preceding months, turning it around and spreading it apart, but the more she wondered what she was supposed to find on the island, lying over there up north, a whole continent away from her, the worse it got. But she knew she had to go. For her own sake, yes, but also for his.

He called her that evening to tell her he had fallen ill.

No, nothing serious, no, no, I'm sorry it happened right now, but in a couple of days, yes, of course, as soon as I'm better, yes.

She had imagined the first day the two of them would spend together countless times, imagined it while peeling potatoes, tying her shoelaces, and mowing the lawn, in every moment of in-between, every crack, every gap. These moments were filled with numerous variations of days, sunny, rainy, sunny again, the two of them catch sight of each other in the hotel lobby, in the café, in the store, by chance; they catch sight of each other and slowly walk toward one another, no, not slowly, perhaps quickly, or perhaps they just stop, standing motionless somewhere between the

tomatoes and bell peppers, they stop and they wait for the wings to spread, for it to become majestic.

She had anticipated every variation, imagining it again and again and again and again until she felt as though she had already lived it, already endured it, and therefore would be merely repeating it, enduring it once more. Every variation, every one except this one. A couple of days, he said, alright; but what was she supposed to do now with all this fear, all this warm anticipation?

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She spent the night thinking it was a sign: you made a mistake, leave. Go back to the life you knew, to the person you were before you answered an unknown sequence of numbers that day with your left hand in the fixer, even though you don't do that, you aren't a loyal subscriber and don't want a special offer, answering right in the middle of your work, even though you don't do that; contamination, they drilled into your head, *Contamination, colleague*.

Hello, excuse me, have I reached Olga?

Yes, speaking, go ahead.

Olga, hi, good afternoon.

Silence.

It's Theo here, I'm calling because I'd like to...

Silence.

Look, you've caught me right in the middle of something; if this is about something major, I'd ask you to call me back in about half an hour or forty-five minutes.

Well, I don't know if this is –

Listen, I can't right now, who did you say you were again?

Theo.

From the depot? But I told you I'd come tomorrow, I was just speaking with –

No, I'm calling because I'd like to –

Oh, sorry, look, I'll call you, just let me finish this.

But I just wanted to –

Well, fine, but make it very quick, please.

Silence. And a little more. And more.

Hello? Hello? Are you still there?

Yes, well, so, Theo here, your brother, half-brother, well, *your* half-brother.

Excuse me?

Yes, I know it's out of the blue, but I did –

Excuse me, but I don't have a brother, I'm an only child, you must have made a –

I didn't, I didn't make a mistake, I already wrote to you and you didn't answer, so I figured I would just –

Olga hung up. What weirdos, she thought, where on earth do they find her.

When the number rang twice more in the following days, persistently, she sat down at the computer, opened her inbox, and typed in his name. It was there; for a good week already.

unusual

our mother

moved

married

gave birth to me

wanted to

asked about

if you wanted

my number

your half-brother

She stared at the screen and the word spread within her like an infection, uncontrollably, rapidly, seizing her, seizing her, taking ownership of her, limb by limb, until her hands shook, her shoulders wobbled.

Contamination, colleague.

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With her fingers still stinging from the warmth, she reached for the spoon jutting out of the dish. If she turned it sideways, just enough, at the right angle, she caught a reflection of white in it, and then buried it back into the sugar, trying to crush the largest lumps first, then the small ones. It crossed her mind that the grains weren't clumping together because of the moisture; they were crowding against one another because they simply wanted to, because existing in the plural is easier and more comfortable. Nonsense, she told herself, letting go of the spoon.

She clasped her hands and brought them above her head, stretching first to one side and then to the other. She dug her wallet out of her backpack and stood up, walking past the sign for the deck exit. Behind the vitrine of the makeshift bar, she found some chocolate bars and sandwiches, three croissants, and two pretzels.

The girl frothing milk behind the counter looked up and then lowered her gaze again, as if to say, *Yeah, what is it, can't you see I'm busy.*

Excuse me, good afternoon. I'd like a coffee, if I may, no sugar, and a glass of water?

I'll bring it to you, yes, right away.

No, I can take it myself.

No, ma'am, I'll bring it to you. Would you like anything else with that, something sweet?

Returning to the table with a dried-out pretzel in her hand, she remembered that a year ago, a group of men who looked like they were heading home had been sitting on these exact split benches, halved into brown and black. He could be any one of them, she had thought then. Because he also commutes to the mainland every day, he had said, if his lectures start at eight, he's on the water by six.

On the days when she was also waking up early, to be on this or that shore before dawn, covered over her head, standing in the dark, she would peer through the loupe and see the break of day there, and in the break, him, with a briefcase in his hand. It was so similar to hers, to its long, thin fingers, similar to hers, and, she realized now, to her mother's.

When he first sent her a photograph of her, she thought she was looking at herself, at a moment she had lived but could no longer remember. Those were her eyes, her shoulders, she could have sworn. She had stopped asking herself who her mother was, her *first, real* mother, relatively early on, she stopped asking after she had pried and pried until the two of them told her *We know nothing*

about her, Olga, she didn't even leave a name, no details, no papers, she didn't want anyone to know.

All she was left with was the slippery *she didn't want to*: she didn't want to keep her, she didn't want anyone to know, she didn't want to be found. Her *first, real* mother. She would stop thinking about her, she told herself, to show her what it was like, and at times she succeeded, at times not; she managed to push her away, but she was pushing away the thought, not the face, not the body. When he sent her the photograph, she knew she had lost. She would now be forced to allow this woman, who had thrust her into the world, to draw nearer, forced to make space for her, give her a will and even judgment, grant her everything she hadn't deserved.

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She woke to the wind. She heard it howling first from the left, then from the right, trying to track it with her eyes closed from one corner of the room to the other. She rolled onto her side and struggled to fall back asleep, but the harder she tried, the louder it became. She heard its every move, heard how it barreled straight at the rock instead of over it, how it lifted and tousled the branches, how it paused, then barreled, paused, paused, then barreled.

She rolled onto her back and remembered a game she used to play as a child, on nights when wakefulness clung to her like the burrs she plucked from her pant legs after running through a meadow, when she was told *Turn off the light, you'll fall asleep.* She turned off the light and stared at the ceiling, or squeezed her eyelids shut, tightly, tightly, hoping it would work, but it was all in vain.

Eventually, she accepted that she couldn't sleep through some nights, but could only endure them, so she turned off the light, pulled the covers up to her chin, said *Night night*, and waited for the sound of showering and dishwashing to quiet down. She waited for the two of them to check whether the lights were off and the door locked, twice, waited for them to climb the stairs, kick off their slippers, and finally get into bed. Then, with her eyes closed, strictly in her imagination, she climbed down from the bunk bed and marched into this or that part of the house, where she looked around, picked an object, and – *This time I'll be this* – inhabited it. As the hours passed, she imagined what it was like to be that something, anything from a bar of soap or a broom to a couch or a fork, what it sees when it stabs, when it rests on a tongue, when it waits and waits in a drawer.

She heard footsteps echoing down the hallway, back and forth, back and forth again, and finally opened her eyes. She blindly felt for the nightstand with her left hand. Shit. If she didn't get dressed and drag herself to the dining room this instant, there would be nothing left of breakfast but sweaty slices of cheese. *Still unwell*, read the message Theo had sent her an hour and a half ago. *I'll call you when I'm better.* Yes, that's fine too, she thought. The most pressing concerns first. She pulled on her socks so she wouldn't freeze while squeezing out toothpaste in the bathroom, splashing water on her face, and tying her hair into a bun, then she got dressed, tried to locate her key, *Damn it, where did I put it*, and ran along the plaid carpet leading to the staircase, down, further down, into the dining room.

White tablecloths glowed amid a flood of brown, wood on wood against ochre walls. Here and there, crumbs, stains, and the arcs of lower lips on coffee and teacups reminded her that there were others here who, just like her, had bought themselves a few days' opportunity to set aside who they were. Names held no weight here, this was understood by those who provided them upon arrival, as if handing them over for safekeeping for a few days. It didn't matter who you were or who you wanted to be; what mattered was your room number.

Good morning, help yourself, the man who had checked her in the previous afternoon nodded to her, holding a breadbasket. He wore a black suit and a crisp white shirt, and she couldn't remember if he had been dressed like that yesterday or if mornings were a formal occasion for him.

On her plate, she placed a roll, a rectangle of butter, and two tiny plastic circles of strawberry jam, then took another plate and attacked the leftover scrambled eggs and sausages.

On the table marked with the number 8, a platter awaited her, with a metal pitcher over two burning tea lights, and next to it, a cotton napkin folded into a fan. She sat down, shook it out, tossed it over her lap, and tended to her breakfast. The fork-girl stabbed the sausages and brought them to her mouth. It was a child’s pastime, yes, but also an exercise in adopting a perspective different from her own, an exercise she kept returning to years later when, sitting in the dark of a lecture hall, they were asked what they saw.

And on this one? Take your time.

Some kind of vegetable, a bell pepper, they replied. It looks upside down, it was probably –

Alright, that's fine, let's move on to the next one.

Three men beamed from the photograph before them, leaning on walking sticks in the middle of a dirt path, turned sideways, wearing hats, blazers, and polished shoes. The middle one raised his hand; the left one pinched a cigarette between his lips.

I know this one, said a boy sitting a few rows ahead of her.

Yes, colleague, go ahead.

If I'm not mistaken, these are farmers on their way to a dance.

Not farmers, iron ore miners, but that wasn't my question. Anyone else?

No one; silence.

These lads belong at best to the second generation to wear suits like that in the countryside. In a couple of months, all three of them traded them for uniforms, he said, turning toward the wall. Well, perhaps this one will be easier.

Click.

So, again, what do you see? I'm not asking for a name, I'm not asking what object is in front of you, I'm asking you what you see.

What Olga saw was an empty town square, and in the foreground, a man's outstretched forearm wearing a wristwatch. She didn't see a lazy emptiness, but rather rigidity and unease, the anticipation of everything we do not want to anticipate, and she knew it was about the moment that split the man whose hand would forever dangle there above that square into a before and an after.

When she returned to her room, the bed was once again exactly as she had found it the day before. The edges of the blanket were tucked in, and the pillow wasn't crushed and stuffed into the corner, it was smoothed out instead, its left and right sides perfectly even. The pajamas she had hurriedly kicked off and left lying on the floor in two heaps were now hanging over the back of the chair, which had been pushed back to the desk. It was a kind of care doled out only by mothers to their children and chambermaids to their guests. On the nightstand, the key with its wooden buoy-shaped keychain awaited her, alongside the pile of brochures she had wanted to leaf through the night before but had tossed aside when the letters started dancing around the room.

She threw herself onto the bed, a tiny desecration of the order, and grabbed the top brochure. It featured women in long white dresses with their hair tied up, sitting at tables on a covered porch. Behind them were large windows draped with lace curtains, and in front of them stood a wooden fence, leaned upon by men in blazers and straw hats.

The first day passed peacefully, she read, *with the resolution of a dispute between a housewife and a fishmonger*. *The building that served as a courthouse later became a space for receiving and dispatching letters, while operating as a tavern throughout that time as well*. *Tax records from that era reveal that the tavern poured a thousand liters of juniper spirits a year*.

She skimmed the rest, the addition of floors, the installation of wiring, the damage caused by three American bombs that fell on the island by mistake, one landing next to the hotel, *Only the manager's wife was seriously injured*, then placed the brochure on

the desk and looked out the window. The howling had quieted down. If she had to wait, she would wait while working, she told herself, so she went to her bag, stuffed her scarf and hat inside, then put on her winter jacket and hiking boots. A sprained ankle on a beach years ago had finally convinced her there was just as much mishaps while trudging over flat terrain as in places where you could plunge.

The path led past brick houses, some painted white, small and triangular, as if someone had pitched a tent and built around it. Most of them were empty and locked, she noticed, and she remembered Theo mentioning in one of their calls that the island once had enough children for five school classes, then three, and now barely two. *Even my gardener is older than I am, every time he climbs the birch tree behind my house, I start drafting an obituary*.

At first, she walked on paving stones, then on gravel mixed with sand and crushed seashells, and finally only on sand, soft and yielding. As she pushed through tufts of grass and sea buckthorn to climb to higher ground, she felt the wind again, saw it lifting and scattering the sand, which offered no resistance. There was no point in setting up a tripod in this weather, everything would sway and shake, and she would only be wasting film. She wanted to experiment with the longest possible exposure, a blur that would make the boundary between air and water barely visible, but she would need shelter from the wind and hours of absolute stillness, so she set the bag down on the dunes, rolled the shoulder that had borne its weight, and sat beside it, leaning back on her hands.

She had sat like this before so many seas, watching the day rise and fade before so many of them, with all that dark water beneath it.

Don't you think this is somewhat repetitive?

The professor was leafing through the images that had cost her everything she had earned by serving, hosting, cleaning, and cleaning some more. It was her final assignment, the culmination of years of work. To afford to visit all the shores she had chosen, she resorted to strict measures – she bought clothes and shoes only when absolutely necessary, she cut her own hair, poorly, but she wore it tied up, so it didn't matter, she ate enough, though slightly less than usual, and she gave up her car and bought a bicycle. She didn't view it as a sacrifice, even though it was, she just knew she had to do it. When she was asked at home if she couldn't perhaps choose closer, more accessible locations, she replied *Of course, of course I could*.

Technically they are polished, I must admit, he told her. But listen, Olga, you cannot submit fifteen photographs of the exact same thing.

With titles underneath: *Ionian Sea: Santa Cesarea; Aegean Sea: Pelion; English Channel: Weston Cliff; Sea of Marmara: Silivri; Norwegian Sea: Nyksundøya.*

You could have played around with color a bit, if you insist on having half ocean and half sky everywhere, that would give you some options to –

They are black and white on purpose.

Well, explain it to me, let's hear it.

It’s about –

It’s about that there is no progression in this, and if you think this will –

I believe you once said it wasn't just about what is in front of us, professor.

He peeled his eyes away from the paper and directed them at her, slowly and slightly raising his chin.

She had gone too far, a step too far, she knew, but he should have seen her on the trains and boats and buses, should have seen her sitting on the sand and rocks, waiting and measuring and waiting, lugging her gear back and forth, and how, bathed in red at home, she finally stared nervously at the developing trays.

Yes, colleague, that’s true. And what, pray tell, am I supposed to see in these grey smears?

Standing before her was a man who knew everything about Weston and Sander, everything about how Koudelka sliced time in two with a watch in some town square, yet he knew nothing about standing before the ocean and feeling what young sailors feel when they step back onto the mainland after many months at sea.

Well, I thought as much, he said, and went back to leafing. You know what they say, the sea is everywhere the same amount of wet.

Not long ago, she had run into him at the opening of a survey exhibition organized for her fiftieth birthday. She saw him enter, circle the room, then circle it again, slower this time, before he approached her and offered his hand.

I still think they’re smears, he said seriously, without a smile. But you were right.

Olga stood up and shook out her pant legs, then rolled down the cuff of first one sock, then the other. Damn sand, it gets everywhere. Beneath her steps, the wind lifted more and more of the beach, lifting and dropping it, lifting and dropping it, hurling itself with increasing force, striking her in sharp gusts as well, and before she could even feel around in her bag for her hat, the sky above her darkened as if someone had flicked off the light.

The rain fell in drapes. Olga grabbed her equipment and tried to hide it under her half-unzipped winter jacket, but it was far too small, so she took it off, wrapped it around the bag, tied a knot with the sleeves, then another, clutched it tightly to her chest, and turned her back to the sea. Nothing but dunes stretched before her, nothing but grass, interrupted here and there by a path leading toward the village, but it would take her at least half an hour to get there, if not more. She shielded her forehead with her right hand to keep the raindrops out of her face and scanned the flatland once again. Nothing, nothing, nothing, and then: a house.

She ran in the direction of what she had seen as a brown smudge through her hand, now resting again by her side. She ran past the path, straight through the tufts of grass where her feet kept sinking, so she fell to her knees twice, shit, shit, it burned and she was freezing, but she had to keep running, wiping the water from her face, brushing the hair from her eyes, checking if the jacket was still wrapped around her bag, and running again as fast as she could. It wasn't that she couldn't afford a new camera body, new lenses, and the rest, it was that she simply didn't want to. She had owned this equipment since her college days; it was worn out, but it was faithful.

Reaching across her forehead with her palm again, she pushed back her hair, wiped the drops from her eyebrows, and then looked to the left, where the low house stood. She saw the path leading up to it, estimated it would take her another minute, maybe two, and charged forward, gasping for breath. As she drew nearer, she saw that the house wasn't brown, but rather made of brick, red, with green windows and doors. There was a fence and some trees to the left, and a dilapidated wooden shed to the right. She lunged at the door and knocked, hard, then harder. She expected the sound of footsteps, a hand grasping the handle, the squeaking of hinges, but all she heard was the roar of the downpour and the pounding of her heart that now moved to her temples. She tried again, knocking for longer this time, but nothing stirred, not a hand, not a foot, not a single movement. Left with no other choice, she bolted for the shed.

It was small, crammed with shovels, rakes, and axes, with pliers of various shapes, with short handles and long handles, with a long saw and an even longer one, with boots, buckets, and pieces of wood. Olga set the bag down, freed it from the jacket's grip, and then wrung out her t-shirt and pant legs, flapping them with her hands. She found a rag draped over a bucket, grabbed it by the corner, smacked it against the edge of the door, and then wiped her hands and blotted her forehead and cheeks. Once her heart settled back into her chest, she reached for the bag, soaked on the outside, and pulling the zipper open was relieved to find that her equipment made it out well. She spread the piece of fabric she usually used to cover the camera bellows, to drape over herself to see in the dark, on the ground before her. She laid the equipment out on it piece by piece, then hung the bag on the door handle and sat down.

After a while, when she heard the calls of the terns, even though their cries were distant, she knew the storm had passed. She put on her jacket, now heavier with water, and returned to the path leading inland.

Wrapped in a towel, she lay on the bed, waiting for the pressure that had settled somewhere deep behind her forehead to subside. Upon returning to her room, she had filled the bathtub with hot water, so hot that her feet turned red when she stepped in, and soaked in it until she began to feel cold. She pulled the plug and watched the water drain in a swirling vortex, draining everything except a few grains of sand that had managed to escape the force in a small indentation on the far side.

But that was earlier. Now she was lying down, staring at the ceiling, above which someone was coughing, and waiting for it to pass. She should have put her hat on the moment she left the hotel, she knew that, she knew it perfectly well, it wasn't the first time she had succumbed to the wind like this. Here, as elsewhere, you could spot the locals by the fact that none of them wore hats, and if anyone did, it was always one that ended right above the ears. Everyone here was used to the wind blowing at them, blowing through them.

She lay there, feeling it blow at her, blow through her, overturning and demolishing whatever had once been solid inside her, scattering and mixing up the broken shards, so she would never be able to find them, or piece them back together.

I will never be an only child again, she thought then.

She was sitting at a table wedged between the fireplace and a window, the lower half of which was drawn with lace curtains. Behind her a selection of photographs in simple wooden frames. One showed a car stuck in the snow, with three men standing by with their hands on their hips. On another a group in woolen clothing and boots, sitting among the dunes, with rifles slung over their shoulders or resting on the ground. Two pheasants lay in front of them, dead. The island had long served as a hunting ground, she had read, populated by pheasants whose tiptoeing meant waiting on a bullet. Generations upon generations wondering whether it would come from the left or the right, while walking, or perhaps mid-flight. It had been decades since they were hunted, but she was certain that if she had the chance to look one of them in the eye, she would still see their terror of the boot, the shock of the gunshot.

May I get you anything else? the man asked, reaching for her empty coffee cup. This arm, too, was clad in a black suit, it too led to a neck wearing a carefully knotted tie.

No need, thank you. I'll just sit here a little longer.

Of course, take your time.

To her left sat a couple, with playing cards and two glasses in front of them. The man was leaning his elbow on the table, combing his fingers through his beard, while the woman rubbed her right earlobe. Olga watched her, observing her slightly hunched posture, and wondered about the body of the woman who had given birth to her, what her legs and arms were like, what habits were inscribed upon them. Did she also brush the hair from her eyes with her middle finger, as she did, did she also sit with one leg tucked underneath her, did she sleep on her side, her back, her stomach?

What inside her was aching, what was cramped, and since when, what had she all passed down to her? Her mother, her *second, not-real mother*, had suffered from tremors in her hands in the years before her death, tremors so severe that she would scatter food across the table at lunch, and that once, trying to drink, she had knocked out one of her front teeth with the glass. Olga was cleaning and wiping, feeding her and giving her drinks, occasionally asking herself who would be wiping her when she would inevitably end up the same. And now? How was she supposed to know what was in store for her now? There was only whiteness before her – the whiteness of water stalling among the dunes after rain, which shines so glaringly once reached by the sun that you have to look away.