Ojalá se derrumben las puertas
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´There is nothing more to be said, however, as Odradek is extraordinarily nimble and not one to be caught.´
Franz Kafka, *The Cares of a Family Man*

This city breathes quieter at night. Like the aloe or the monstera, its pores – those potholes that pit its avenues, streets and alleys – open and close unseen. The rubble is never still, a casualty of post-traumatic stress. The empty lintels stretch and strain. The frames of absent doors yawn like toothless mouths. Veterans of some appalling local catastrophe, the sewers spread their scrawny arms, through whose open veins flows this strangely glowing effluent.

This city. I had heard it before, incessantly moaning and whispering in my ear. Just to me. Like tonight, beneath the full moon.

Its plumbing sputters and wheezes from behind the walls of collapsed buildings. The old gas pipes stand exposed like an exoskeleton. The bare scaffolding make its joints clank. These are the prostheses, the crutches, the prehensile extensions that have no explicit function anymore because they shore up nothing anymore but rubble. They're a part of it now.

It's almost impossible to tell street from pavement. The rusted pipes and damp chipboard amplify the ruined blocks, merging into one amorphous mass. They too breathe at night. Slowly they vibrate, responding to the falling temperature like waves in a basin caressed by the wind. They contract and expand. Like the willow woods huddled on the outskirts, they block my view of the outside world. But then they protect this city in its constant flux of construction and destruction.

The sky is slashed up by bare cables. The looted copper couplers hang empty at street corners. They once carried the power. The energy that connected an ancient neural network: the brains of all those other cities. Their synapses could be seen from satellites in the dark of outer space. Their cables used to draw a map of fireflies that were concentrated in the north of the world. Obviously, that map, here in the deep south of the world, is slowly fading.

Yet I'm connected to this city by a fine silver thread. My favourite place is the old natural science museum. It stands alone on the main avenue. Despite the hole in the roof, which sags under the weight of the summer rainwater, it still collects the darkness inside it. Only when the moon is full does the light pour in. Its walls, stained with great patches of damp, stand true with ageless elegance. Their remaining porous bricks console each other, the splintered floors still hold firm and the doors, as yet unlooted, stay carefully closed, solemn guardians of the dust.
After the cityscape had collapsed so fast, I liked that nothing had changed in there. I was haunted by the memory of the place: a poor provincial museum, with none of those interactive exhibits or eerie animatronic figures they have in the capitals of the developed world. Something about the history frozen within those high nineteenth-century walls especially drew me in.

The moonlight glinted off the eyes of the contorted animals. Resolute in their absurd taxidermal existence, there they were still. No one had taken them. The only things the looters were after was copper and the wood from the doors, which they could recycle as firewood. No one needed a souvenir of the days when the sight of embalmed corpses would draw whole middle-class families here, when there used to be weekends.

The extinct species of this artificial habitat were accompanied by a discrete smell that hung in the air: the all-pervading damp was suffused with the pungent scent of camphor. The age-old decadent magic of the taxidermy lingered on in the museum's nooks and crannies, even in the yellowed labels within the dust-laden cabinets. Like an armadillo poking its head out of its tunnel to breathe after the countryside has been ravaged by wildfire, I sensed there was a future, a potential, hidden in the rubble.

At that moment, amidst the chaos of life and death's voracious cohabitation, this gallery of time-frozen corpses was a haven of quiet. Like that game I used to play when I was a girl: the one with the dancing statues, where everyone had to stand still when the music stopped. Yet something was different: it was as if the song were still playing at low volume, but the statues had gone on standing there, holding their collective breath.

Now I'm walking over the viaduct. Above me, the skeletons of a few desiccated pines still stand, nonchalantly ignoring the dereliction. Like punks with crests of fire-scorched hair solemnly greeting the Queen of England, they stand in a defiant row, bound to the concrete.

An ash colour in the air rules over everything. A new kind of smog after the wave of wildfires. An upturned supermarket trolley without wheels. Piles of shredded clothes. I take in patterns of polyester forms that may once have been trousers, t-shirts, sheets, jackets, towels. Everything is charred. A kind of warmth lingers on in the odd mound of garbage. I kick a few glass bottles and jars. Lifeforms unknown to me peep out from between the gaps. Everything is coated in a layer of ash. And what the grey dust spares is a sickly fungal green. I bury my hands in my pockets. I can't bring myself to touch anything.

The rubble and refuse collect in every nook, every cranny, like an army of exhausted soldiers' bodies in trenches. They give off a sweet smell, like expired milk. Mingled with a hint of ammonia. The vast assortment of plastic bags vibrate with life in their non-biodegradable eternity. They're the red carpet awaiting me at the end of my journey. I can see things moving. Cockroaches, rats and other vermin scurrying about beneath the plastic, making it heave with underground breath.

Unable to walk, I slid and skittered over the transparent cobblestone of empty bottles of mineral water and fizz brands long since vanished by the time I was born. They formed the foundations of what had once been the city landfill. I made my way through more piles of waste thrust up by the sewers. They looked solid. It should have been like climbing a hill, but unlike earth and stone, the waste gave and shifted under my feet. The physical sensation of balance was nothing but an illusion. All my ideas about what was hard or fragile dissolved. I sank up to my knees with every step. I no longer breathed through my nose. It wasn't that it was blocked. I'd grown used to the smell of burnt plastic and all-infusing damp. My sight had become more sensitive to contrasts. Especially differences in the light.

There was no horizon. Everything here was defined by the organic outlines of plastic bags perishing under the sun. The trace of all that had been consumed and discarded. The museum, the underground river, the landfill, they stood as anonymous witness to what was left of the city when there was nothing left. They were a city within the city: the river, the underground mirror of the museum; the landfill, the reverse mirror of the city.

I kept sinking amidst the maddening squeal of plastic on body, like nails on a blackboard. After a long struggle, I gave up. I could hold out no longer. Maybe a new life awaited me. Probably not. All I could hope for was that my corpse should become food for the fungus. Only then would I be one with my environment.

I let go. I merged with it. Like these ruins, no one has dreamt me. Nor even imagined me. I want to breathe like the bags of garbage burning in the sulphuric air or the mutilated stump of a willow, scar-covered yet still in leaf. To breathe with the will of an endangered animal, rooted in this city.