

Malachit and Amphisbaena

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The danger of losing one's mind cannot be understated. In these times. Now that Lola has lost everything, at least I, if I understand correctly, haven't lost my mind. At least. Even if the thought of seeing Lola again after all these years, not in a month, nor in a year, no: today!, may cause me to lose just that. As her father who called me said – much to my surprise – in the end she knew neither here nor there. Lola – as he put it – is said to be in a biographical and mental dead end from which there is no way out or way to adapt much like the famous Jean de la Balue who was in a cage, in which he could neither stand nor stretch out.

As children we – Lola and I – often played in the tunnels, in this labyrinth, which, as I now realize with some horror, left its mark on the rest of our lives, even obsessed us, in many ways, first and foremost because it made us realize for the first time, all of the things there are that are not seen. Even more so: it showed us the madness, made it recognizable and at the same time ensnared us, perhaps without any hope. The labyrinth, or at least the search for it has – that is how I think of it now – since we had to leave it once and for all – continued to haunt our lives without interruption. And yet –in her and my life – in completely different ways. Down there, in the lair, as we simply called it, in the endless, cold passageways, in this system of kilometer long tunnels strictly laid-out in a grid by some calculating mind, that we of course were not allowed to enter, even more, that signs and parents forbid us to trespass, strictly and under threat of terrible punishment, down there, this is how I understand it now, we were enchanted, entrapped, bewitched by a neutralizing, perfidious and all consuming longing. Back then I learned, and that is not of little significance, to deal with fear, with sheer fear, because if you leave the forest floor – even if there are two of you and you've already done it a dozen times –and descend through the overgrown air shaft into the strange and musty depths, in which – especially as a child – you are afraid to find nothing but monsters, thieves, murderers and vermin, and if you climb further in complete darkness through narrow cracks and openings that gape in a wall designed to block passage – regardless of who blasted or struck them – then you start to deal with fear.

Like today, like yesterday, like I naturally deal with fear every day, whatever else, even though I move in totally different spheres.

Actually, if you really think about it, I hardly move at all anymore. The machine runs on its own. I carry out the necessary, if not simple task, open the welded pockets, take out the bills, smooth them out on the conveyor belt that transports them to the machine, open the welded pockets, take out the bills, smooth them out on the conveyor belt that transports them to the machine, open the welded pockets. There

is time to think. And it allays the fear. The fear of what? Of what there is? No. Of that which is to come.

Lola. After work, right at five, after the machine has come to a halt, the containers have been picked up, the records checked and signed, the tiresome body searches completed and farewells said, I'll come directly to you, most likely by taxi to save time. To you. I will take care of all of the necessary formalities, in order to gain access, to see you, will wait in the corridor, until my name is called, will come into the room, where you will be sitting. Or standing? Or lying? I won't let you notice anything, keep myself from shaking, take you into my arms. If I may.

The whole system of tunnels, the whole empty mountain, seemingly hollowed out by termites, could have caved in at any moment, and buried everything hidden there including Lola and me. Sometimes I catch myself thinking, it may have been better that way. And once, in fact, when we tried to dig through a buried passage, equipped with shovels and picks, since we expected to find nothing more behind it than the most mysterious and valuable things, a piece of the tunnel started to cave in, accompanied by a sinister echoing and quaking, just a few meters in front of us, so that we, running and screaming, just escaped the falling clods of earth. Back in the open, we fell into each other's arms, laughing and crying. More precisely, Lola laughed with joy, to have outsmarted danger. I cried not out of terror or fear, but more out of happiness to have Lola so close for a fleeting moment.

Lola. You were taller than me, freckled, and beautiful (yes, you essentially became my idea of what "beauty" is), with restless, piercing eyes, which I sometimes felt shined in the darkness underground as if you were a cat. I never confessed – as a child – my love for you.

I don't know why no one ever told us about it. Most likely out of pure cowardice, and out of the old, nonetheless fatal assumption that a silenced past will vanish into thin air and eventually disappear. In any case we found out much later, as young adults, what was so special about the tunnels, and the dark places in which we playfully set foot, even so we already must have sensed something. From the spring of 1944 to April 1945, in just eleven months, a system of tunnels of over 12 kilometers and 57 000 square meters was built under the code word "Malachit" supervised by the SS under the most horrifying conditions by thousands of nameless prisoners from the labor camp Langenstein-Zwieberge, a subcamp of Buchenwald. 750 000 cubic meters of rock were chiseled out of the mountain through the most rudimentary means and transported out by pure manpower. It was supposed to become an underground arms factory protected from allied aerial attacks, placed underground, in order to place others under ground to build armaments and aircraft parts. The NS commando issued two separate mandates: 1. Carving out a network of tunnels in the Harz Mountains, a mandate of production. 2. The imprisonment and subsequent elimination of "labor material" from the main concentration camp Buchenwald: a mandate of annihilation. The reassuring formula was: Each meter of tunnel = one dead person!

It's been years since I heard from you. And then this mysterious letter: "My dear Finn. Suppose there were something that has no meaning. Suppose there were something that in fact makes no sense, tells nothing, that does not hold a story, that is empty in its innermost, bottomless ground, so that it can mean anything. Suppose this nothing might actually begin to mean everything. It would spread and penetrate all of the spheres, regions, stories of this world. Me, you, my mind. And then what? Yours, Lola"

What we found in the tunnels went beyond our imaginations. Not because it had anything to do with a treasure, since anyone could have imagined finding a treasure underground. Rather because it had nothing to do with a treasure. Since the time of treasures belonged once and forever to the past. So we didn't find any of the stolen NS treasures that people expected to find buried in the tunnels after 1945. We didn't find any traces of the 5500 tons of weapons and munitions either, that the East German National Volks Army, in preparation for a third world war, or even of an atomic war, stored in the 70s and 80s, in partially hermetically sealed and radiation-proofed tunnels, called Storage Complex 12. Nothing like that.

"Do you still do it?" Lola asked the last time I saw her, years ago, as we walked in the Theken Mountains. She asked without looking at me, turned away, anxious to be distant in her whole demeanor through and through, dismissive, the way she walked, sooner staring at the trees or into a vague distance rather than look into my eyes.

"What?" "What am I still doing?"

"Destroying money," she answered.

"Why does it sound so accusatory when you say it?"

Lola looked up into the cloudy sky, focused, seemed to be following something with her gaze up into the treetops.

"What else do you do," she asked.

"Like?"

"Do you have a wife?" Lola looked into my eyes, suddenly. A piercing, candid and vulnerable look.

"No," I said too hastily, too loud, too stunned. "I read magazines, watch t.v, spend time thinking. That's all."

Lola turned away, was silent.

In a way Lola and I chose very related professions. Why am I realizing that just now? I became an assembly line worker. She went to the stock market. I knew early on what I wanted to do, after all that had happen, and prevailed against any resistance. Lola, who had already started climbing the career ladder before me, as she said, called my plan an archaic, asinine reaction. She felt slighted, misunderstood it as a pedagogically condescending commentary on her life. As a matter of fact, it feels like a necessity, that I hardly understand myself, but that gives me a modicum of satisfaction like nothing else. The machine calms me down. It is among the most

advanced of its kind. Its ability to annihilate is rational, economical, safe and irreversible. It chops, rips, shreds. It blows, sucks, hauls, packages. And that fully automated. If it runs at full blast, it can destroy up to one and a half tons per hour. 150 million Euros.

I find Lola's father outside of the psychiatric clinic, smoking. I almost don't recognize him. A scrawny, graying slight man, a shadow of his past self, pale and as if about to vanish. He draws on his cigarette as though without smoke he might suffocate. I greet him and he startles, lets the cigarette fall, puts it nervously out with his shoe. Without saying a word, he looks at me, shrugs his shoulders, as though to summarize laconically the past years.

"How is she doing," I ask, and he responds with the same gesture. I tell him – since I have nothing else to say – about the tunnels, about long by-gone days, and that I believe that Malachit is at the core of what has guided Lola's and my life until today. He then looks up and begins to speak.

He says he reads a lot since retiring, this is how he begins, he says he reads a lot, especially about history, he doesn't really understand why or how come, he just doesn't have anything better to do. He says he reads a lot, about Malachit too, especially about this entire, terrible time and that he is convinced that the history of the tunnels and of the Third Reich, that this history is not only one of political delusions of grandeur, of a hunger for power, of the self-destruction of a continent, rather a history of money, of plotting, yes, a formula.

"What would that be?," I asked, anxiously, since I hardly can pay attention, and finally, after all these years, want to see Lola. Just see Lola. Has she maybe cut her hair? But he goes on without even hearing me. The National Socialist state, Lola's father said while he lit another cigarette, had mathematical reasons to expand, conquer, plunder and destroy. It was a calculating "predatory machine," an all consuming, monetary Moloch, that followed a state of collective psychological shock, the humiliation of hyperinflation, when what used to be one Mark, suddenly became ten thousand marks, a hundred thousand, a million, a billion, a trillion, in which not only the outside was uncertain, nothing safe anymore, nothing in the same place anymore, but also everything inside became null and void because people feel as bad as their money. A predatory machine that followed Black Fridays and Tuesdays, unemployment and mass desperation, that wasn't just out to avenge, to retaliate against the collective humiliation of money, but was out to hide and deny government bankruptcy that had been looming from the beginning. Yes, Hitler's black magic, Lola's father continued breathlessly, that caused mass unemployment to disappear within two years, and hastened a massive armament, was financed through an exorbitant debt that exceeded the national revenue ten fold, through an enormous well-concealed hole in the state's reserves by an absurd discount credit. This magic was nothing but a deception that caught fire and quickly died.

What he actually is trying to tell me, Lola's father says, while lighting another cigarette, is that when the credits became due in 1939, and the insolvency of the

Reich was directly imminent, that they not only confiscated all Jewish property, no, but they turned it into government bonds, so that they just had to make sure – imagine this perfidious cruelty! – that in the distant future when the credit matures there would be no one to claim it, no more Jews, no more heirs, so that not only were the Jews annihilated for their money, but new financial resources had to be secured through expansion and war, which meant: new countries, newly stolen assets, newly exploited people, but that despite the most acrimonious plundering of Jews, of Poles, of occupied French, the Third Reich, which was in debt beyond imagination, would have faced bankruptcy, and that the longer this system aspired to live on, the more brutal, the more appalling and the more inhumane it had to become, Lola's father says, who then looks at me through empty eyes, shakes my hand ashamed, turns and walks away taking clumsy, small steps.

So what we found in the tunnels was not a treasure. It was on a day in spring, that we first dared to explore another tunnel entrance that we had opened up, an entry way that was more daring because there was no ladder or any other way for us to climb down safely into the shaft that led into the depths, just a dark, stark hole, that lead into the unknown, which is why we brought along a rope and lowered ourselves down with pounding hearts. We wandered around for a long time, like cave explorers, with our headlamps, in the passageways that were up to eight meters high, in which our steps echoed, in constant fear of getting lost and dying of thirst or fatigue, down here, alone in complete darkness after walking for days, that's why Lola – for the first and only time – grabbed my hand, squeezed it hard and did not let it go, so that I felt like this moldy tunnel contained the whole brilliant universe. So that I hardly was surprised at first when we made our find behind a wall, plastered with warning signs, that marked the abrupt end of a tunnel that had a gapping hole a few meters high, which seemed to have been broken open by force. We squeezed through it, without letting go of each other even for a moment. It was perhaps already the first of both of these moments that etched itself into our memories, profoundly marked us, since it set in motion a logic of desire, that would give us no more peace. We wiggled through the opening and found ourselves again in a world of bills, notes, sheer masses of money, half buried, half exposed, mixed with sand, mountains, landscapes, unreal, monstrous and infinite, everywhere, all around, wherever the light of our headlamps shone, provocative and wasteful, so that without even grasping, what we had there beneath us, we threw it around, dug, crawled, picked through it, screamed, into this mass, breathless, drunk like Solomon's sailors in the golden Ophir, like Parzival in the Grail Mountain Munsalvaesche, like treasure seekers in the new world, our imaginations drowning in possibilities that seemed to be concealed, multiplied, stacked, in what we saw, possibilities, that our minds could not measure, since it was so much.

What we found in the tunnels exceeded our imaginations. Not because it involved a treasure, much more because it didn't involve a treasure. Because it involved an obstinate non-treasure instead, a sheer pile that stubbornly refused to disappear. What we had to grasp a few hours later in a whispered, agitated conversation with my older brother – and that was the second, exponentially more shocking and more

far reaching moment—was that we had found paper, worthless from one day to the next, once a symbol of power and a phantasmatic object of everyone’s desire, now plain trash, like by word of God, degraded, erased, buried, in the subterranean graveyard of an entire currency. In 1989, over 3000 tons of GDR Marks that had been printed once in what used to be Leningrad, in the Peter and Paul fortress on the banks of the Newa, and thus the entire currency of the former GDR from all of the states and communal banks, was packed into boxes and taken to Halberstadt, stored in the tunnels, mixed with sand and left there to disintegrate in the sands of time, doubly walled in and sealed. The money was supposed to decay, mold and decompose since ovens that could have burned such masses of paper did not exist. Yet the fallen currency, hence plain, powerless material did not want to disappear. It resisted, stubborn, was persistent, it began to enfold its own material will against all calculations. When Lola and I found it over half a decade after being stored away, even though it smelled a bit mildewed, it was like hot off the press, as though patiently awaiting its magical resurrection.

After waiting a while my name is actually called. I get up, and a nurse accompanies me to Lola’s room. I enter, the nurse nods at me, closes the door behind me. Lola is alone. She is standing next to the window gazing off into an vague distance in a long white hospital gown.

“Lola?”

Her appearance is frightening. She is pale, aged, bloated by the medications, with deep and dark circles around her eyes, so that her face seems to be both sunken in and pulled inside out.

“Lola?”

And she, driven to pace along the circles and paths on the floor only visible to her, begins to talk.

“Finn, you come to me after all these years, exposed, naked, totally you, just like that, I appreciate it, yes they say I am sick, you think, I am sick, ach was (oh come on), Finn, like all of us, just more advanced in my case, much more, could be, possibly, and not because of the wildly mixed cocktail of substances that I am given to swallow or to take intravenously, rather because of you, just because of you that I am having a healthy moment of lucidity, velvety warm, come to me, Finn, I know, don’t say anything, Finn, I have treated you more than terribly, contemptibly, inferior, behaved reprehensibly toward you, pushed you away, scolded and snubbed you, spit on the floor, told you to your face that you are a bore, Finn, told you to your face, Finn, that I have rich men now, sweetheart, go and shred money and leave me alone, ok? Told you to your face, not even, if I suddenly were to sniff all the Coke at once that I snorted through my nose and down deep into my innermost thoughts all of last year in London, would I be with you again Finn, dear Finn, you come to me after all these years, I appreciate that, you know, I have dealt with things, that don’t

exist, that are nothing, dealt wrongly, drank thousands of pounds of Champagne and ordered ten strippers to my room at night, Finn, you know, I have lost everything, much differently than everyone, because I, like everyone, wanted everything, and you know, people prefer wanting nothingness rather than wanting nothing. Finn, I want, I want, I always have wanted, I always wanted to want for the sake of wanting, to want, everything and nothing less, not a penny less, what is wrong with that, tell me, go ahead, tell me, and what would have been more beautiful, more straight forward, more brilliant, purer than simple money, that can change into anything, that anything can change into, godly, magical power, Finn, since it embodies the will and desires and possibilities, mine and others, because money contains everything, do you understand, everything, every dream of this damn humanity, because there is nothing airier, more liberating than money, because it is nothing but the yet to be lived future, formative, creative, inventive power, since it could be an evening in the suburbs, or a whole suburb, the music of Brahms, or futuristic music, an atlas, or an new world, a limousine, cash machine, mandarin, trampoline since it could be a cup of coffee, a touch, or the words of Epictetus that teach us to despise money. Finn, I want, I want. Unpredictable time. Come to me, Finn, I know, don't say anything, Finn, you don't love me anymore, is that it, that's it, right, how could you, how could I blame you, I have watched myself fall with the rates of exchange, despise myself, am disgusted with myself, terrified of myself, gross myself out, come here Finn, please, no, you better stay away, get lost, do you hear me, beat it, piss off, how often do I have to tell you anyway? Get out of here, you hear? And don't start talking about the tunnels again, these tunnels, these swampy, dark holes, Finn, yet who knows, maybe you're right, maybe I have perpetuated them, not inwardly, no, these caverns and passageways and tunnels, this shimmering, moldy network of shiny bills, of shiny illusions brought up through the earth, through the surface, into the air, so that it can breath, finally, erected skywards, not buried, rather blown, whistled, so that they can flutter, the shiny bills, chirp like birds, butterfly bills, oh come on, rather a cathedral, of illusions, of shiny light, out of fleeting pathways born unto themselves, this system of tunnels, up into the clouds, and beyond, an infinite, airy, magical building, on which everyone can get drunk with happiness, in which everyone can get rich off of everyone, so that everyone gets rich, in which everyone lives at the expense of everyone, so that no one bears the expense, a tunnel kingdom of lights, an infinite, insatiable flash in the pan, that produces shiny bills, shiny money, more money and the next tunnel and the next and the next, and if someone asks where the money is from? Then I will shout: out of the future tunnels of oneself, from which money will constantly flutter and flow! Out of the future, up there, in the sun! And the more tunnels there are now, the larger they will be in the future and the larger they will be in the future, the richer and more luxuriant, and more radiant the tunnels are in the here and now. Finn, yes, they say I am sick, you think I am sick, come on, Finn, like all of us, just more advanced, in my case, far more, could be, maybe, because for me, that's how it began, everything was much the same, one man was the same as the other, junk food was like caviar, people like dogs, hotel rooms like flophouses like the streets, brokers like cars like sushi like wine like Coke, the derivatives like short sales, insolvencies like rates of return, the banks like the states, so that I soon started to speak to my damned, dead, broken thing of a cell

phone like to the damn, living, broken thing of a person, with a table like with my lunch like with my chauffeur like with a street lamp in the city of London, since everything became indifferent, all the same, all differences vanished, since I soon couldn't tell the difference between me and my pantyhose, my one night stand, the doctor, that I looked up, the pile of shit, that I stepped in, and soon I mistook one word for another, rose counted the same as zeppelin, derivative as mausoleum, soon annihilation meant the same as hearth and heart as horizon and horizon as amphisbaena."