Hypernauts

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Meliha Erem was born in Toronto in 1981. She graduated from the Faculty of Architecture at Politecnico University in Milan, where she lived for nine years. Erem wrote her doctoral thesis on technology in Neolithic Age settlements and on the animist utopias of the near future. She served as a volunteer in the archaeological excavations on the Eolie Islands. She has worked as a simultaneous interpreter in Istanbul, Amsterdam, and Mexico City. After a two-year world tour alone on her boat "Sis" [Fog] in 2013, she settled in Istanbul. A member of the fiction-science-poetry platform *Elektroizolasyonista*, Erem wrote her *Hypernauts* between 2017 and 2020; the selection here is the author's first published work in English.

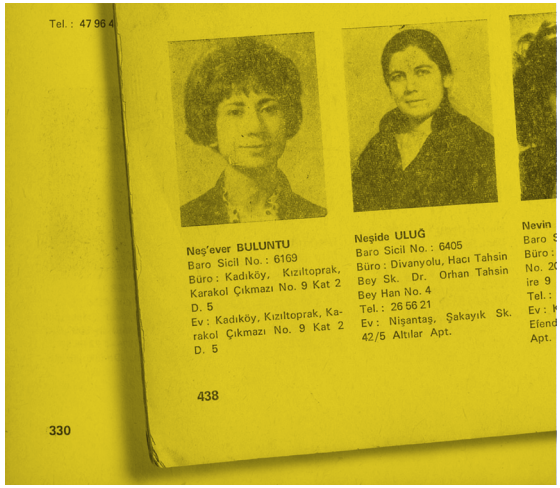
Found Object

I cast myself to the streets in the night of time as I try to find and bring back a lost friend. The playful ghosts I encounter on these drifts during which I imagine I move alone, the incoherent narratives of the darkness, the constantly intersecting spaces, the spectres of the dead calmly wandering about, the howl of orphan objects teaches me that no walk is ever done simply in the present, that this route has no clear beginning or end, emerging not from a straight line but from tangled convolutions, in which the past and the future produce layers that fold atop one another.

Although the story is yet to be known, it wants me to give voice to it, to explain what happened. Writing became an act of grinding up the residue that had accumulated along the many paths that run through me. I nibble on every thrown-away thing like an enormous mouse hiding in the grasses that shoot through the concrete canal on the side of a highway. I swim in filthy waters and scamper in through a hole I find. That night, I wander through the flea market, having snuck slowly and slyly through a crack in the edge of a sidewalk, and hide under the old rugs.

I climbed into a barrel nobody paid attention to, between the counters made of wet wood planks, piled high with every imaginable odd and end, two gas lamps in the front, a few model boats behind, silver candlesticks lined up side by side, beaten-up musical instruments, pneumatic drills leaning against the wall, rusted hammers, a bag of sandpaper, screwdrivers of all sizes, keys, rugs thrown on the floor, carpets, helmets, jackets, shoes, trousers in every size on hangers, dozens of broken radios and televisions, dishes, glasses, trays, telephones, toy cars, old magazines and books by the pile, hundreds of cassettes, boxes, pots and pans, vinyl records,

trinkets of every kind of animal, watches, computers, cables, spare car parts, shelves, cabinets, while trying not to inhale the searing smoke of the cardboard and plastic burnt to keep the cold at bay. Out of hunger I began to nibble on the first thing I stumbled upon, an enormous, soft-bound directory of lawyers, its old pages yellowing, belonging to who knows what year, containing the lawyers' headshots in alphabetical order, along with their registration numbers, firms, and home addresses. I continued eating it until a curious hand came and, feeling around in the barrel, suddenly snatched the book it found from between my teeth.



Crackle

Gone are the days of toothpaste and toothbrushes. Seven thousand years ago, in Ancient Egypt, they would use a mixture made from ox hoof ashes, eggshells burnt and then ground, myrrh, and pumice stone. How does he know that? He must have read it. When was the last time he read? He can't remember.

He took pieces of raw meat from the yellow plastic bag in his hand and gave them to the dogs, giving them commands in angry words that foam in his mouth. He continued until each dog had its share, a piece of neck, spine, or bloody bone of its own. Though the animals fought at first, they eventually calm after each gets what it receives. At the edge of the platforms the sea is golden and calm. Small eddies appear on the surface, a mixture of metallic chemical compounds and the sludge gurgling up from the depths. I imagine these pieces of meat to belong to a human body. But even if that were so, who would notice anyway? Around here there are neither camera drones nor mobile security at this hour. Once the dogs sate their desires with their food, they assemble into a pack, running around and barking. A hefty black one, their clear leader, takes a shit as the others watch. In the leaden, mentholated night air, dark blue steam billows from the animals' nostrils.

He stands there awhile, listening to the electricity crackle across the poles.

A homeless person watches them, too, perched in one of the burnt-out holes covered in concrete, stone, and barbed wire where the joints of the back bridge meet the crumbling city walls below. Preparing to get through the night, he hides his emaciated body beside the trash he gathered, under the tarp rotted by filth and the warmth of the fire that shines off

the tin cans. He takes some of the offal the dogs leave behind to cook. A silent agreement. Everyone is satisfied.

The days of his childhood when he brushed his teeth before bed at night are behind him. He almost hears his mother's voice admonishing him, but he knows it's not possible for him to be remembering her. He watches two dogs tugging on the empty, bloody plastic bag.

Whistle

A ship's whistle was heard from afar. A full, sated sound from around the port. It pushed its way through the hills, the buildings, the streets, it echoed in the sky's emptiness. It made time tremble. That sound took flight like a doomsday herald blown from an enormous, withered horn through a command executed by touching a screen in the captain's quarters of that state-of-the-art cruise ship; it spilled fervently from those new alloyed pipes, those wonders of technology, and struck against my eardrums. Then it melted into the air and disappeared.

At first there was a feeling of closing in on disaster, almost an expectation that it would strike any day. Now, though, I feel as if I'm in the very heart of that disaster. In this instant, I tell myself, I am living exactly what I've been awaiting. Then I realise: No, I'm not in it yet, I've only just arrived at its shore, touched my feet to the waters striking the coast, and stepped slightly away. The waves are not rough but gentle. I am still many more waves away from the enormous wave that will come, that will rise out of the silence in a roar. I always accustom myself to the most recent wave as I await the arrival of the one that's supposed to be worse. Compared to the long-awaited tsunami, this thick layer of fog that I claim to be inside, that I felt descend upon me, is nothing at all. There is, of course, what comes next; the after-wave landscape, when what the wave swept away is replaced by a large mass of mud, debris, ooze, and trash. There, I suppose, I will probably stop and look around myself. Only then will I be able to say, I am now right here. I have no idea if this is the moment I'm waiting for, or if this moment is preparing to exist because I keep on waiting for it.

Bread and Worms

"The imaginary architecture of the art of memory has preserved the memory of a real, but long vanished, building."[1]
—Frances A. Yates

I remember that, in those times, there was a fuel barge somewhere in the middle of the sea. A floating petrol station. A facility with corners painted in yellow and black stripes that appeared in the distance, out of nowhere, among the waves. The logo on its long, narrow, neon sign was a flickering orange flame atop a sharp blue wave. It was an island mass of metal where the passenger catamarans, the fish-processing vessels and the sand-bearing freighters lined up like cars in traffic and waited for refueling on a sea road that passed between large buoys, where the hovercrafts and the seaplanes rocked among the oil eddies on the opposite side as they approached the rusty iron platforms held in place by enormous, algae-covered chains, tightening and slackening in the water.

Once I set sail by skiff and the land vanished, along with the white, foaming wake left behind me by the motor's propeller, I wanted that station to emerge before me as the waves crashed forcefully over the bows. Perhaps I'm not going in the right direction, I would think, looking around and scanning the surface of the sea, my eyes in a squint.

What remains in my memory is how that building rose out of the desolate dark green of the waters. A block, covered in hot steam, slightly blurred by the heat, its simple geometric form coming into view the closer you got. A structure with broken windows, its light-up sign dim, its petrol pumps broken; capsized, orphaned boats leaned against its concrete surface, split by the salt and sheathed by the rampant plants.

1 Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. XIII.

A few long-beaked birds, made anxious by my arrival, take flight in worry, the sound of water echoing into space as it strikes the slowly creaking iron. I disembark from the skiff and walk along a fixed platform. I can feel that it is connected to the sea by stakes and pipes that rise from the seafloor. It could of course sink one day, I think, in a violent storm, because of some accident, or else by corroding and splitting apart over time. Nobody will know then that there once was a petrol station here; nobody will remember that this slippery ruin had wound up on the bottom of the sea. It will only exist as it is in my memory.

I sit on one corner and stick my hand into the water. With my finger, I stir silvery, purple ripples in the diesel runoff. The schools of fish lurking just below the surface dart away in mechanical movements. I climb back onto the skiff, the sun blowing its seething air over me like warm breath. I turn on the engine and make my way toward the marsh in front of the airstrip where the training planes and gliders take off, toward the forbidden beach. A squad of soldiers in white undershirts, khaki pants, and black boots is running in a line. I take the bait out of the cooler and prepare the fishing poles as I watch them from afar, in their makeshift barracks and bunkers that would be totally demolished in the earthquake that was to strike a few years later. I bait the hooks, covered in plastic tinsel feathers, with morsels of the inner organs of an electric ray I found, a couple of mussels I brought with me, and bread and worms.

When I arrive at the compound and return home, the children peer into the fish-filled buckets I carry as I tell them about the station. They want to learn how to get there. "I don't know," I tell them, "After going due north from the coast at half speed for an hour, when the shore disappears from sight, it just appears there out in the open sea." I draw the station logo and show it to them. They've never seen a place like that, never heard of anyone ever getting petrol there. They don't really believe me.

Lists

As she watched the yellow-grey fish whose skin shone from soaking in the mercury that leaked from the thermal power plant leaping among the dried pines and slime-filled muddy waters, she floated along in the raft she'd made out of barrels and logs, passing by a sunken coastguard torpedo boat. When she arrived at the silted bay, trudging her boots past the thorny, aggressive sight of the overgrowth enveloping the cracked concrete columns of the government summer palace, she thought about poaching gasoline from the tractors that had been left along the burnt asphalt by the villagers, before gently lifting her dust mask, ever so briefly, to watch the setting of the ember-coloured sun, overcome with a mixture of amazement and fear. Then, in order to protect herself from attack by the mutant bees with long stingers, she dug a hole in the ground and, setting an area covered in tar on fire, covered herself with a tarp beneath the smoke. She tried to sleep. She imagined what people who had travelled through these waters on sailboats so long ago might have seen. In the beam of her flashlight she looked at a small, old photograph she had found: A model boat. Her nose burned from the smell of the rotting overgrowth and the chemicals she carried with her; her breathing slowed and, there in the desolation of night, she fell into a dark sleep.

When she awoke near daybreak, she noticed that there was a pungent smell coming from a dead horse being eaten away by some species between grasshopper and ant, and she took a couple of its bones to use as weights. She carefully tore some of the thorny fruits hanging off the cactus mounds, tossing them into her jerry can, and tied her rubber gloves to her waist. After cleaning out the stubborn bugs that had made geometric homes of mud in the roll of paper she'd saved, she set out, using the ink she squeezed out of the body of a fat cuttlefish, to write all the words she could think of.

Reality Show

Horse Market: Car Bonnet Mechanics: Women's Market: Migrants' Market: Bonesetters: Electronics Arcade: Junkers' Bazaar: Container Square: Grocery Hangers: Exo-City Cargo Terminal: Coding Offices: Urban Ruins Tourism: Medical Prosthetic Equipment Distribution: Sub-Law Firms: Offal shops: He walks.

Behind them a shanty house, made from metal sheets stacked atop one another, a half-collapsed, mildewed concrete wall, and wooden planks and tin fastened to the corner. Satellite antennae, lopsided water pipes, electric cables, an air conditioner held up by wires, and a burnt stove stack.

"There are houses where the water doesn't go," he shakes his head silently, "they still don't have water, forget about electricity."

Meat Products Cold Air Depot: Industrial Kitchen Riggings: Crane and Sewage Truck Rental: Capsule Cargo Airlines: Hunting Sports Weapon Ammunition Sales: Prefabricated Fittings: He walks.

Sewage Automation: Food Industry Compound: Boric Acid Depots: Transformer Traffic S.A.: Boron Meat: Carboncity Main Entrance B-Gate: Radiatorists: Anti-Bacterial Car Wash: Disaster Coordination Centre Central Office: Implantology Clinic: He stops there.

"If I jump from here it'll feel like concrete," he thinks to himself.

He looks down at the oil-coloured sea through the bridge's railing, the heavy metal mass slowly creaks as it rocks. Because of the fog he can't see past the tip of his nose. The fuchsia layers of the air pollution, the clouds behind the bug-like television tower reddening in the setting sun, and the moon shining like a fluorescent bulb; all of them in the frame at the same time.

Tar

We had split up.

Her raft rocked along the waves, disappearing soon after. I stood there like that for a while, observing the barges carrying the shockbeton moulds, the old fishing vessels loaded with enormous poured bricks, the skiffs coming and going with sacks of sand, all passing amongst the tourists' cruiseliners. I contemplated the silence of the night behind me, the beating of the waters against the floating dock, the enormous seaweeds that undulated like hair produced by a dead body. I remained there watching the horizon, until I bristled at the sound of plastic bottles collected from a pile of trash being crushed and tossed into the sack of a trash collector on a motorcycle.

This is right where we split up, I thought to myself. We parted ways without knowing when and where we would ever meet again. As I sent her off on a raft made of barrels, all she had was a bag that held no more than a few books, a pair of boots hanging over her shoulder, and a backpack filled with canned goods and an old camera. I remember thinking, this is all she has.

Ironic how the cure, like the disease, resembled the tar oozing off the melted highways. Those who found comfort in rubbing that thick black substance on the swollen pustules that covered their hands and arms often had to wait in unending queues in order to procure more. As the doctor said, there wasn't any medicine left in the warehouses. You won't remember the epidemic from fifteen years ago, she said, but thankfully we haven't yet reached those levels.

After a week of sleepless anticipation, I too had been able to get an appointment. The clinic was in a shipping container mounted on a traveling lorry. It reminded me of the traveling

libraries and market carts of my childhood. Apparently, I had always preserved this short-lived service as a good memory. I think the prospect of being able to travel in a lorry with its own library held an important place in the daydreams of my childhood. So it was no coincidence that the temporary barracks I built here and there were erected with this fanciful image in mind. Standing before shelves lined with tanks of liquid nitrogen and cryogenic flagons that resembled milk cans in all shapes and sizes, the doctor welcomed me in. When she realised that my eyes had settled on the thick book on her desk as I explained my discomfort, she quickly glanced through its alphabetical index and, opening it to that page, showed me photographs of the most extreme forms the sickness could take, its dangerous stages, its case studies. Purplish swellings hanging like bunches of grapes from the armpits, craters opening on the skin like tiny active volcanoes, sexual organs covered in warts, fingernails browned and withered by ossification, tissues of the hands and feet that transformed into monstrous sponges covered in mucous, highly-detailed microscopic images resembling small islands and mounds of sand on the planet's surface. She must have sensed that I grew more nervous with every turn of the page because she asked: "Why are you so interested in this? The sick can't bear to look at these, you know…" "Yes," I said, "I can imagine." In that moment, all of these forms, tissues, lesions, bacterial phenomena, parasitic eggs, epidermal cysts, dermatological deformations, all of them give me inspiration as plastic; I look at them as ideas for sculpture, though of course I couldn't confess that, so I closed the subject by saying I found the images quite intriguing, that my grandfather was a doctor and that's why I'm interested in these kinds of books. She returned the book, faded, its pages curled from leafing through it, to its rightful place: The Atlas of Clinical Dermatology in Colour.

She took a rather large, empty petrol can, gesturing for me to sit, and peered through her small, LED-lit scanner lens at the hair follicles on my leg to take a sample of my skin. The image of the bacteria appearing on the colourless screen struck me most as akin to tractor wheels slowly circling in space. After massaging in the lotion she gave me, she admonished me not to drink carbonated drinks, not to use sleeping pills or other such medicines, and not to expose myself to direct sunlight. After rubbing in the tar – she didn't call it tar, of course – I was supposed to go the whole night without showering. "We'll see in a week whether the larvae died or not, the cause of the swellings in your hands will only become clear then; I hope they're not caused by a metal allergy or hyperstress, because those things aren't so easy to treat," she said. "The number of people who have become chronically ill because of the nickel, cobalt, and chrome salts in the hydrophore pipes and the chemical waste that's spilled into the drinking water has increased so much of late," she said, "medicines aren't having any effect anymore; the whole city's sewage and drainage infrastructure needs to be replaced, but as you might imagine nobody is taking on that responsibility."

I thought about the voice message I received the other day. They said they could install a free device for me to filter my drinking water, that it was only intended as a trial but that if I liked it then I could sign a customer agreement after using it for some time and be able to cheaply procure the main filter. The fact that a sanitation company working without permission of the Ministry of Health had my number didn't bode well at all. Especially after hearing the news about the threats received by those who couldn't pay the fees for their drinking water. A piece of news at least as tragic as the cases of those people whose bodies were covered with hair after using antacid that had been mistakenly concocted with baldness prevention enzymes. I climbed out of the container, wanting to for-

get all of that immediately; I crossed the trestle bridge near the power plant, where the long lists of those waiting for stem cell transplants were hanging, and, filtering through the crowd, I got on the first lorry to stop and made my way back home to the hills.

Almost all the men in the truck's dumper were bearded and on crutches. They must be mercenaries, I thought to myself, brought en masse to the city's hospitals and sent back to the front after a quick prosthetic fitting. Perhaps that's why this rash epidemic won't go away. The virus is constantly returning from rural areas to apartment buildings in order to feed. More than half the city is gooed up, everybody's busy scratching at their skin, which withers like dried rubber. Hawkers of homeopathic ointments, gels, and creams appeared suddenly on every corner. None of them do any good. Nobody had yet found where the bugs that had mutated after developing immunity to the municipality's pesticides were hiding and laying their eggs. Everyone was talking about a new species that had emerged and thrived in the waste grinders, that nourished itself with chemicals.

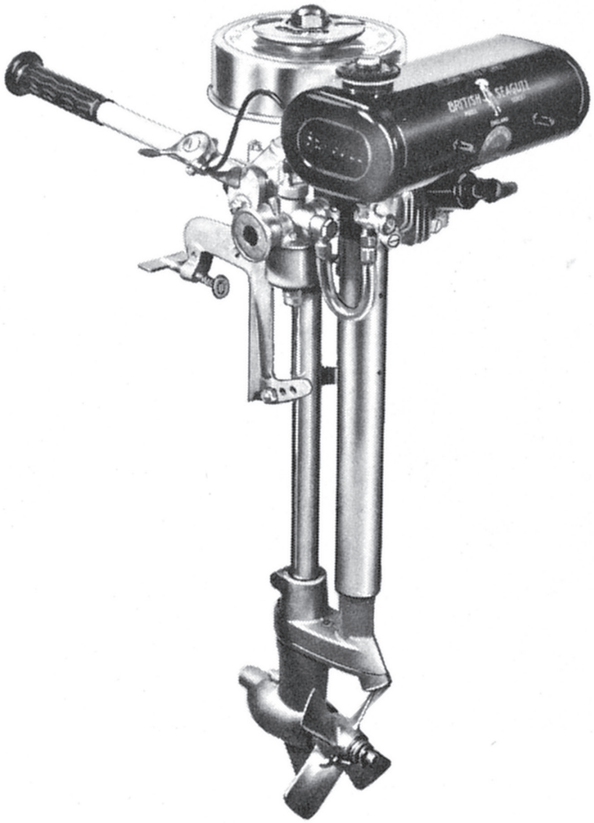
As we ascended on the viaducts farther above sea level, the swollen waves became clearly visible below, poured like lead, drawing their arches as they beat against the island's bluffs. At the end of the road winding past the swaying cranes up to the top of the hill stand the ruins of the old stadium, now used as a prison. New hotels are being built around it.

The flocks of storks gather in spirals along the road. The indistinct silhouettes in the sea's surface transform into helixes in flight, appearing again above the grey clouds. Once, I saw the horses roaming freely about, as well as the hungry, wild dogs chasing after them. The pipeline that follows the road belongs to the machines of the Centre for the Investigation of Gravitational Waves. Some people, hoping to find dinner, dangled octopus hooks off the rotted concrete pier, surrounded by rows of flashing buoys on either side. The dried cyanide beds, the partially demolished public housing complexes and the rusted pipes of the watering stations for the old greenhouses glittered in the reddened garb of the setting sun.

Wandering Villages poured its bilge out in the islands' open waters, and in no small amount either. Aside from the discussions of natural and organic eggs, the number of people who developed oedema from the meat they ate was quite high. Frankly, if you ask me, it's strange to describe food produced in a laboratory as natural, and the word organic called to mind organs soaked in gelatine and frozen in tubes of liquid oxygen; a liver that looks like broccoli, for instance. With the circulation of the non-scientific results of how these harmful substances, derived from the microplastics that had supposedly seeped into the drinking water, had been melted by a number of new minerals in the soil, the number of people who tried to get archaeologist doctors to treat their stomach pains drastically increased.

The floating nuclear power plant called The Academy was so large it couldn't be missed despite being so far off the coast, and though it had been built on the pretext that it would provide energy to destitute areas, for now it's only being used to meet the expenditures of the island-hotels. Those who say that the trash is taken by horse-drawn cart across floating platforms to the other side of the canal and buried are silenced in the press, unable to speak up. There were many, however, who described how the chemical compounds in the water caused fires that took weeks to burn out, how the filament factories were reduced to ashes, how the smoke darkened even the most unimaginably far-off metropoles in an instant and the cities had to turn on their lights in the middle of the day, or how the sky was enveloped by yellow-grey clouds.

The people gave so many different names to the epidemic, but the one that stuck in their minds was Tar. The greenhouse workers were the first to use this name, finding scorpions that had bitten the dust by the dozens. A photograph went viral on the internet, in which the workers stood in the clouds of pesticide that wouldn't dissipate because of the bad weather, gathering living scorpions from the scorched earth and storing them in clear plastic buckets tied to logs. It was said that the poison they collected would replace the antidote. When some people couldn't receive treatment, they mixed ultra gel glue activator with baking soda and rubbed it all over themselves, trying to dry out their purulent bodies. Eventually, the exits of highways were outfitted with steel steam booths, which everyone had to visit at regular intervals for mandatory disinfection. Though it was explained that these devices were carbon dioxide incubators that eradicated microbial life with their high temperature sterilization systems, it would be much more accurate to call them Human Dry Cleaners.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