

# anarchia and other anachronisms

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The truth is one disappointing banana, any way you peel it.

We're supposed to be, above all, socialists, as in, socially ept. As in: umbrella-sharing. As in: you wash the dishes, I'll dry. As in: you watch my daughter, I'll fix your stoop. As in: honey, you look *tired*. Cup of tea? Versed in the art of the social.

We were supposed to be 'prepared,' as in: tempered in struggle. And we were meant to thrive.

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I had to be rubbed free of mud before I could eat. A patched comrade handed me a scrub brush with haywire bristles and they nodded at my boots and I went to work on the bioluminescent bacteria that still clung to them, and the bacteria sloughed off in the squirrel grass and eddied in the gravel in the rainbow way of gasoline. Beyond the eddies there was the camp which maintained a skeptical adherence from the cliff's edge.

This was not a cliff to take lightly. It was a long way down. And what was down there, most people up here had run from. Tethered to the edge, the airships floated, docked and bumping against the cliff gently like curious dolphins. Out here on the mesa, with little forest cover, the wind scratched my face with fits of gravel. I smelled burning rubber, smoke and food.

I straightened up and the same patched comrade was still there, soft pale jaw that belied age, generous with cigarettes, wearing the lumpy clothing that folks around here produce from a combination of recycled plastics and papers. They wore goggles over their eyes although we still stood on solid ground.

They leaned in, I'm Met, I'm the Welcoming Committee, and we began a trade in news. I revealed my name and that I had been abroad in the Forests of Disillusionment. I learned that Met knew nothing particularly juicy of the class war down below. I don't needlessly traumatize myself, Met said firmly, It will come to you regardless of where you hide, I countered, and Met looked a little put out at that.

All I know of the Many's position I learned from looking, I added. I was intensely curious about how they were faring in the war: Temis had made me believe that some of them, the Teachers, had perfected the use of some ancient weapon.

But I hardly look anymore, Met said. This I understood. Most of the people up here had likely escaped the war and sought refuge up here.

They offered me a cigarette, and I swallowed my nausea and accepted. I could see myself in their goggles: to myself I looked weary, and short.

I also learned that Met and Co. were destined for my hometown, aboard an airship, just as Temis had promised. Home: a disloyal outpost I hadn't seen in several years. How she had disapproved of my decision to return there, the nursery, she called it, Zero Point, I called it.

Temis and her unwavering opinions. Her convictions. And if she disapproved so much, why had she blessed my leaving with such a promising sign?

I hated her for it. As she made me repeat, over and over until it made me irritable: When you hear laughter, it is safe to jump in. And hadn't she laughed at me when I fell into her pool in the Forest of Disillusionment where blessings bubbled up from under the sterile rock? And hadn't I spent the weeks of melting water with her, and hadn't I memorized the sign and could rattle it off at a moment's notice, When you hear laughter, it is safe to jump in, even though I had long since took my leave of her and her bioluminescent mumbo jumbo.

Come, let me show you around. Thank you, I said at once.

Horseshoe of tents, each adorned with stick archways and quilts and chintz fabrics, the dirt in front of each run bare, with their backs to the cliff's edge. And three community fires, each with a pitiful stockpile of firewood. The mesa looked picked over: and the camp was packed. About the footpaths the adults moved slow and the hens moved slower. Everybody was dressed in that lumpy recycled material of recombined plastics, or else in damp dresses, their drying laundry hung over the shrubbery. I considered that the smells of smokey cooking would be stronger if it weren't so windy.

An older woman with a helmet of curly hair caught my eye and indicated to my arms. I looked and realized I still had streaks of dried bacteria along my outer forearm, bare beyond my hemp vest.

I looked up to thank her and she was already laughing among her comrades, her generous back to me.

I need a wash. When will we go? I asked Met.

As soon as you're settled. You were the last one we were waiting for.

Me?

I bet you are wondering, Met swung at a chicken, and it ran in front of them and they nearly tripped. I laughed and then stopped myself quickly. I bet you are wondering, how did we know you were coming?

Well, Yeah. How did you know?

Well, I didn't- said Met, and they pointed to the woman with the helmet of curly hair- but Gal did. The seats on our airship are already predetermined.

I didn't know how to respond to that, because it wasn't like I'd begged for a seat or anything. Temis had just told me where to go and I had listened. With a hot stab of regret I wished I had somehow smuggled her out of the forest, although it was impossible.

I know it seems impossible, but just accept it, O.K.? Get a snack, have yourself a sit, and let's get on with it. We've all been waiting for you. Not because you're special, mind it: you are just the last to arrive, Well O.K., I said, and I went over to the community fires and a merry woman with boxer braids gave me some grub whistling as she did so and I went to the cliff face and I gazed dreamily down at the class war and judged none of it. It was so far below us that I could not tell if the land below was wooded or farmland, and clouds rolled in below me, slow as sleepiness, Ah that's nice, I thought. And I savored the roasted apples and the cheese hunks and the sweet little green nuts and the burnt bread, and before I knew it I had fallen asleep.

When I woke up my neck was cold and I started, the edge of the cliff was right there in front of me. I had slept sitting up, which was a good sign that I could relax so quickly among these new people.

The sun was directly above now (I had been traveling since daybreak) and I could see the war better. From this height, the Many held a line that looked like the high-water mark on the beach, and the Few for their part were keeping the air hazy with smoke: marking out any position was like christening a sand castle, futile. The lines were more twisted than the double helix. From this height every intricate move looked so small. From down below, each individual move would have looked small, too.

Behind me, comrades were packing their tents. No one had woken me. Met was pissing on the community fires. The woman with boxer braids swatted their bare rear with a broom.

Among the camp I had nothing to pack and knew nobody, so it was an opportune time to eavesdrop. It seemed that folx were reluctant to fully break camp. A few people bustled about one of the airships, tying some things down and unfurling other things, but most were going about rituals of abandonment. The woman with the helmet of curly hair was leading a prayer circle seated on the ground near where the airships were tethered. They sat forlornly, with no one guarding it: who could get at us from up here? There must have been twelve or fifteen airships docked around the cliff and not a single one was even armed. Among the people camped there seemed no fear of attack from below. We were cloistered, sheltered in our ragtag camaraderie.

And still I wondered at the impossible welcome, how Met trusted me immediately and how they knew without asking that I would join their crew. We were so far above the war, even the rockets made no noise.

I went to the nearest airship and sat. It was strange sitting in an orange lifeboat. In another life, this boat would have spent its entire existence taking up deckspace. I lost myself in the motion of the boat: it turned out the motion of air was as mesmerizing to the body as the motion of water: and then Gal was sitting beside me.

I was startled. She smelled agreeable, of fresh sweat, which was strange, because it wasn't hot.

Hullo. What is your ship called?

"Your" seemed appropriate: not because Gal owned it, but because she had expertise.

The Beak, she answered. I frowned. Why? I think you can use your imagination, Now answer a question of mine, she said, why isn't Temis with you?

You know Temis?

Yes, said Gal, And she regrets not coming with you, But I thought she couldn't leave the forest. Well she can't, not as a druid, she would have had to take a body. I didn't know you knew each other, I said, and Gal said, Many paths cross in the season of falling leaves.

I waited at that, sure that Gal would go on. And she did: Besides, she sends nearly everybody she meets to me. But tell me- Did anything happen while you were with her?

What do you mean?

I mean anything out of the ordinary, she said. I thought about it. I had stayed with Temis for a brief season, the season of melting water, and in all that time we were nocturnal. We slept all day, her underwater, me floating faceup, and every night we watched the stars and calculated their changes from the night before. We ate roses and scraped our tongues against the moss that grew on rocks.

I had run into Temis, literally, at an opportune time in my nascent life, when I was traveling home from a posting at a collective farm near my Aunt's hometown. After that season of hard labor, I was brash: the Forests of Disillusionment, I reasoned, would be a shortcut. It was not.

I trusted Gal and decided to give her my story.

One day, not long after I had fallen in with Temis, I woke up early. I mean, right from the start we were nocturnal: so I woke up during the day. Temis was asleep and everything seemed fine in our little spring. The willow branches made play with the water, and you could hear the willow roots drinking the spring water. It took me awhile to notice what was wrong, and all at once it became so obvious. The sun wasn't moving. At first I thought I'd wake Temis and ask her what's what.

Already Gal looked frightened. In those days, I added hastily, There were never many thoughts in my head. They were like big stubborn trees: you can see all the space between one and the next.

But luckily I figured it'd be wiser to wait. It was a weird afternoon. Never a break in the birdsong: and you know in that Forest the housecats get as large as houses? Hence the name... It's they who hunt the bears... I waited, daring the sun to move, thinking every shadow would be a demon cat named Oreos, but no matter. What happened, instead, was that Temis woke up.

Here my intuition saved me, and I quickly closed my eyes and floated like a dead stick. From below me the bubbles of her breathing tickled against my back until the urge to move was unbearable. I got through it by squeezing my eyeballs until they rolled around like evil snakes. And the bubbles got larger and larger until her head popped up and she got out of the water, which she had never done before, and I didn't look. I guess she must have looked at me and assumed I was asleep: or maybe she knew I was up and she didn't mind: all I know is she got up and went off somewhere, and I'm hearing whispering, sort of like Pssst, It's time! It's time, she says, except she's whispering, so she's saying Pshhhhhhhh, Is dime, Is dime, and nobody says anything back but all of a sudden the whole Forest goes dark as if it's midnight o'clock. And all the birds shut up too, for all I know they were coming out of an intercom somewhere.

And Temis comes back and I don't say anything about it, and I never mentioned it to her. But from that incident I gathered that the whole of the Forests of Disillusionments, the vines, the deep dark thickets, the trees, the crows and the brown birds, the brown bears and the grubs the bears eat, and the fish, and the water the fish swim in, and the sun reflected in that water, it was all just a set. With a lightswitch and a domed sky. The sun never sets there, it just gets put away. Some kind of big play, maybe, but why anyone would put it on I don't know. It felt like a practical joke. That was the beginning of the end of my happiest days with Temis.

It sounds like things were tense, after that, said Gal, so gently that I didn't mind her probing.

Yes. I had hoped she would tell me about the true nature of the Forest, or what role she played.

Did you ask her?

Well, no.

Did you continue to have relations after that? I stared at her and nodded even though I hadn't really decided to share that. It wasn't that I was hiding our intimacy, exactly, but on the other hand, I hadn't gone out and mentioned it.

I'm sorry to be blunt about it, Gal said, and she looked old as she said it. I'm the midwife for the crew, I guess that makes me nosy.

And besides, having met Temis - here I looked up, my attention shamelessly piqued - I have often wondered what her role is, as you succinctly put it. I don't suppose you were born down there, she said, rolling her neck toward the thin layer of fabric which kept us from smashing onto the war below.

I don't know what that has to do with it, I said defensively. Besides, isn't everyone?

This time she did not smile. You should talk more with Scarb and Met. They were both born here, away from the worst of the war.

But they weren't born a world apart. The war is everywhere. This world is war.

Gal shrugged, seeing I was worked up. You should see what they think of your warmongering. I merely wished to point out that every wanderer that falls into Temis's pool is wandering away from that war.

Someone was cooking back at camp, meat by the smell of it. We were upwind. It made me impatient despite having eaten a few hours ago. But Gal went on.

Temis often reminds me of an apprenticeship/master relationship: the corporal discipline she demands to invoke daily hibernations, the abdication of power to some feminine archetype which administers and discriminates at will. And you're supposed to like it, that suffocating. Some of that sexuality is imprinted pretty young, don't you think?

I took a breath before I spoke.

Sure. But I trusted Temis. But on the road here, before I went into the forest, I spent the night in a pub. There, there was much storytelling of the war down below.

A young man with torn clothes told an old story in which the Teachers, one of the Many, had gotten a high bit of ground. They were about to win an important battle and change the course of the war. Many who had been struggling their whole lives were overjoyed and it became hard to maintain a clear head. In the confusion, some of their own ranks were sold out by a coalition of white women, in exchange for marriage to some of the Few. The moral was, What white men are to cops, white women are to teachers, Gal put in. Well, I think that's simplifying it, I said, the moral I got out of it was Distrust power, Re-allocate power.

Gal said, Power is a ganglion. What I'm saying is, I continued, the power Temis had over me, it was her personal charisma. And what I'm saying is, said Gal, is that I think Temis lures in idealists. Like yourself.

Maybe you are right, I admitted, realizing I had enjoyed our conversation, companionship which is its own privilege. Look at us, going on as if it's the season of heavy snow.

Gal laughed. Right. You do have a way with words, don't you. Usually I feel like I'm grasping in the dark, I admitted. Good enough, she said. Go eat. We disembark at sunset.

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The stars were fierce and the moon poured on silver like a rich woman. And there was little wind in the center of the airship where we sat despite our speed. Scarb and Met sat so close together that their knees knocked. I sat across from Gal, near the helm. Steering would be a strong word: but she was, in her own way, directing the airship. We rocked laterally: I was reminded, for some reason, of the wagon rides we took at the collective farm, back on solid ground. Nobody was eager to sit near the edge, least of all me, as there was only a low roll of orange plastic, between us and falling. Which encouraged slumping. So the twenty or so of us in the airship crowded

together in the center, where the air was warm and still, even though it shouldn't have been. Flying in a lifeboat, I reminded myself. Other airships kept pace with us: we were a regular flock.

I cannot tell much else of the disembarkment. I think I was no use at all around camp. I was so scared, away from Temis, away from my Aunt, away from the ground in an airship, that I curled up into myself and it took many hours for me to come out. I think did I eat, though (no one has ever accused me of poor appetite) and that helped me shut my eyes to consciousness. I should have thought of my hometown, but I couldn't focus on it. It seemed I thought of nothing at all.

Finally, hours into our journey, just as my fingers were getting cold, I deigned to calm down at last, as Scarb spoke to me.

We're getting close, she said to Met, and then she said it again, louder, to me. We're getting close to the Drop-off point. What's that, I said immediately and suspiciously, thinking of perhaps tossing sacks of letters overboard. Scarb laughed at my curmudgeonry. I got the feeling she was irrepressibly and fatally cheery. A nice compliment to Met's unflappable pessimism. Better let Gal know it's time, Time for what? I repeated urgently.

Scarb stood up. Then I stood up too, upsetting the balance of the airship and she looked into my face and saw how freaked out I was. And then she laughed. Come, look, she said, pulling me closer to the edge than was wise, and she peered over, and so far down below us were the stars, winking, or that's what it looked like from up above, what is that, I said breathlessly, the cold wind against my face waking me up, and drying my eyes, it's our side, it's the Many, those are their rockets, their affinity groups and their parties, feel, feel around for it - I realized Met stood on the other side of me with horror even as Scarb leaned further out, feeling around with two hands in the empty - her whole stomach on the orange roll of plastic as she leaned - without thinking I grabbed her legs to anchor her and at the same moment she shouted out, I feel it! I found one! Found what? I shouted, never mind we were right next to each other, A current, A current of warm air, Our way down, said Met in my ear, and I understood even though I didn't want to.

And then Gal shouted, We don't have anchors! If you found one here, you better go now! And Scarb twisted around and said, Let go of me, You will fall to your death, I insisted, I won't. Look around. And from all the other airships people flung themselves gently upon the currents of warm air, Why are you going down there, It is death, I said, Exactly! Said Met, The working class is closest to death, and therefore closest to life, But I just escaped all that, I said, and Scarb said, Catch you on the flip, and she laughed, and then she dived, and the current of warm air was so strong that she floated above our airship and bobbed and laughed, and Met said, Gal come with us, and Gal said I cannot, not everybody is ready to go and I must get this airship safely

docked, and so Met jumped, they disappeared from sight quickly, and I didn't want to understand why they had gone but I missed them, and I was alone on the roll of orange plastic, free to decide, and also free to die.