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Nach der Flucht / *Fleeing, and Then?*

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Author's Note

This text was inspired by
the artist Jacob Lawrence's
"The Migration Series"

Opening Remark

A refugee is generally an object.

A problem that needs solving. A number. A cost. A full-stop. Never a comma. Since he cannot be ignored, he must remain a thing.

There is a life after fleeing. Yet fleeing has a lasting, life-long impact. Regardless of the individual circumstances, regardless of guilt, conscience, intention or longing.

Refugees are a separate category of human beings.

Part One
(Of psychological disturbances)

I.

Fleeing is self-explanatory. Life after fleeing keeps raising new questions.

II.

Nothing about fleeing is fleeting. It seizes your life and never releases its grip.

III.

A refugee is always presented as a person who came from somewhere else. Who stepped into an inn late one winter's night. Who wasn't invited. A ward presented with a bowl of soup, because that is the done thing. No matter how many years have passed since he fled, the locals mark him out as someone who doesn't share something vital with them. Even the shortest biography has room for his hyphenated identity. Is it, he wonders, because I still count in my mother tongue?

IV.

Eighteen minors are fed word crumbs in a room at the reception centre. They are thrown an 'A'. Be grateful, for this is *the finest and most authentic of all sounds, ringing loud and clear from chest and throat, which the child learns to utter first and with the greatest ease.*

V.

First day of school. He speaks a smattering; his mother speaks a smattering. Together they stand outside the headmistress's door on the first day of school. They are late. *Class 1b*, the headmistress says. *Second floor*. She points upwards. A wide staircase. As they turn into the corridor, a door slams shut. The mother knocks on the door. *Come in!* A room full of children of his age. He feels a creeping shame.

His mother's speech is mangled. He does no better. *No, no, no*, the teacher says, pushing the air at them with both hands, *I already have four Turks in my class*. And she drives mother and son away. The staircase has more steps going down. He knows what will happen. They'll have to go and see the headmistress again. He feels even more ashamed. The headmistress stands up. She marches along the corridor, up the stairs and along the upper corridor to the classroom door. She flings the door open and says a few curt words. He sits down in the back row. He doesn't understand much, so he glances around furtively. Who could the four Turkish children be?

V.

When he pronounces a word funnily, the other pupils pull faces. The words are marbles in their mouths, he thinks. It strikes him later that he must have decided that day to learn the foreign language so well that he'd never be ashamed again. He hasn't yet guessed what his parents already know: speech equals empowerment. If you master the alphabet, you can defend yourself.

VII.

How can you let a foreigner be better than you? The teacher from England directs this reproach at most of the class, at children of all origins. In this particular classroom, *foreign* means the boy who only recently learned the language. He didn't understand the very first question he was asked at the boarding house. The other pupils laughed. He didn't know how to ask: What are you laughing about?

VIII.

Is it because the foreigner, as everyone knows, is not of local stock?

IX.

Stock: a tree-trunk metaphor, generally wide of the mark in two senses. 1. Trees don't move: they migrate by means of flying pollen. Anyone who insists on talking about roots identifies too much with oaks and ash trees. If a person is of different stock, does that mean only his leaves turn German? 2. Stock as race: a unit larger than family, tribe or clan. A past he has escaped (even if he was an innocent child). Etched into him like a tattoo whose trail he pursues in a new language.

X.

No one could tell you're not from here. Even innocent questions can degrade you. *You don't have any accent.* Which sounds like: *You're hiding something from us. You're pulling the wool over our eyes!* An African in Vienna mastered the major languages of his time and the knowledge of his age of Enlightenment. He taught the sons of princes, frequented the same freemasons' lodges as the most famous composers, wore the finest clothing, married a native-born lady – and was skinned and stuffed after his death. Because there was no Viennese blood flowing and coursing through his veins in three-four time. He who has my blood, so the proverb goes, is my heir. It is not foreseen that foreigners can no longer be distinguished from us. *How did you learn to speak such good German?* There is no answer to some questions.

XI.

A refugee doesn't have to feel like a total stranger to lose his identity. He doesn't need to take a wrong turn to get lost. Even if he manages to get his status legitimized, his diploma recognized and his driving licence re-registered, he is bound to shed some layers of skin. Whether he is out and about with a briefcase full of new ID cards (and a few crisp banknotes), or *sans papiers; the abandoned skin always / the orphaned skin next & untranslatable /*

the adopted tattoo & / the evaporating grammar of the senses. While he assimilates – ergo, stands with rank and file, trying hard not to stand out, concentrating frantically to avoid breaking ranks – he longs to arrive: utopia for every refugee.

XII.

His name makes him conspicuous, because others think his name explains who he is. Far from home, many a refugee shaves a few consonants from his name. To arrive he must ensure that his name is easy to pronounce. Or come to terms with a different pronunciation. Get used to it so he doesn't lose his name entirely. Until one day the original pronunciation sounds unfamiliar, almost wrong. Not everyone believes him when he claims: I don't care how it's pronounced. Some pronounce the name properly, but it's a different name. He's rarely asked: What does your name mean? or: Why were you given that name? That would start a conversation. Instead: an initial greeting, then friendly silence.