

Anatomy of a Night

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Sample Translation by Kári Driscoll

Sivke Carlsen has just met a stranger who throws his shoes into the air, they stick to the darkness, as if there were a ski run there, an invisible path. The stranger, whose face she cannot see, is shrouded in a uniform, he seems tall, but also very thin, his clothes don't touch his body at any point, but rather stick out from it, like a board. He frequently strays to earth because in truth there is no limit to the sky, in flight the self-evidence of the ground is suspended, giving way to an ambiguity that short circuits the connection between the eyes and the brain, suddenly it becomes possible to throw sleds into the air so that they stick to the firmament and you can take a ride across the sky that feels like a ride through the snow: It's a little quieter here, dominated by the voices of individual birds, the rushing of the wind replacing the rushing of the sea, and the runners glide as if through fresh snow, and just as soundlessly.

I'm Jens, says the policeman and slips into his boots, I'm here for six months, she hears and pushes her competition aside. Asks him whether he'd like to dance, doesn't wait for an answer, just buries herself head-first in his arms while she lets him tell her that he's been in Amarâq for a month, that he's just been stationed in the Sudan and that he and his colleagues sailed along the West coast of Greenland around the Southern tip and to the East, and she moves her lips a little closer to his, until she is only a finger's breadth away from him, she keeps talking like that, maybe she says she likes him, maybe he answers that she's very pretty, but in the end it doesn't matter what is said, the point is to filter out the softly whispered grace notes until but a single message remains: *Take me with you.*

Even in their sleep they danced, they twitched, while some people stepped, hopped, or stumbled over them or leaned on the grey bar stocked exclusively with Tuborg and Coca-Cola, standing watch on the shelf in rounded rank and file, bulky, little bombs of aluminium. Others drank at the round tables, arranged high and low in a semi-circle around the dance floor, drank to the end of the day, to the end of the week, till the end of their money. In this columned hall, affairs are started and ended, in this columned room, known as Pakhuset, the warehouse. You can find it in the darkest corner of the harbour, by the harbour mouth, where the bulbs in the streetlights aren't replaced when they burn out.

But Pakhuset is more than a discothèque, a nightclub, a bar, it is an assault on the silence of Amarâq, an assault on the isolation and as

such a place for the present: everything that happens here happens now. Because it keeps the loneliness out and life in, it has become fixed in the townspeople's heads as the only way to escape the past and the future, for those five hours between ten at night and three in the morning.

Julie Hansen allowed herself to be pulled out onto the dance floor by Jens, even though her body closed itself off from the music, not even finding the edges of the song, he had to steer her, turn the corners, the straight lines and circles, to make her feel the rhythm even marginally, she didn't notice that all he cared about was reducing the distance, moving closer, with every step, until he was standing so close to her that his eyes blocked her view of anything else. She stood still, being jostled, pulled along to the beat, people stepping on her toes, shoes, still she didn't move, took the shallowest breaths she could, perhaps she thought she could only hold his gaze if she didn't move. At that moment her entire existence was reduced to that eye contact and she was no more than the sum of her eyes. She tried to stand that moment still, to breathe it still, and she succeeded in slowing down the speed of time—

until he closed in on her mouth and held her with his lips.

In his patrol car they leave the harbour along the narrow winding street, a sluice that even in the daytime, in the sunlight, is twilight. They drive through a veiled city that even in summer is a winter city: even when the last traces of ice have disappeared and one might be inclined to think there never was any, the blind spots in front of the houses, tiny parcels of land set aside for sleds, sled dogs and snowmobiles, stencils essentially, evoke the image of new-fallen snow, it's just that in the summer it's brown, green in patches, muddy when it rains.

They followed the road in the direction of Heliport, uphill, always uphill, until after the third curve they stopped, diagonally opposite the Lille Købmand, a general store offering four types of biscuits, two types of noodles, stale packaged bread, expired jars of pasta sauce, instant Chinese noodle soup, flour, rusk, UHT milk and fobs for homeless keys, arranged on three just barely red shelves. At night this area is darker than the darkest square in Amarâq because it is illuminated by a single streetlight and despite the overabundance of water, despite the rain that feeds the neighbouring lakes and the river, the houses in this part of town have no running water, no sewers, they are smaller, more hut-like and are inhabited by the poorest of the poor. Once a week the sewage tanker comes to pick up the sacks full of excrement from the outhouses, the water has to be drawn from one of the green miniature blockhouses, the tap is usually out of the children's reach, they have to stand on a rock to fill their buckets; fetching water is a job for the ten-year-old boys.

The area with one-storey houses outfitted with running water and electricity is near the harbour—

but poverty in Amarâq is relative, as long as the individual does not demand to be free and the community is happy, everything is shared and everyone only owns one thing, namely himself. And that property, whose limits are marked precisely by the boundary of the skin, is called into question only in sleep when the soul of sleep leaves the body and ushers in a state similar to solitude: numbness.

We're here, says Jens and gets out, that's Johanna's house, says Sivke and stops to straighten her dress.

[...]

Amarâq is at the end of the world, it is a place-swallower: a place that swallows you up along with the place where you are; that purports to be less a place than the entrance to a place that, once you enter, you can never leave, because this entrance is not an exit.

On the one hand this is due to the fact that once you arrive in Amarâq your memory starts to dry up and you gradually forget how you got here and that at one point you had just arrived, you begin to forget what it was like when you arrived and you feel like you can't remember anywhere other than Amarâq, for the town limits wrap themselves around your neck like a heavy scarf that makes it impossible to turn your head and look back. Thus a forgetting supervenes, making the end of the world definitively what it is: the end.

On the other hand the end of the world is the end of everything that is of the world. Amarâq isn't just a place with its own, unmistakable coordinates, Amarâq also has a purpose, namely to end. That means that in this place is an interruption of world, it also means that there is no continuation of world here, that after Amarâq there is nothing. Hence, nothing waits at the end of the world for it to be its turn, but maybe it's not nothing at all that waits, but rather something, but a something that is so inchoate and chaotic that it looks like nothing, whereas in truth it is everything. That would make Amarâq a place where everything is possible because in reality nothing is, but because everything is open and these infinite possibilities are hidden in the chaos, no one knows of their existence.

Because the world comes to an end in this place, it contains nothing but its remains, isolated, cravenly colourful houses, the offshoots of isolated, cravenly colourful houses, and even the vegetation comes to an end, and exists only in miniature: tiny, tiny offshoots of plants.

Amarâq is a world that is running out, which is why whatever is left of it, the elementary, the unadorned, the undisguised, consists of basic geometrical shapes: cones and cuboids. The silence emanating

from this penury is interrupted by the calving of icebergs, the waves, the splashing of the rain, the trickle of the snow; this place is nothing but the backdrop for water's varieties of play.

But perhaps Amarâq's landscape has to be restrained in order that it can show that the earth is in truth not the opposite of the sky, but rather its complement: that at the end of the world the distinction between sky and earth is suspended and the sky is just as much a vast ocean as the ocean is a vast sky and the mountains green-seamed clouds and that it is within the realm of possibility to climb that mirror image and not only that but the actual firmament where you wait for the last drop of rain, the first ray of sun, and the rainbow, for the lowermost sky, and then to climb slowly from rainbow to rainbow, from hue to hue, in the winter, when everything is frozen, and every step would confirm that the earth continues into the heavens, and that the end is really nothing but an illusion.

Naturally it depends on the type of gaze, how and what is seen and what is overlooked: the educated gaze will stick to the familiar, but the distorted gaze will perceive also those things which it ought not to have seen. Perhaps the peculiarity of Amarâq lies in the fact that it takes a particular kind of gaze to see it, to look through the nothing and discover the something that, albeit in miniature and in small quantities, exists nonetheless. Precisely because all there is in Amarâq are offshoots, only the right kind of gaze can discover their stories, the wrong kind will remain blind. It is as if nature, as if the town spoke a different language, expressing itself in images that you need a special kind of eyes to see. But it is a fragile language, a pane off whose edges one may easily fall, which would happen suddenly, there would be no warning, in an instant the nothingness would appear, for it is disguised—

as loneliness: it has suppressed the contents of Amarâq, pushed it away and spread out, unavoidable, unexchangeable. It too is what creeps into every conversation, ensuring that it is given enough space. It isn't interested in what is actually said, only in the amount of time it takes to say it, and so it censors according to duration and sentence length—

and silence descends upon Amarâq, a dense fog, and one's own breath is its ally.