



LAST YEAR IN MARIENBAD  
BEATRIZ COLOMINA

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I arrived in Berlin in the dead of winter, four months after everyone else, on a cold and dark afternoon in early January. The lake in front of Villa Walther was frozen except for a very small patch near Koenigsallee where two swans flipped around furiously as if trying to keep the water from freezing. By morning they had given up, or lost the battle, and were sitting on the same spot where the hole once was, as if resigned. Was the hole still there for them, as a kind of conceptual piece? Can swans not move around on ice? Are they cold when out of the water? Can they freeze? I worried about them.

The swans were a big part of Wiko. “Where are the swans?” was a recurrent question for me and many of my dear Fellows when walking back and forth from Wallotstraße, or coming back from a foray into town, or strolling along the lake behind Villa Walther to check on them, admire their majestic glide across the lake, their architectural abilities in building and rebuilding their nest, their methodic and obsessive cleaning of themselves by the shore. Can swans be neurotic?

The swans were actual fellows, fellow neurotics, along with the birds who woke us up every morning before dawn with the most incredible performance – a true orchestra of sounds I have never heard before – and visited the windows of my apartment regularly as if saying hello while I worked. The trees were also our friends. Tall, beautiful, august, old trees. It was as if they could talk, and in this area, Grunewald, where so many crimes were committed, I felt sometimes, particularly at night when walking around the streets or coming back from the supermarket or the train station, the air dense with an incommensurable sadness and the trees whispering stories of the horrific events they have witnessed. At the end of February, a municipal team came around and, for no apparent reason, cut many trees along Koenigsallee and the banks of the canal running down the side of the villa, and many of us cried. Did the trees also cry? Have you heard about the neurobiology of trees? Do you know that recent research demonstrates that plants have senses and memory and they communicate with each other and therefore can be considered intelligent? In February we went to the opening of the Triennale di Milano and saw the moving exhibition “A Nation of Plants” and learned about it. Did the trees alert each other of the upcoming massacre so they could prepare to die, if chosen for no apparent reason? Joan, who has good German and admirably speaks her mind at every turn, confronted the tree cutters about it and told them off, but they said they were only following orders. After a big tree by Bissera’s and Ruth’s terraces came down, a beautiful black bird with a red beak kept smashing itself against the glass of Bissera’s window. Was it disorientated and desperate, having lost its nest, Bissera asked Ruth and me one day. Was it attempting suicide? I wondered.

It was also in one of those “cutting” days, precisely the day that right outside our windows onto the canal many trees fell, that we were robbed, an experience that could happen anywhere, on the road or at home, Wiko being somehow both. An intruder broke in through the kitchen window onto the courtyard while we were out and took everything of sentimental value in the apartment, including my wedding ring. Now I had other reasons to cry, but I didn’t. I can’t explain very well why. But I was reminded of my

friend Yehuda, who a long time ago spent a year in Rome. Upon his return, I asked him how it was and he said that Rome was a “very fine city: among the ruins of so many great civilizations, nobody can take themselves too seriously.” Likewise, among so much palpable pain, past and present, how could I feel sorry for myself over the loss of some things? How could I compare my experience to that of millions of people, including some current Wiko Fellows, who have gone through and are going through unimaginable suffering and lost everything? Perhaps the greatest gift of Wiko is to offer an intellectual and personal home, respect and affection, to displaced thinkers. It is a gift to those who have lost, are lost, but also, and usually unacknowledged, an enormous gift to those of us who get to live with them, learn from them, eat, drink, sing, and dance with them. And yes, cry silently together for these times we are living in, “these times wherein the unimaginable occurs and wherein what has to occur is no longer capable of being imagined,” as Karl Kraus put it more than a century ago during the first war of the world.

One day, walking into Wiko for a Tuesday Colloquium with some friends, a woman I didn't know came towards us clearly upset and said “There has been a murder on the lawn.” We were understandably alarmed. It turned out that the fox, which is also a Fellow at Wiko – coming into the garden of Villa Walther, not through the bushes but through the front gate, unperturbed if we are coming out at the same time, and routinely crossing Koenigsallee to visit Wiko too – had killed one of the swans and left the corpse on the lawn. Poor swan! Did it sing before it died? Did anybody hear the swansong? For a while, only one swan was on the lake looking very lonely and sad. Do you know that swans mate for life and can die of heartbreak if their partners die? Luckily, another swan appeared one day. I thought it has been put there by some official institution in charge of the lakes, but my Fellow friend Jessica, who also followed the swans assiduously, said that apparently the ecology of the lakes is much like that of real estate and when there is a vacancy somehow the word goes around the lakes and another swan takes the position. I loved that story.

In the spring, the swans gave birth to seven adorable cygnets and the frenzy around them intensified. We followed their movements constantly and mourned every time we realized they, and we, had lost one. Soon after birth they were only six, and a while later five, and all of a sudden just two, which remained for the rest of our days in Wiko, getting bigger and stronger, as we watched adoringly their coming and goings. “The swans are here,” was enough to get me rushing out of the shower to catch a glimpse of them from my window. One day, when the cygnets kept disappearing, I was walking back from

lunch with Dave, and I asked him what he thought was happening, and he said, matter of fact, that they were probably eaten by another animal. I was horrified just to think about it, but he was not alarmed. I told Mark and he said, “Well, you know, he is a biologist, he sees it from a different perspective.”

The biologists were by far the largest group at Wiko this year and while some in the so-called humanities lamented our small number, I found the experience truly exhilarating. They are a completely different species! Their topics of study, attitudes toward research, collaborative methods, and direct questions after a lecture were inspiring. It is not that there are no scientists at Princeton, on the contrary, it is hard to move without tripping over a Nobel Prizewinner, but we in the humanities rarely interact with them. Unless you are in some bureaucratic committee of the university, you don't even know who they really are. We talk a lot about interdisciplinarity, but it tends to be among the humanities themselves. This makes Wiko very special – spending so many months living in close proximity, having lunch together, dinner together, singing in Victor's karaoke parties, having drinks by the lake in the back of the villa hosted by Joan, discussing with Judith why some species collaborate, the sexual life of bees, etc. It turns out that scientists, at least at Wiko, are a much more outgoing and inclusive group of people. And I thought they were all nerds! I was reminded that I was myself a nerd for a long time, a science-math nut as a child and still in my early years at the university, who somehow defected to the wild terrain of architecture.

This was for me another important experience at Wiko. To learn from the biologists. And when it was time to choose who would introduce my colloquium on the intimate relationship between medicine and architecture, I naturally went for Thomas, whom I had met by chance, sitting next to me in one of my very first lunches and with whom I immediately had a stimulating conversation about architecture and the microbiome – the first of many that will continue beyond Wiko, as we are planning a couple of collaborative projects. I thought the *X-Ray Architecture* book that I finished at Wiko was the end of a long obsession of mine – starting in the 1980s with my first ideas and draft chapters for a Ph.D., but long repressed in favor of other super-absorbing topics. Turns out, it was just the beginning.

The strangest thing about these special months in Berlin was the constant sense of reliving different histories, of having been in this place before, of even having thought some of these thoughts. Walking into the building in Wallotstraße on the very first day, I had one of those “Last Year in Marienbad” moments. Was I really here before, or did I dream

about it? Did I promise someone to come back? I had to check my own CV to confirm that I had given one of my very first lectures as a young scholar, right here, in the main room of Wiko. It was the Spring of 1986. I must have written a chapter or two of my dissertation and published a few articles when I was invited to a symposium on architecture and politics organized by a remarkable cluster of four architectural historians who were all Fellows that year. I met several other younger thinkers who have remained colleagues and friends to this day. To return to Wiko to finish the project I had left behind before the Ph.D. was somehow a tender responsibility, a promise even, and a privilege. I cannot separate the arc of my thinking from Wiko, nor do I want to.

