



FRAGMENTS OF (IM)PERFECTION  
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I never *really* expected to be at Wiko. A chance encounter led to a very welcome impromptu invitation to come as a Short-term Fellow. I had no academic plan but knew I needed a break, so gladly accepted. My university agreed. Then they didn't. Then they did. My original intent was to spend October to late January in Berlin, with a rush home to the UK for Christmas. COVID had other plans. Shortly after I had resolved to escape to Wiko, Delta struck and the German government closed the borders to the UK and wasn't accepting applications for visas. Emails flurried between me, Wiko, and another UK Short-term Fellow, Rachel Wheatley, in the same predicament. Wiko was again cancelled.

As Delta spread into Germany, however, the borders opened, and between me, Rachel, and the amazing Wiko team, we navigated the system. Visa, health insurance, vaccination certificates, and much other bemusing paperwork in hand, I eventually arrived late on a

wet evening in early September. A break that just a short while before seemed impossible was real.

After the introductory week, fragment 1 concluded with my return to the UK a few days later, COVID test negative. Fragment 2 started in late September with my return to Berlin, but this time to visit collaborators in Buch, in the far north-east of Berlin – a world away from Grunewald. I discovered an abandoned Stasi hospital in the woods and a fascination for hidden Berlin. Fragment 2, part 2, saw me arrive, now once again a stranger, at Wiko on October 1st. I settled down to discover Tuesday Colloquia, Thursday dinners, and the silence of weekends. I walked, discovered the woods, and found the mental exhaustion of university life under COVID slowly easing.

Then darkness slowly descended. COVID's resurgence seemed a mirror of the northern European decline into winter's unrelenting grey. Expecting the worst from Omicron, before my return to England, I packed away what little I had left at Wiko, not confident that I would be returning. In mid-December I struggled home, COVID tests negative. The day after, the border was again closed to UK residents.

I have no regrets not returning in January. Fragment 3, my final return mid-April, saw blue skies, a tour of the botanic gardens and cherry blossoms (do go to the Hanami festival on Lichterfelder Allee). I was again the stranger, the fragmentary visitor. That suited me, as I could remain a hermit (twice weekly COVID tests were, perhaps not unsurprisingly, all negative). And this time, helped by the lengthening days and brightening skies, I knew how to use my time. I luxuriated in the Tuesday Colloquia – the scholarship and the creativity was like soaking in a warm bath. Who knew that the history of Catholic dogma or the architecture of job centres could be so interesting? I worked from early morning until late at night, walking when need be. In my new single room, a bird nesting above my window was welcome (nut-eating) company. The move outside for lunch and dinner, with sun on our backs, was emblematic of a rare fragment of time, separated from all others.

Shortly before my return home (no COVID test), I found myself, while waiting for a bus, seeking shade from May's sun. I was warm in Berlin and waking up. I took the train back to the UK – a relaxing experience watching the world go by. Torrential rain in Amsterdam made a fitting punctuation to terminate the final fragment.

And what did I achieve? On paper perhaps not so much. I fell on my feet in receiving the invitation but had no plans, just a need to stop my brain from exploding. A rest. That I achieved that much is good enough.

But I managed something. Before I arrived, Wiko asked if I could write a paragraph on what I might do. As I didn't know what else to say, I wrote about some of what I am interested in – why, if natural selection is a perfecting force, do so many things seem extraordinarily imperfect. Our DNA is mostly junk, we are quite singularly bad at processing our genes, and making babies is bizarrely wasteful. For every human born another two die, most of which a mother knows nothing about. Why?

While I thought nothing of this paragraph, a few weeks before I arrived, to my surprise, a publisher approached me to ask if I had the intention to convert that plan (such as it was) into a popular book. I had no such plan I said. But then I did. I had once again landed on my feet and had a much-needed focus for my short stays. “The Evolution of Imperfection” had my attention.

I had no idea how to structure a book or how to write one. As a scientist, I write three-minute pop songs, not operas. Walking the woods and pavements through October and November, I found a structure and composed the book proposal. I enjoyed the novelty of the challenge. One revision later, a few enthusiastic comments from the referees and I had a book to write. The one month in April found me completing 5 of 7 chapters.

Along the way, I think I might also have solved the problem of why so many human embryos die so young. That was my first single-author paper since I was little. I'd forgotten how much fun that can be. With my graduate student Alex Ho, I suspect that we have also solved the problem of why our genes use and conserve the least good “stop” codon, one that regularly leads to cellular traffic accidents. That was fun, too.

Written like this, I could have been almost anywhere, but the experience needed Berlin. I visited the city first while a graduate student in Oxford. In 1988/89, my American girlfriend at the time was having a year at the Freie Universität. On my regular visits, I discovered *Currywurst* and *Glühwein*. I recall taking the S-Bahn over the Wall to Friedrichstraße and freezing days in East Berlin (what an irony that, as a UK resident, I was permitted easier travel then to East Berlin than I was, post Brexit, to Germany). I have regularly returned after the Wall came down, often to Wiko (for workshops etc.) but also to Buch. But being Jewish, Berlin has always been “difficult.” This is not the right word, but I don't know what word is. Wrestling with this has been an undercurrent of my months at Wiko. I can't explain more, not because I don't want to, but because I don't know how to. Perhaps it is enough to say that my year was very much like my view of Berlin: a set of discordant fragments, some in colour, some in black and grey. There is glory in the music, the art, the science, and especially the ethos of Wiko. But there is also the dark. The perfect and the imperfect.