



VERY LIKE A SANDWICH
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Toward the middle of our lives, as Alyx reminded me to read, we came to ourselves in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost. Or rather, for me, the way was too straight, I had filed my mind to a point that could think only of the pandemic, I had been working too hard and too single-mindedly, and did not know how not to. In the first colloquium (Ulinka's), a flourish of ostrich feathers and the rampantly oblique questions that followed (none more splendidly angled than from our post-Cartesian philosopher, Sophie) delightfully revealed a thousand meandering far-from-straight paths. At our first dinner, a courteous Ilya Kl. (very perfectly, one of two Ilyas) layered more magic around the mystery of one of my vast loves (Henry James), which, as we all know and Anthony reminded us, Can Have Only One Meaning.

And what followed delivered: Adrian, writing from the Death Star, heroic crabs from Tatenda, the wonderful challenge of introducing the brilliance of Elisa's mathematical models of our paradoxical integuments, steamships with Constantin, unexpected music and the obliquely revealed magic of how music is written with Liza (a sad bridal song), magic (but quite literally magic) with spellcasting Sofia, and Kullu, fleet-footed across mountain ranges of all kinds. And when the pandemic came back into my working life

(as it had to), Sanyu reframed it for me entirely by saying so simply but so clearly that all of it comes down to intimacy, or rather, the breaking of intimacy.

Winter came down. The dog, Svevo, and I started taking our morning walks with Hannah, a loop that turned left out of Villa Walther, past lakes and villas and up to the train station, with its memorial, and then through the *terrain vague* behind it to loop back down to her office. These conversations brought a new set of curiosities to marvel over from what we had been reading, or a new, fascinating angle on the history of a term I'd been using unthinkingly for years (I might perhaps have guessed that the term "sensitive windows" had more history than hinted at by its dry immunological sense, and so it proved). Then winter entrenched itself. My brother visited under steely skies – and my brother caught COVID (or COVID caught him). One day he had symptoms, and so we tested him, and he tested positive.

Vera and Maike rallied magnificently to help us sort out the logistics of what had to happen (the rules and the specificities of the rules were enormously bewildering at that point in time). My brother was housed in the basement of Villa Jaffé. Dunia supplied us with food for him – indeed supplied us all with food, thoughtfully, calling us up when we forgot to ask, since we were also isolating. We walked over from Villa Walther to pick up food from the kitchen and then passed food to him through the window. He stood in the bathroom, looking up at us. We would rub our hands against the cold and talk for a while. Wiko was vastly supportive, but it was a strange and anxious time. In the evenings, walking back from seeing my brother, I would sometimes see the fox. It would trot by, light and busy, at the start of its nighttime, at the other end of which it might meet Mohammad, heading home. Ten long days later, my brother tested negative, and thus released himself and flew home. On his last day, as we cycled through Grunewald, we saw eight wild boar running across a hill.

Omicron swelled and abated. Life continued. German lessons continued. Eva was endlessly patient with me. Ilya and Sophie and Anthony and I met and read Klemperer. I felt a little more possessed by German, as Nuno would put it, but my stammering tricks not to lose the flow of my German thoughts were always and stubbornly French (euuh). My reading rambled from Anthony's colloquium to Valéry, which wandered me back to Rilke ("Diese Tage, die leer dir scheinen / und wertlos für das All, / haben Wurzeln zwischen den Steinen / und trinken dort überall"). I felt that I spent a lot of time wandering through quiet days. History showed up on the outside of things, and I fell in love with Berlin, outside and in; inside the museums, where Menzel's curiously edge-side angles on forgotten windows were an odd foreshadowing of Guy and his colloquium.

Amid the ludicrous springiness of spring in Grunewald, I took to a routine of mornings spent always in a different café, in a different corner of Berlin, riding out on my bike, or the M19 bus, or the S7 train, and then returning to lunch with my fellow Fellows. Mostly, I applied those mornings – in Kreuzberg, or Charlottenburg, or Schöneberg, or Mitte, or Prenzlauer Berg – to quietly resetting the foundations of my knowledge, reading in and around and through the topics that I’m supposed to know but had run through so headlong over the last decades that I’d never stopped to look.

I was very much at peace with this gentle pace (and have since turned much of that rumination into a text for teaching) but unexpectedly, aspects of Wiko fed back to the more immediate questions I had half set aside. The Three Cultures Forum on biodiversity, a workshop led by Dieter Ebert on co-evolution, and conversations with Sabina, Ulinka, and Eva provided me with new thoughts and new angles in thinking about the microbiome. With Britt, I consummated a somersault in perspective that I had long ago started and never completed to consider how hosts are shaped by rather than shape their microbes. I finished a few more papers about the pandemic virus; I even saw my way to thinking about it a bit more.

Over the spring, the days became blue days (as Sandra would say) and we started to swim (except for Sophie, who had been swimming since the beginning). Mark guided us through a cycle of swans. And then, Mark stayed, but we had to leave.

I have returned to what Anthony taught me is the *Abendland*. And every Tuesday, I miss how we all tilted forwards in our chairs and turned our heads when Nuno’s question was called.

So.

Begriff.

Genau.

Works completed:

Rice, B. L., J. Lessler, C. McKee, and C. J. E. Metcalf (2022). “Why do some coronaviruses become pandemic threats when others do not?” *PLoS Biology* 20, no. 5: e3001652.

Metcalf, C. J. E., B. Tepekule, M. Bruijning, and B. Koskella (2022). “Hosts, microbiomes and the evolution of critical windows.” *Evolution Letters* 5: 412–425.