

## ISLANDS

We say: there once was. We say: what once was, was once. We say: once upon a time. We say: she lived, she was. We say: there once was, there never was.

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As a young man, my father, who was not yet my father, wrote fairy tales for the children's program on Radio Tirana. He got the job through Margarita, a cousin of my mother's who first trained to be an electrician, then studied acting, and finally took courses in directing. With her very short black hair, she looked like Gertrude Stein. Single for many years, she later worked in Kosovo and would come back between semesters to Tirana, where she'd only drop hints in passing about her life abroad. She was and remained what I always wanted to be: an enigma.

The amalgamation of my childhood, between sleep and waking life: witches' houses on chicken legs; Nasreddin Hoxha, the wise village idiot; the little bear who buys ice cream for himself and his hardworking bear of a mother; the princess who strikes out into the world equipped with iron shoes, an iron bag, and a few iron coins; a magical boy who makes everything better; Captain Nero; Huckleberry Finn.

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For a decade or so, my father translated German articles and historical research papers about his county of birth into Albanian. I only realized the extent of his activities, which he carried on with silent stoicism, when the forum where he published his translations was taken offline. As he later told me, most of his posts had a few thousand unique visits, but some of them reached the ten-thousand mark, the last of which was a nearly thirty-year-old piece of literary criticism.

My father, who owns two spiral-binding machines, an all-in-one printer, and about a hundred ring binders of records—my father who loves organizing and filing—had not made any backups. He had typed most of his translations straight into the “new post” text box in his browser without stopping by a word processor. First I was stunned, then very flustered. We talked about the threats to press freedom in Albania; about the manipulation of European voters; about Cambridge Analytica and trolls for hire; about Albanian TV hosts who, out of an

apparent lack of fluency in their own language, employ a unique vocabulary of made-up words, which the children of émigrés have been harshly scolded for copying during the two dozen summers since the big change.

In the end he warned me, as always, to back everything up in three places: on an external hard drive, on paper, and finally in the *Wolke*—his innocent literal translation of the digital Cloud.

A few weeks earlier, I'd been through a disaster of my own. The night before Saint Lucy's Day, while trying to stop a pesky recurring error message, I inadvertently deleted my iCloud account and, with it, permanently erased about 4,000 of the roughly 5,000 notes I'd compiled over the preceding three years.

I'd dominated those notes like nothing else in my life. My access to them felt absolute. They were my attempt to make sense of the constant production and reproduction of a reality I felt marooned in and still can't escape. There were synchronized folders and subfolders and sub-subfolders containing overheard phrases, email starters, short essays, first sentences, last sentences, plots, Wikipedia articles, fun words and concepts, lists upon lists upon lists. My life was stored more clearly and systematically there than it ever had been in the always quite dissatisfying physical world.

Each of my writing sessions began by pressing Ctrl + F to comb those notes for relevant keywords. Only when I merged the past and future Enises with the current one, who was scouring the folders, was I able to produce those meanings and assertions that we call, for lack of a better word, text.

The Wikipedia articles were the most important of all. They still exist, and that cheers me up. That's not true of one of my favorite articles, but ironically it's one I remember: "Occult East Germany." Two years and a day before I inadvertently obliterated my notes, Ephraim33 deleted the article once and for all. Two and a half months earlier, Baumfreund-FFM had merged it with the article "Treatment of the Paranormal in East Germany."

For their many venerable years of work on Wikipedia, both users had been granted administrator privileges, including the right to remove articles. For a decade, they have been making decisions that shape everyone's knowledge. For a decade, they have taken charge, and for just as long I have been following the talk pages about removing articles. I'm addicted. Alongside the "Article" tab, each article has another tab called "Talk." Articles such as "War in Ukraine since 2014" and "Wuppertal Suspension Railway" have archives of past protracted

discussion points, sorted by year. The talk pages for “Lake Shala” or “Hans Reiter (mathematician)” are completely empty.

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I remember: myself, as a child, sitting on the floor cross-legged, or “like an onion merchant,” as we also call it in German, and retrieving the Wahrig dictionary from under the bed, studying the vocabulary as if I understood it, spending hours, days, on one letter—E, G, Q, Y.

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This summer I want to visit the Radio Tirana archive and listen to my father’s fairy tales. That they will still exist nothing but wishful thinking. He says that, when it comes down to it, the stories are nearly indistinguishable from the ones he used to tell me and my sister as kids, and this “nearly” is what interests me, what makes the difference.

I can’t imagine that those fairy tales could have been possible on Albanian radio in the late 1980s. The so-called Iron Curtain hadn’t fallen yet; Tirana’s first punk had probably been thrown into a psych hospital for the second or third time; my father was standing in line for petroleum; Helmut Kohl was doing his thing; the West was the West and the East was the East; my friends’ fathers were working as miners before they sent for their wives, started their second rock bands, finished training as industrial locksmiths at some state-run factory, raised livestock, or spent half the year working in Asia. Back then our fathers weren’t our fathers yet. It was a different world. We didn’t get to witness the transformation; we missed the moment when it became another one, when its production methods changed, when the old methods of reality production were phased out. That moment was not necessarily the Fall of the Wall, but still it resembled the process of carrying away a wall that had been concealing a previously unseen sea of barbed wire. The death strip was revealed to be a beach.

And so I can’t imagine that back then, in the late eighties, Radio Tirana could have broadcast the same fairy tales that my father would later tell my sister and me. I can’t imagine that some fellow student in Margarita’s department played the magical boy who, to escape the wicked witch, turned the princess into a minaret and himself into a poisonous snake before coiling around her walls. I can’t imagine that the paranormal and the supernatural were allowed. I do know this: there was no space for subversion; I know this: subversion was not my father’s

purpose; I know this: when distinguishing what does and does not count as subversive, the question of purpose has never mattered.

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My hopes that I could undo the whole thing and the notes would somehow reappear, that the translations would wash up from the depths of the Wayback Machine, were in vain. If his translations had one special strength, my father said, it was their liberties. I'll never know them.

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You say: I speak Albanian, *unë flas shqip*; you say: I pronounce, *unë shqiptoj*; you say: I translate into Albanian, *unë shqipëroj*; you say: Look, an eagle, no; you say: Look, a she-eagle: *shih, një shqipojnë*.

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When my mother took me, as a child, to see *Intrigue and Love*, her favorite play, I was surprised when the German lines didn't rhyme even though the Albanian translation, which my mother recites in the most inappropriate situations, rhymes indisputably.

Luise says: That letter. Prepare yourself for a terrible disclosure! My hand wrote what my heart abhorred. It was dictated by your father! Luise says: *Këtë letër—kjo dorë e shkroi, kjo zemër e mallkoi—yt atë ma diktoi*, and says nothing more, and the president holds the hand of his dying son, who is just one more entry on a long list of bloodthirsty men, real or fictional, and the president, probably also an American at his core, holds the dying murderer's hand to claim a forgiveness he has not been offered.

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The rich hold sway, the rich fade away, says my father, who is a post-totalitarian father, and to call this position his own is a truth and a falsehood at once. Socialism was just one more entry on a long list of failed experiments, my father thinks. Try again! came the voice from the quiz-game box, which our school let us borrow, whenever we had chosen the wrong answer.

I remember: to entertain himself on the night shift, my father had bought a tiny portable TV, which he shared with a man who had no name to my knowledge besides “the GDR guy” and

was a fervent xenophobe. But when it came to my father—who was not just any colleague, but a colleague with a TV—he gave reassurances: you're different from the others, completely different. I remember: myself, age seven, up in arms as I commanded my father never to speak to that nasty man ever again; I remember: my father laughing uproariously and saying, You have so much to learn.

How could the word resistance be formed by mouths that had learned to speak in a place where dissent was seen as utterly impossible? A place where resistance could be directed at three official targets, the only ones possible: the Nazis, capitalistic imperialism, and Soviet revisionism. What is the relationship between knowledge and resistance?

In the sky, back then and presumably still today: no paranormal activity, only stardust and microwaves and things we don't quite understand yet. In the alleys, the boulevards, and the squares, they say: come out for May Day, come out for Women's Day, come out for Liberation Day, come out. I study, I read, I conclude: In late capitalism, dissidents are no longer tortured and killed, just pronounced to be foreigners. I write: The fugitive stands under a different sky. Her eyes view a different distance.