

Susanne Kriemann: P(ech)B(lende) – Library for Radioactive Afterlife
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Lutz Seiler

i am tired

before going to sleep i'd quietly speak with
my mother's hairpiece i
don't remember how

it managed to sing from its pale
styrofoam head so quietly
llorelyn songs

you'd have to be
twenty again and it told me
too i should go to sleep

The Territory of Tiredness

People generally referred to the two East Thuringian villages in which I grew up as the *tired villages*. People there, it was said, were apathetic and listless and they themselves even complained about their perennial fatigue and wondered about those strange moments when they were somehow absent. There was a heaviness there, which hung over everything: over the seemingly endless series of days in the courtyard, over the garden, in the labyrinth of the outbuilding of the half-dead, post-collectivization estate. A large four-sided farmyard with feed rooms, a laundry room, garages, stalls, and hay barns with unused wagons, next to which stood a five-meter high threshing machine that would emit satanic noises and gave me the impression that sooner or later I would be called into its hoppers and chewed apart. Everywhere there were ditches for slurry or water that children might have the inclination to fall into—simply because they'd heard so many grave warnings from their concerned parents.

A bizarre mountain delimited the world of the tired villages and shaped the horizon of my childhood: the slag heaps and tailing ponds beneath which lay the ore, the uranium. When the American occupying forces pulled out of Thuringia in 1945 and as a countermeasure Berlin was divided into sectors, they managed to overlook something in particular: pitchblende. Black and glistening like meconium, those cryptocrystalline uranium stones down in the earth are its heaviest natural element. Strangely, the East German storage sites were forgotten by the Allies. James Byrnes, then Secretary of State, had explained that the Soviet Union could not produce atomic bombs, as there were no uranium deposits in Russia. After the Americans' departure, though still in 1945, Russian geologists discovered the East German uranium deposits. One year later, the only communistic stock company on German soil, the Soviet-German AG Wismut, began to take fissionable material for Russian atomic bombs out of the earth. The Americans' monopoly on the atom bomb had been broken.

The uranium stockpiles, their ash-grey emissions, the thin, hair-like covering of birches at the foot of this mountain belonged to the horizon of my childhood as for others maybe the Alps do, or the eaves of a neighboring row of houses. When I draped myself across the gate that opened back out onto the fields, their horizon reached all the way into my dreams.

My father tells the story of how one morning he awoke to find a drilling rig in the garden. A neighbor said: "There's one in mine too." And, at the same time, the way to the next village had disappeared—excavated away, buried alive. Thuringia became the third largest uranium extraction site in the world, after sites in the USA and Canada; at the time, half a million people were employed there. The miners worked in shifts, but were paid well, had to wait less time to order their automobiles, and had a monthly ration of four bottles of brandy, duty free. 0,7 liters cost just 1.17 marks. Made inside the plant itself, the mountain workers called it "Miners' Death." If anything, their sense of humor was macabre and was a combination of knowledge and ignorance. When my grandfather would get back home from the pit in the mornings, we'd sit in the kitchen in front of the radio. He would come over to us and wave his hand above its wooden casing and immediately the music would thin out into an otherworldly clicking and crackling. As soon as he pulled his hand away, the ghost would disappear and **Bavarian Radio** would return. We were impressed, and he would laugh. I also remember the oppressive feeling this invisible power had over me when my grandfather would affectionately place his hand upon my head.

In the distance, the space we knew—which right before our eyes had been expelled or pumped away into a tailing—had become a landscape of slagheaps. “A world subjected to the force of a dowsing rod stretching from the Antarctic to the Erz Mountains: Uranium, Pitchblende, Isotop 235! Those neuroses reaching deep into the ground!” By the time **Gottfried Benn’s *Ptolemaist* was published in 1949**, East German uranium mining had already managed to extract the first of the 220,000 tons of uranium from the earth. In the end, 500 million tons of radioactive waste was to remain behind in East Germany.

But we didn’t think about force or neuroses when we looked at the slag heaps. It was only at night, with an ear to the bed frame, that you thought you could hear something moving under the earth. Something like what Büchner’s Woyzeck must have heard when he stamped the ground and said: “It’s all hollow down there.” I can remember the strange feeling under my soles when I thought I was walking across particularly thin ground.

Our lives were clearly not marked by any particularly inspiring sociability. To quiet down, to retreat inside for “a moment of reflection”—no one had to do that at our table. We were *inside*. Often our conversations did not really seem as if they were made for true exchange. What was said came as if from afar to the ear of those sunk into their tiredness, like the contact call that underwater animals make in order to announce their location to others. That way no one was truly alone. And the tiredness was a protective skin of sorts. You were among others and with things, but without getting to know them any better; you remained self-contained, somewhere beyond external life. And it was within this “tiredness”—so it seems to me today—that a particular and almost self-evident closeness to things, the feeling of a secret relationship, began. Already in childhood the assumed duality of subject and object for the perception of the world, for its daily conception, had been disrupted. I imagine that that is precisely what led me later to the rather tortuous difficulty of being able to presume what a subject was, embrace it and then *speak about* it—or, at least to write. I didn’t feel I possessed the head start that the present concepts and names suggest.

When I began to write, I imagined a kind of “Dictionary of Diffused Being.” Little by little a lexically ordered poetics was supposed to develop, emanating from so-called “specific clusters” like *Absence*, *Tiredness* und *Heaviness*. *Absence*, *tiredness* and *heaviness* marked that time. Childhood states of

perception that later have the effect of affine media in which you think you can more directly feel the world. And childhood, again, is where the qualities of the text arrive from, pre-poetological axioms, if you will.

Today, when I return to the table of my youth, where we would sit and stop for a moment in our tiredness, I also have to think of all the moments we weren't particularly at peace. When my grandfather, Erich König (born in 1908, deceased in 1987), would try to shake off his tiredness and its rarely unrelated lethargy, headaches and dizziness, he usually required the energy of an explosive outburst. A meal was often the point of departure. Even before he'd had anything, he'd grumble something about "too little salt" or "too much salt" and wave about with his fork in my grandmother's direction, which was to the left of him—the place closest to the stove. When his outburst grew in intensity and my grandfather was no longer able to calm down, he'd announce that he wanted to kill himself. Out in the pig stalls there was the rope that he'd use to do it. This would happen two or three times a year, but one time in particular was a regular occurrence, and that was Christmas. On the first day of the holidays, my grandfather would first destroy whatever gift he had for my grandmother (once it was a beautiful, heavy desk; he managed to bring it downstairs all by himself and out in front of the door to the courtyard where he then proceeded to chop it into neat little pieces), only to then—as announced—go and kill himself. The chosen tree was the oak his own grandfather Eduard (born 1846, deceased 1910) had planted as a freedom oak at the end of the Franco-Prussian War of 1871. Either my grandfather had really forgotten that the lowest branches of that great tree had long been at such an unreachable height, or he knew all too well that the wife he had scolded would get help from the entire family and, as if in procession, follow him to the stalls, from the stalls to the tree and, at the latest, in front of the driveway with the oak, would have talked him out of killing himself and instead talked him back into coming inside to join everyone else around the table.

Tired villages—what a beautiful way to describe the effect of low doses of constant radiation, which is why there were no weeds and which is also why, even in the most glorious battles of my imagination, I could not protect myself. Of those who worked in the uranium mines, very few made it past sixty. When one looks a little more closely at the uranium producing parts of East Germany—for example, at the high frequency of blood disease and cancer, which had already begun to be noticed in the 1980s—discussions of castor transports and disposal sites appear in a rather strange light.

The former mining company—today a restoration company—is, however, still known by the cover name it once received from the Stalin administration: “Wismut.” In the year 2000, parts of the slagheaps made up a section of the German contribution to the international “expo” exhibit and in 2007, the National Garden Show laid its lovely and dark mother earth over the wound. A memorial mine was constructed; the actual tunnels, which wind for over 1000 kilometers through the bowels of the earth, were closed off due to radiation concerns. A glass pavilion has already been erected where the holy Bad Ronneburger spring waters were discovered in 1666. As to the spring itself, it disappeared with the construction of the mine and has never been seen again.

In the meantime, it is a well-known fact that wherever the Navajo Indians of North America built their holy images out of sand, ground maize, and crushed blooms, uranium was to be found in the earth. The holy land—where for generations there had been warnings about invisible dangers—was radioactive. The largest underground uranium mine on earth is supposed to be in Mount Taylor, the Navajo’s holy mountain. In the Black Hills of South Dakota, uranium mining destroyed the Sioux’s holy sites. Generations of native people, Navajo or Sioux, had travelled across the country precisely to find those very places for the invocation of their spirits. The shining stone was also present in the fields around Ronneburg, but we had never had to seek out the place; we were already there. Why should the trance-like quality of such places not have affected us just as strongly? One person makes a mandala, another person a poem.