

BLOCKS

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THE NIGHT

The plane went its way, dead straight, a red signal light in front, strengthened by crystal prisms. It shot through the night like an arrow with a glowing tip. Its destination was the city. It flew low over arable land.

There were no lights on the earth. There was an abundance of light in the sky. ~~[[Romance prevailed wherever man had not yet struck, wild and furious in its victory.]]~~ Storm clouds sped past, frigates of the night covered with sail. The sails tore.

The ground was chequered in white and black, pale black, pale white. The plane passed through shadow and light. The moon burst through. Light cascaded down in waterfalls. The ravine of night was brim-full with waterfalls. The plane with its foreboding ruby searched for the city.

The villages, fallen into ruin, had been wiped out. There was no place for villages in the State. Instead, there were large central hubs.

The plane flew over arable land, then over pastures, then over forests. There was not a single point of light on the earth, and the moon was smothered. Winter hail swished past the metal flanks, the plane climbed over invisible hills on its way to the capital. For a moment, the night was flawless,- then, on the horizon, the throbbing glow of the ruby. It neither receded nor came closer: the plane kept a parallel course.

In the dark cabin, passengers got up from their mattress. The night, drained of hail but still black, flooded with red eyes, above, below. In a corner of the heavens, high above, was like an enormous constellation, as if seen through red glass. The stars edged through slowly.

A thin strip of light swelled and grew into an airship with all its windows lit up. On the other side a diffuse milky glow lingered for a long time, then split like an iceberg breaking from the mist into sunshine. This was the Mammoth, the lustrous, brand new and largest airship of the State, a city above the earth. The moon broke through again, pale and frail in comparison to that great, new, radiant globe; all moons were diminished, manacled and obedient in peaceful resignation. The name Mammoth was diminutive. The Council would rename the airship Nr 4. The number did not represent dimensions.

The plane held a steady course diagonally underneath the Mammoth, which smudged a patch on the horizon. After the crossing of this satellite into view, the night suddenly brimmed with red eyes, and then another smudge of light appeared straight ahead: the capital's airport.

Plummeting lights scored the ground's surface in regular rows, mimicking a rectilinear drawing. The airport came into view, its plain grass square a pasty green in the floodlight.

Sixteen mooring masts carried a dull red light in top. But truly awe-inspiring were the sixteen searchlights embedded around the periphery in their concrete towers,

supporting bases for the sixteen dead straight columns of light holding up the night. The red-beaked bird planes flew in and out between the columns.

The helicopter navigated for its landing spot, descended perpendicularly, bounced briefly on the grass, settled, folded its wings for the night. The passengers alighted between the double rows of police, travel badges pinned to their chest. Police units searched the cabins with torches. The Mammoth appeared on the skyline like a diadem.

THE DAY

The capital awakened to the fluttering of the national flag on its days of rest, - which was every fifth. The residential districts were a hubbub of activity. The work districts were deserted.

The city was laid out spaciouly and evenly, the streets were straight, the middle lanes wider than those on the outside. The asphalt was decked out in different colours, white, brown, grey, black, in plain stripes, side by side or with a Greek border, but nothing ostentatious. The monotony had to be disrupted without it drawing away attention from the buildings.

The building facades stacked up in similar colours, four or five windows high in the residential districts, lower in the work districts. The streets were never long, and uniform building blocks canopied either ends. In the interplay between open space and enclosure, enclosure had the upper hand. The city bent over for pedestrians. It had no endpoints: the city ended abruptly, around the corner. There was very little construction work, the population of the State was stable and now that it was housed in the cities, the trickle of urban migration had dried up. Migration between cities was rare now that all architecture was standardized. A city's individuality was wrapped up in a single relic. That relic belonged to that particular city and not to another. But apart from that singular curiosity, all of life's necessities were provided in and around one's own city.

Arable land was centrally managed by the cities. A few remote regions required sub-cities, their concrete structures populated only during summer.

In the city, residential and work districts were purposefully built to sit side by side. This way, everything was within walking distance. The car was an extinct means of transportation, as was the railway system before that. Only the army still used cars. Footsteps had reclaimed their ancient rights; perambulation was the best form of relaxation.

The families, on that day of rest, swarmed early at dawn from their residential districts. The city was bursting with processions, with flags and gentle, never loud music. Anyone who ventured out alone straightaway drew a thousand mistrusting glances, like sunbeams converging in a lens, and was in danger.

The children unable to join in stayed behind under supervision in the wide sheltered courtyards. The older ones among them would parade around the residential blocks later that day, in small groups.

The city's earnest commitment to the four working days was expressed in the rigid monumentality of its block architecture, but the joy of the day of rest exuberated in the flowers in the windows, the lawns in the courtyard, the flowerbeds and the fountains. The State commanded a love of nature because nature was a source of joy and peace.

The State had introduced the wearing of national costumes; fashion had come to an end. Until 15 November the population went dressed in a white and red costume, then until 15 March black and red. ~~July and August had been renamed.~~

Today was the thirteenth of November, the last **day of rest** before the transition to black. The outfits were sporty, lightweight. The population was hardened against the cold.

Small armies walked in serried ranks. Against the severity of the buildings this human activity looked joyful, exultant. This was not the wriggling of countless individuals but one solid moving mass-, powerful and unyielding, it was elated in its power. The public processions dominated the city.

In closed columns they filed past, women and girls at the front. The armies formed impeccable squares and rectangles. The short white skirts with single red stripe fluttered above their knees, the white shorts with a red stripe stretched around their thighs. **Everyone wore sandals under bare legs.**

There was a soft humming from the processions. The faces bore expressions of pure strength and happiness. It moved quickly and monotonously. Only the most alert observer would be able to snatch a glimpse of the individual among these strong, determined groups.

The tangible carefreeness, material well-being and equality for all had allowed the population to thrive. Universal dental care had cultivated gleaming sets of teeth, teeth made for biting and smiling. The people's faces were fierce, probing, hard. Cranial capacity had increased, predominantly brachycephalic. Long skulls were considered to be ethnologically inferior. Cheekbones and brows were set a little heavier, and a mystery to the demographic institute, which nevertheless heralded an imminent refinement of facial bone structures.

Until 15 November, headwear was prohibited. Hair loss had been cured. Hair growth, mostly luscious, was uniformly cropped.

Several formations consisted exclusively of young men, and these were the most striking. They surged and swayed like an ice drift on restless water. Their eyes encapsulated the angularity of their thoughts. There were no transgressions, not now, not ever. Instead their bodies moved smoothly and quietly, pliable. They carried their shared ideals in a red hurricane of flags above their head.

Singing was permitted outside the city. Throats broke open in hymn. Music had reverted to the almost Gregorian chant, but it was too powerful to be gloomy or sad, too encompassing to be rebellious. There were only national songs, about the State, community, labour, sport. The young men exalted in song, their corals ringing through the air.

The day was cold and clear. A northerly wind gusted through the lungs. The sky was pale blue. The sun was still low. The sky was speckled with eagles. On a

rocky outcrop overhanging the plain, one eagle had built its eyrie. Their care fell to the State. Every night cadavers were transported to the periphery of their territory, for their quarry. These charnel-grounds lay scattered with carcasses gnawed to the bone.

Gently sloping woodland and meadows surrounded the angular city. This was the relaxation belt, which easily accommodated the population. Some troops marched for hours,- others practiced different sports on the meadows. Athletics could again be practiced naked, in concrete sports buildings, by both sexes simultaneously and often together. The State did not distinguish between the sexes, - man had become the perfect equal of woman. The distinction in costume was a vestige the State would like to see scrapped. But as part of all freedom of social expression, the State recognized chastity as a symbol of national will power: the lower body stayed covered up.

The day grew higher and higher above the rumbling and tumbling multitudes. Police were on surveillance everywhere, and openly. The day began to shrink; yet still there was little time to rest. No one ate or drank; mealtime wasn't until 5pm. Columns that had been on the march for eight hours returned fresh, waving flags and singing. The sun sank. The sky flickered like an open fire. The eagles swooped down, the people went home. The north wind whistled from the hills, snapped at clothes. It was honourable to return to the city singing loudly and full-heartedly. The corals rang out once more. Night fell over the big day.

In the city, the voices fell silent, but the troops marched on, joyfully marching in their impeccable square and rectangular formations. The street lighting was adequate, not abundant. Plenty of light shone from the residential blocks. The ban on curtains had proved unenforceable and had been withdrawn by the new Council eight years ago. Many families nevertheless lived their evening lives visible to all. Their domestic lights lit the street.

In a few residential blocks, the alcoves on the ground floor were brightly lit and accessible to the public. Here, at an angle, the dead were propped upright against catafalques. Carbonized to ward off the first decay, they were exhibited in the alcoves for three days, to please the crowds,- after which they were buried, naked and stood upright in their graves, the moist sand stamped down around the corpses. It was a harsh sentence indeed, to be condemned to be buried lying down, in the remote and desolate Recumbent Graveyard. Only exemplary behaviour could reverse that sentence.

The population was now free to go home, but many people chose not to. They headed to the People's Hall, a space that could easily hold two hundred thousand people. The floor was covered in concrete slabs, yellow and brown, the walls and the roof were white. The roof didn't have supporting beams but was suspended from an aluminium span. Light flooded in like daylight, in every direction. It was freezing inside. There were no seats, everyone stood. At the far end, an enormous organ stood like an ancient city within a city in this hall. The organ played for two hours. When it started playing the light altered. It turned yellow, red, from a violet vividness, it morphed with the music.

There were no more orchestras, and only a few musical instruments. The national instrument was the pipe organ. Every city's People's Hall had one, the capital the largest. But it was no longer an instrument intended for musicians; it was operated by an army of government officials and powered by a series of electrical levers. It was a beast of an organ that refused to resonate softly. Even though it had been tuned to the piano, it was like listening to a lowing cow abandoned on an oilrig out at sea. But

the overriding effect was overwhelming, when on the rare occasion the hall's roof was opened, and the sound of the organ, too heavy and sonorous for the human ear, merged with the vibrations in the air.

It was considered honourable to stand motionless for the duration of the concert and its associated light display. The young men refrained from blinking, even during the loudest eruptions of sound.

The crowds listened to the music as one, but to the critical eye the homogeneously dressed crowd peeled back into separate and individual faces. Nature, more powerful than the will of the government, whimsically usurped the monotony of the congregation. The State's thick layer of varnish could not dull the original colours.

THE LECTURE

The State machinery had been operating in its present form for forty-five years. In that time, the odd screw had been tightened, another loosened a little, - no more than that. The State considered itself the most perfect order attainable on Earth, and founded to last an earthly eternity. It could in all probability stay this way for millions of years, and so it would. Mankind had only just begun to poke at the earth's crust; and even though an ever-faster pace was anticipated, it would take an inconceivable amount of time for man to reach the core. Every possible raw material needed to sustain life was found in the State. There was no foreign trade; there were no diplomatic relations. The exception was films, which were bartered across the border. Money was verboten; production and distribution systems had been put in place by the State or were done by the State itself. Nothing had value because value is personal. The State did not tolerate criticism because criticism is divisive.

That evening, the Council, made up of ten – five men, five women, that administered the State, scheduled a lecture in the small council chamber for its own entertainment and that of the State's other higher administrative departments, about one hundred people in total. The lecture would be on Sphere dogma.

The speaker standing on a raised platform was not performing for the first time. He had talked about the Sphere before and was to speak on it again that evening. His proclamations had landed him in prison thirty years ago, where, it must be said, he was treated well. His state-threatening utterances could not harm the listeners assembled here. His critique and that of his fellow sufferers was for their sparse amusement.

A solitary figure stood on the platform. It was a figure from the past. His word was a voice from the past. He stood and they stood listening to him.

He was short, wizened, myopic, and the only strong feature about him was the long, wild, snow-white hair that covered his head and face. His voice was feeble, but not unclear.

'You have,' he said, 'built a world of blocks, carved your flowerbeds into squares, shredded your streets into lines! The hard love of your soul is in love with the hard lines of figures and shapes. You have pushed the block to its absolute extreme; you are the cubist of reality. The sharp edges of your lebensraum will mortally wound you.'

I only need touch my round skull to feel that what lies inside seeks perfection in a circle, disc or sphere. Oh, glory to the infinite line, surface without corners, body without surfaces!

You worship the block as you would a god and yet you have failed to discipline nature. Your children sit in your square classrooms and absorb the angular lessons of your principles through round eyes. You, men, stroke the curves of your women for sensual pleasure. What would be your response if your caressing hands instead stroked cubes? You forget the earth is round, that it orbits the sun, whose rays refract into rainbows when round drops fall.

You are not disciples of the loving water but of loveless blocks of ice. Your angular intelligence drifts like an ice floe on the undulations of your afflictions. And yet, water flows underneath, and sometimes, where the ice is soft, where there is a hole, it spills out onto the surface. Yes, your ice floes are impressive, but eventually they will crush the State. The arctic cold you so revere will be your undoing.

Your aspirations are not in accordance with the nature of man. You are unfaithful to your founding principles in other ways too. Your Mammoth, your Mastodon, your Minotaur or whatever your M-airships are called – I hear you have renamed them with numbers, you fools – are not boxes filled with gas, but balloons; the **transportation belts** of your cities run on wheels, discus throwing hasn't changed. Do you believe your cannons fire cubes? My voice travels through the curved and oval orifice of your ears.

The sky hangs over you like a dome; the universe that surrounds you is a sphere. The natural order strives for the sphere. The city of the future will be a city of domes, a city founded on top of a round mountain. If you must worship, worship the sphere, bow down to the fearsome secret of its contents, you who so ardently strive to achieve fearsomeness. Your power is an inexorable caricature of your principles, you ditherers, you double-standard keepers, you mathematical bigamists.'

The congregation stood and listened to the old man, unmoved, without laughter or ridicule. The upright position of man was a mark of his progress: no one ever sat at a gathering, people stood. Whispers rose from the crowd when the old man finished talking. He was getting old, they said, he was becoming repetitive.

The old man was escorted back to his cell, where he was well looked-after.