

Is there a first time, an origin, a single explication, a reason behind everything? Or is it just our desire, the ignorance we display, the urge of wanting to explain everything? Questions demand an answer and the bridge they predetermine is too narrow: the whole world flows below it, fast, unfathomable and fresh and it is worth bathing in it, dipping into it, drinking from it, sprouting shoots, sprouting gills.

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They say that it all started on a high Andean plateau. Was there one sole discoverer, a single pair of hands digging up the earth, or were they found already unearthed by a torrent of water? Were they a pile of experiments heaped together and forgotten then deposited over the course of the centuries? It seems that the sweet type came first and the other was inedible – small and twisted like arthritic fingers – and they had to cross-breed its time and again to be able to get their teeth into it. And also, that they used to freeze and sun-dry them, making a dehydrated blob that could be kept up to ten years. That a great empire used them to deploy its power over the continent. That there were a thousand types of them.

Everything slips our grasp: who knows what truly happened
10,000 years ago?
Who remembers what they had for dinner last Wednesday?
Potato omelette?
Carrot soup?
Nobody remembers their first time.
Who knows when they took their first bite of a potato?
Why are carrots orange?
It's not important. Right?
What is important?
A prince? A name? A colour?¹ A war?

The main information that a question provides is about whoever is asking it: what interests them, from where they are asking it, what they know, the kind of person they are. Every question prefigures an answer, or rather, the limitation of that answer. It's a kind of mould: human questions give human answers, at the service of the human mind's limited knowledge. We cannot access knowledge, knowledge in its entirety, knowledge outside the human mind, through the questions that we ask, because above all what they do is narrow it down. Questions are useful to us as a spur, but cannot be a method. They are the crutches of curiosity when it does not fly, a beginning, but they can never be what determine our research – true research discovers what it doesn't know it will discover and has to allow itself to do so: if you find what you wanted to find, why were you looking for it? What benefit does it give you? If the aim is self-corroboration, the outlook is not good. A direct question opens nothing, it is not a key; it is rather, simply, the negative of a lock. And we don't want to know how the door closes but rather what is beyond it. What escapes us. In contrast, questioning ourselves is not head-

ing blindly into an answer, into the lock, but more a case of flying over the territory of our knowledge, mapping it out, widening the battlefield. Multiplying it. Making it fertile: breeding more questions, not answers. A thick web of questions that we measure, let loose over the immensity of what is not structured to be understood. Playing it, experiencing it, becoming wrapped up in it, learning not to impose the meaning. Questioning ourselves means asking ourselves bird-questions, that act like ship's lookouts in the sky of our thought and spot undiscovered lands, skyscraper peaks and splendid clearings, without parallel. Incomprehensible. Unknown. Peaks of wisdom, dissolutions of reason, thought that is overflowed and overtaken.

I don't know how Edu and I first met. I think it was when were playing with the Sirles, a chaotic and foggy era, probably on a summer night in Sant Feliu de Guíxols, the kind of night where you end up in the sea stark naked under the stars. It's been years since we last saw each other. We arrange to meet at half six at the temple. It has two entrances: one from the square and one from the alleyway behind. I find him at the marble bar, chatting with Josep, who is explaining how one day, with a partner of his, they locked themselves in the kitchen in order to make the perfect patatas bravas. Scientific method: various varieties of spuds, measurements of oil temperature and timing, double and triple cooking processes, et cetera. He doesn't explain the secret to us and recommends we try the baby octopus, a true delicacy, tender and tasty. Between beers, I ask Edu if he remembers the first time he ever ate potato. He makes one of those faces that are so his, so expressive, with ambushed laughter about to assault you from every corner of his ears, his eyes and his nose. He says he doesn't, but he imagines it must have been mashed up, in the

form of purée, like so many other kids. I bring him up to date on my spud research, full of amazing anecdotes such as the Potato Edict of Frederick the Great² or the story of this poster³. He tells me that what he finds most amazing about the potato is that it is infinite. I suppose that he is referring to its capacity to sprout and sprout, not depending on a seed to continue its cycle. To germinate and graft itself here, there and everywhere. To spread out. To emerge from itself and become another. At a dinner party a few days ago, somebody brought some sparklers to celebrate the get-together and a couple of guests suffered slight burns. We were in the Priorat area. A writer friend of mine told them to cut a potato and rub it over the burn, saying it would calm the stinging and heal the skin. It worked. Why do we have to perpetuate the segmentation of knowledge? Who benefits from the distinction between theory and practice, between textbook and trials, between narrative and non-fiction? Why not practice a literature without floodgates and plant potatoes in its footnotes?

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Turin, 1889. A man flogs his horse mercilessly. Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche is overcome, he flings his arms around the animal and falls to the ground, sobbing. Crazy, he will never recover his mind. He dies eleven years later. In 2011, the brilliant Hungarian filmmaker, Béla Tarr, wonders about what happened with that horse and its owner – and his daughter – in an isolated farm in no-man's land. This question becomes a film that offers no answer, that screams apocalypse: *A torinói ló* (*The Turin Horse*). I don't remember when I ate potatoes for the first time but I will never be able to get that film out of my head: the incessant wind, the growing darkness, the daily struggle for survival and at the

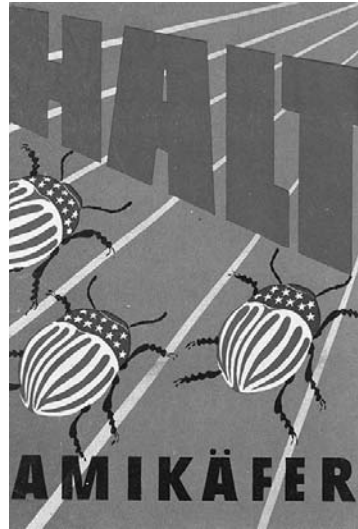
end of six days, the end of the world when, finally, they could no longer boil the potatoes that they ate every evening with their hands, father and daughter, face to face, in silence, as though in a pagan communion.

[1] Citrus fruits are twenty million years old and originated in Asia. In the year zero, in India the orange was known as “naranga”, in Sanskrit. As they journeyed west, this fruit was assimilated by the Arabs, who introduced it into the Iberian peninsula with the name *nāranj* and the French in the Middle Ages called it orange based on the Arabic and the Italian *arancia*. Since then, the fruit’s name has also become the name of its colour. William the Silent, a noble of the Nassau family, was born in Germany in 1533. When he was eleven, his cousin, René de Châlon, Prince of Orange (a county in southern France) died, and he inherited his titles and became Prince William van Oranje-Nassau. He would end up captaining the Dutch revolt against the Spanish monarchy that would set off the Eighty Years’ War, and in 1648 would culminate with the independence of the United Provinces of the Netherlands. In those days, the Dutch were big carrot-growers, and in honour of the royal house that had given them independence, they started to mass grow a very rare species of carrot containing a large amount of beta-carotene, a pigment classified as a terpenoid hydrocarbon, the same colour as the name of William’s dynasty. In other words the fruit – the orange – gave its name to the colour and the Dutch ended up giving this colour to the type of carrot that is most common everywhere today. Like the one that you grated into your salad yesterday.

[2] When the Europeans discovered the potato in America in the early 16th century, it caused no stir among them, rather the opposite: the green part was poisonous, it came from the dangerous nightshades family, it was not mentioned in the Bible and it didn’t look too good either. So when it reached Seville, it was grown in the courtyard of the Hospital de la Sangre in the year 1570 to feed the poor who were living there: if they died, nobody would kick up much fuss. Contrary to all expectations, its high nutritional value (easily digestible proteins, minerals and vitamins) helped them to recover. Felipe II saw an opportunity and sent some to the Pope, who had an ambassador who

was ill in the Netherlands so sent some to him. There, the potato fell into the hands of botanist Carolus Clusius – responsible for introducing the tulip – and he planted some in Vienna, Frankfurt and Leyden. The crazy Frederick the Great would be one of the first people to understand that the potato could strengthen his soldiers and the population in general, because it was a nutritional food that could be grown anywhere, in adverse conditions and independently of harsh weather conditions that could devastate other crops. To overcome the reluctance of the peasant farmers, Frederick used two ploys: one subtle and one categorical. He had a royal potato field planted by a busy thoroughfare and put guards there to watch over it. This amazed the peasants and they started to take an interest. To ice the cake, he gave instructions to his guards to sleep at night and not be too attentive to their guard duties. It didn't take long for people to get hold of the coveted potatoes and plant them themselves. The categorical ploy came in 1756 with the Kartoffelbefehl, or Potato Edict, which obliged everyone to plant potatoes. Their initial rejection very quickly became devotion. Antoine-Augustine Parmentier used the same ploys in France – where the potato had been banned by parliament since 1748 because they alleged it caused leprosy – by planting potatoes in the garden of the Tuileries Palace to attract interest to the cursed tuber, but since he could not hammer the point home by publishing an edict, he used other arms to make spuds fashionable: he convinced Marie Antoinette to carry a bunch of potato flowers and organised major feasts with celebrities such as Benjamin Franklin, where all the dishes were based on different ways of cooking potatoes. Eventually, in 1785, a year of failed crops, the French populace gratefully accepted the potato as a way of avoiding famine. Exactly the opposite happened in 1845 in Ireland: there, they would grow the “Irish Lumper” variety as a monoculture. With the arrival of the American pest – *Phytophthora infestans*, a condition that caused potato blight and wiped out the crop in the blink of an eye – in just four years the Irish population fell by two million people, of whom one million died and the other million emigrated.

[3]



THE TALE OF THE PIG SLAUGHTER

In a mountain village in Europe
in the spiritual back of beyond
when icy winter arrives
it's time to slaughter the pig
up there in a world of their own
locals gather in the street
they're not from Porto or Geneva
Madrid or Bucharest
they can't make head nor tail
of European Parliament debates
to them the whole business
all sounds like hogwash
 they don't know the far right has the run of the place
 Brexit's set the cat among the pigeons
 even if they knew all this
 they couldn't do a thing about it
 governments
 and people
 out of step
like odd socks in today's Europe
always wrong-footed, staggering
from one disaster to the next

but they can't escape the telly
after picking the crops
and checking the chickens are safe from the fox
they spend their evenings on the sofa
watching whatever they find on the box
it's always the same old rubbish
ranting and raving on every channel
people kicking up an almighty ruckus
they don't get out much to look at the stars
the earth and the universe
are on first-name terms
 but the majesty of the sky
passes them by
 surplus to their needs

 what hubris the earth the centre of the cosmos
 yet
 how many still think
 there's nothing but us, the only sense
 and sensibility
 in an absurdly vast void

they get on well this lot
one wheeler-dealer two tongue-waggers
the usual old-timers
plus the blow-ins from Barcelona
loath to return to the city on Sunday
secretly praying for a downfall of snow
that'll leave the village smothered in white
 sausages and chops grilled over coals
 washed down with wine from local vines

bubbling stews with garden vegetables
a handful of beans garlic from the woods
and half a rabbit and a rasher of bacon
from a friendly farmer down the lane
a lettuce that's never been washed
—a marvel of nature like
fish that have never felt ice—
tongues of fire burst forth from the hearth
warming nooks, crannies
and the cockles of hearts

but it never happens
the German lass Steffi
has made a place for herself here
like past generations of villagers
she's managed to raise
poultry, tomatoes and three kids of her own
the father's the shepherd they say
a strapping young man
maybe it's him or maybe it's not
Steffi gets on with her stuff
she's taken in two German lads
boys with issues they say
some love and attention soon calms them down
the mountain air
soothes their troubles and cares
and a spot of hard work
leaves no time for screens
and dispels the screams
of past abuse
they run with the sheep through fields
and valleys

chasing and larking the day away
Agustina and Marcelino
living legends in the village
invite them over to their pool
diving
splashing
basking
in their new life
but when they can
they're away
off to Berlin
thumbing a lift and cocking a snoot
 out of control
fucking who they like
 taking what they want
sleeping in the street till they tire
and then they're back
in the village
there's a poet with sparks
coming out of his ears
he shapes words with his hands
sowing syllables where others
plant potatoes and up sprout poems
with words in their roots
from distant dells and hidden gorges
 words like
 griglans
 smeech
 brock
his tongue on his fingertips
his eager eyes leap up from the page

from *Kill All Normies* to the treetops
from *El cor quiet* to Montmagastre
from Carner's verse
to the fashionable fascists
who hate everything and everyone
he jots down the thoughts
whispered in his ear
by the buzzing bees
 the elm becomes a cloud
of enchanted umeboshi
barking dogs tractors chainsaws
jangling cowbells squawking chickens
the next-door neighbour's kids
they say if you listen carefully
you can hear the wind being born
an open door lets everything in
an open poem turns nothing away
 yes
 this isn't prose
 yes
 it twists and turns
scattering syllables pairing words
all welcome
 yes
 this is a poem
 where nonsense is also new sense
playing with tongues
curling up words
chewing the cud
you're reading this in translation
not everything matches the original

some colours are new
some meanings are shaded
some offshoots have run wild
others were nipped in the bud
some turnings were taken by chance
swerving away from the usual path
to a new home stocked with
strange fruit and perky jams
made by crabby grannies
grafted tongues
freed and reborn
if we have to belong to a culture
let it be a sea of tongues
out with the maladies
of perfect pure lives

the poet doesn't go to the slaughter
but others arrive the day before
early morning still dark
the cock's too sleepy to crow
lights come on
coffeepots whistle on stoves
stirring
lazy lie-abeds

wiping sleep from their eyes
a hop, skip and a jump out into the cold
following their own frozen breath
an umbilical premonition
like Donnie Darko's
they head for Steffi's house
an ancient tradition
gathering in the square to kill the pig

a public event for the last 500 years
since the Reconquest
since the Jews were expelled
proving one's Christian credentials

pigs that divide
pigs as animal borders
give us this day our daily pig
for ever and ever
and yet before
it was simply a kind of meat
with no special meaning
not a symbol
but merely a beast

and also to test
the skills and fears of the village youngsters
who baulks at cleaning the innards
who licks their lips at the bubbling pot
who covers their ears from the dying squeals
who ties up sausages with their teeth

there were no pigs in America until
Christopher Columbus brought eight
from La Gomera in 1493
they ate lizards
pineapples cassava walnuts and birds
they soon multiplied
and the flu virus they carried
killed a million and a half Indians

Steffi brandishes the knife
she knows what to do
she's won over the village elders
now she leads the slaughter

and sets everyone to work
the struggling pig knows what's coming
it takes six to hold it steady
the knife cuts true
out spurts blood
gushing and gurgling
into the black bucket
they sear it with the blowtorch
the smell of scorched skin
the stench of burnt animal
fills the cold air
now they skin it while
the children clean the innards
with the hosepipe in the field
 inside the adults
skin, cut and separate
first head feet and spine
out with the innards
 heart and liver
hung up high
next fillets, chops and tenderloin
from the shoulder and belly
then cheeks ears and snout
from the head
the bones are cut from legs and shoulders
the fat for making sausages
and lard
 then
chop up the meat and mix together
 "on their knees
 with two hands

till it sweats from its arse”
as Mesquida said in *Llefre de tu*

salt and pepper
herbs and spices
stuff the sausages
hang them up
set the table
for a celebratory feast
after the slaughter
celebrate the slaughter
after the slaughter
no one asks
what's left of the pig
everyone's full
after the story
no one asks
what's left of the world
we just live here that's all
after the war
no one asks
what's left of the country
we struggle to get by
after Europe
no one asks
what's left of Europe
everyone's dreaming distracted dreams
the answer's always everything and nothing
everything's used, nothing goes to waste
everything changes shape and name
you can't making sausages
without any blood

meat will be meat
cooked in its own fat
we'll throw a great party
to celebrate whatever
victory or fall
what's left or what we've lost
maybe we'll become vegetarians
perhaps there'll be no more pigs slaughtered
they'll roam freely
no longer our borders
perhaps Europe will lose its name
skinned to get through winter
maybe we'll survive on sausages
from the slaughter
on the cured meat
of hope
learning forwards
to tip the scales
to counterbalance past sorrows
and withered cultures
when the cupboard's empty
just crumbs of the past
when all our meat's but a memory
when we've forgotten it all
when a continent is once again just
fertile land
shelter
possibility
then we'll have another tale to tell.

THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSON

Language speaks
Things happen
Science delves
What do poems do?
Provide the only sure refuge against
the supremacy of the visible world.

Things delve
Science happens
Poems speak
What does language do?
Create our world.

Language delves
Science speaks
Poems happen
What do things do?
If you pay attention, put you in your place.
Language happens
Poems delve
Things speak

What does science do?

Overthrow the dogma of religion and
negotiate its axiomatic structure
with the humble passion of the researcher.
And bombs.

if
light
is the necessary
condition
for seeing

if
light
is a form
of energy
and
changes
 excites
what we see
 its electrons

when in '27
Heisenberg
postulates
that
scientists alter the subatomic
particles
 they are investigating

when in '27
Heisenberg
postulates
his uncertainty principle
the foundations of physics
crumble

when in '31
Gödel
demonstrates
the incompleteness theorem
the foundations of mathematics
crumble

both
torpedo
the blind faith
of positivism
to conquer
and dominate the world
have we learnt

the lesson?

in September '41
Bohr and Heisenberg
meet in Copenhagen

a Dane and a German
two Nobel prize winners
in a country occupied by the Nazis

the World War
and the responsibility of the physicists
for the atomic bomb

the meeting is short
no one knows for sure
what was said

in August '45
Hiroshima and Nagasaki
are wiped off the map

when we carve up light
what is at stake
curiosity
or control

when we want to make the invisible visible
what is at stake
thirst for knowledge
or power

perhaps we should learn the wherefore
of invisibility
and honour it

because the most important
lesson
of quantum
physics
is none of its stunning or destructive applications

the most important
lesson
of quantum
physics
is a lesson

in humility.