

GREYSCAPES

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By Dorota Sciepkó-Cram

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The plane passed very low above the street and Trina put her fingers to her ears. She always did that. It was a natural reaction against the noise, threatening to be a violation of some sort of auditory balance. It passed and the world got mostly quiet again, just a faint roar of the machine in the distance, disappearing southwards in grey clouds somewhere where the sea evaporates into the sky.

Autumn kicked in early this year. Days seemed short and grey and Trina was more thoughtful than she used to be in the summer. The season of coffee, fallen leaves, thinking – the three nouns she described it with during the definition game she sometimes played with her friends. In the game one person would say a word or an expression and you were supposed to quickly give approximately three words you associated with that term. It worked mostly on the subconscious level and took you by surprise. They started playing this game randomly, when someone would throw a word at you in the middle of a conversation or just at any time at all. It worked best like this, a spontaneous way of finding out how much sanity was still left in you. One day a few years before the guy she was with at the time threw a word at her in the middle of making love. Between one gasp and another she managed to prove to the world that a wombat's associations were “marsupial,” “lazy” and “milk”. She argued later that it was a valid association, as she remembered a picture of a small wombat drinking milk from a bottle, but her friends decided that she was positively mad anyway.

The street was empty, apart from a couple of children, drawing colourful designs with chalk on wet tarmac. She bent over them, but they didn't notice or pay attention. The drawing was rather elaborate and for a while she couldn't quite work out what it represented. It was like looking into a kaleidoscope or trying to see something in an autostereogram, a “Magic Eye” picture – the more you looked, the more sense you could ascribe to what you were looking at, even if it was supposed to be only your mind toying around with the idea that everything in life has a meaning. It started raining heavily and the children quickly gathered their chalk into a small plastic bag and ran into the house opposite. Trina didn't notice the rain, spellbound by the picture

which, she now saw, spelt her name across the road, just about visible in complicated shapes and lines. It wasn't only that: below her name, in much smaller and obliterated letters, she could read the caption “the sea is calling you”. She looked around, but the children were now gone and the world was perfectly empty and quiet.

Rain was dripping down her short, curly hair and down her face, sinking into her jacket and cords. She shook her head, almost cat-like, and ran down the grey street.

The picture slowly made its way down the drain.

Out of the station came three men in their late twenties, swearing profusely, but without anger – the sort of swearing you use when you want to put on a tough guy act and implement strong words in direct proportion to the level of toughness you want to present.

A group of old ladies moved somewhat out of their way, not that there was much need, only to avoid the unpleasant air about the men. Contrary to what urban myths would have, they didn't say a word about the state of young people these days and what it was like when they were young. Instead they continued discussing train times and delays occurring on the way to their destination.

A mother picked up her child, learning to walk, for the tenth time in a row and with resignation looked down on the little one's knees which in the morning started off as white, but as the day progressed had become more and more grey. Then she smiled and slowly moved on.

“Do you have a photographic memory?” asked a small elderly lady eyeing her in the local library when Trina tried to explain what book she was looking for by means of referring to what the cover looked like.

She had selective memory; she could perfectly well remember a cryptic password consisting of ten completely random digits, but sometimes forgot the most common words. RAM, Random-Access Memory as she liked to call it – one could never be sure what she would remember and what would slip her mind completely.

“I suppose so, just like the majority of people...”

Trina pondered for a few seconds over the patterns of her memory. It was more on the photographic side, but in this case it was of little

relation as she had stumbled upon this novel on the Internet, so she couldn't have remembered anything else apart from the image on the page.

"I read about this book the other day and I vividly remember the cover, it was actually quite unusual. And since I haven't got a clue what the title or the name of the author is, as I obviously haven't prepared before coming here (didn't even know I'd be popping in), I thought maybe you noticed it somewhere. Maybe it caught your eye..."

The librarian looked into the distance, eyes up and to the right, apparently denoting remembering.

"You might be lucky. I'm pretty sure someone returned a book that looks just like you described only yesterday. It does ring a bell..." The elderly librarian shuffled towards the returned books rack. It consisted of three shelves tightly packed with volumes. "Now, let me see."

"Shall I help you?" Trina was already bending down to take a look at the lowest shelf. The lady browsed through the top one.

After a few minutes of rather intensive search the librarian pulled out a medium-sized novel and held it up for Trina to see.

"Is this what you're looking for?" The book was rather new, but with these pleasant little creases indicating that someone had actually read it before.

"Yes, that's precisely it! I can't believe you managed to find it with me not even remembering the author! So what was his name?"

The elderly woman smiled and passed the book on to Trina.

Meanwhile the number 14 bus braked abruptly and a young, slim guy would have fallen over if not for a middle-aged woman who supported him from her seat at the last moment. The guy's face got red as he mumbled his thanks and, not being able to stand the embarrassment, he got off at the next stop. The middle-aged woman smiled to herself deciding that a bit of shame was still better than a broken arm and got back to reading a massive book about Mediterranean history she was holding on her lap.

People on the bus remained mostly unmoved by the whole scene, apart from one little girl whose overprotective mother didn't miss the chance to point out that it's precisely what happens when you don't hold on tight in public transport. For the rest of her life the little girl will be scared to make a fool of herself in public and will prefer not to rely on others for help.

"Patrick Einarth" said the cover and Trina half-remembered that she must have seen that name before she learnt about the book the other day. It was one of these mildly unusual surnames that don't strike you as odd, in fact you don't even pay attention to them at first. Only when, for some reason, they decide to start growing on you, you catch yourself thinking that yes, they are quite different. Then you Google them and find nothing useful but it still gives you some strange sense of satisfaction, like solving an annoying puzzle and finding out that, in fact, there wasn't any puzzle at all.

The title read *Greyscapes* and she liked it. It conjured up an image of a damp, foggy day – nostalgic and thoughtful. Trina, contrary to the great majority of people she knew, liked that sort of weather and didn't find it depressing. She wondered about it – it seemed that she didn't really find any sort of weather depressing – her mood swings were much more easily influenced by every-day situations rather than whether it was gloomy outside or not. If anything, she found excessive heat rather exhausting, but not to the point of thinking too much about it.

The café she went to after the visit to the library was rather empty, especially as it was the middle of the day. And not that many people actually knew about it, located on the upper floor of a somewhat psychedelic bookshop-cum-record shop. Even the customers wouldn't notice it unless they were curious enough to check where the stairs in the corner led. It was an atmospheric place, artistic but not to the point of being pretentious, cosy and very friendly. Having nothing important to do, Trina positioned herself on a colourful sofa in the corner with a mug of latte and a book she grabbed from the shelf opposite the café part of the place. The staff didn't mind and often would even recommend some new findings, not trying to flog anything to you, just sharing what they found interesting or thought you would find interesting.

The car braked abruptly and stopped metres away. A young ginger-haired woman slowly opened her eyes and looked around, as if waking up from very deep sleep. The world was still there, the road, the crossing and everything, and so was the car, sideways, in the middle of the lane. She felt someone moving next to her and in a split second remembered why she was lying on her side on the tarmac, as if frozen in time. She realised her arm was hurting, but only mildly, maybe because of the shock.

A boy of about ten stood up and rubbed his knees. There was mud on them, but not too much. Trying to figure out what happened, he looked around, noticing the woman who was unsteadily rising to her feet next to him just as the driver got out of the car and walked quickly towards them. The penny dropped.

He didn't wait. It was all too obvious it was his fault. He knew it now – he had almost got killed and if that girl hadn't pushed him away he would now be a neat pile of squashed human meat. Such things end up with police sirens and questioning and everyone getting pissed off with you – that he couldn't afford. So he ran, as fast as he could, using the element of surprise to his advantage. He just about heard the driver shouting after him as he turned the corner but didn't look back. A few more junctions and they won't find him, they won't have a chance – he was a quick runner and knew the city well.

The book she picked up was a semi-scientific examination of synaesthesia, a topic Trina was rather interested in but somehow never really pursued fully. What grabbed her attention was that the book referred also to more obscure types of the phenomenon, only bordering on synaesthesia, which, she suspected, everyone experienced at some point in life, in one form or another, most likely not even realising it. She had these sensations from time to time, the in-commonness of the senses, for example recently, when eating a black cherry jelly bean, she remembered a felt tip pen she used to have as a child. Its smell was identical to the flavour of that jelly bean. She wasn't sure if that was proper synaesthesia, and wondered why she remembered this smell at all, out of the whole packet of scented felt tip pens, not only the smell but also the one specific time of using that pen. It was a black one and she was sitting in the kitchen by the table, drawing the sea. She couldn't have been more than four and it was a warm spring afternoon, with yellow light coming in through the curtains. Nothing really happened on that day and she didn't know why that particular event was so memorable, as if it was a story she had read many times before.

Synaesthesia fascinated her. The intermingling of the senses was intriguing enough, but Trina was more interested in what it was like to discover that your sensations are different from what people around you perceive. How do they find out, for example, that others don't see music? Do they realise it by accident, when someone questions their ability or dismisses it as imagination? How many things about ourselves we take for granted and assume others must be alike, and

how many more things we hate about ourselves not realising others are just like us?

All of a sudden she remembered a time when she was describing a song to her friend. She recalled that she had claimed that the voice of the vocalist was like a cream-coloured woollen jumper and it had confused the hell out of the woman. She couldn't understand that for Trina it meant, more or less, a voice that was a bit rough but generally soft, warm, safe. Was that also a spontaneous bout of synaesthesia? This led her to wonder about the different ways we interpret what we experience. And to what extent it is possible for someone to share your perceptions and, consequently, your emotions. Can two different people, experiencing the same situation or stimulus, perceive it in exactly the same way? It didn't seem that likely, unless they were identical twins perhaps. Or Siamese twins, with a shared nervous system. Or maybe just someone extremely empathic? Such things happen in fiction – the ultimate synaesthesia, the ultimate sharing and oneness so many people dream about all their lives...

A woman poked her head round the door of a ground floor flat, mobile phone wedged between her ear and shoulder, then sat down on the doorstep and smiled at the person on the other side of the receiver. Wavelengths of words travelled invisibly up into the air and back down again in another city, only a fraction of a second later.

A green Vauxhall reversed into the side street and turned back the way it came, slowly making its way along the parked cars, the driver staring at the numbers of the houses he passed, puzzled.

Behind the dark blue door of number 28, across the corridor and into the kitchen, a teenage girl in her stripy pyjamas finished the last chocolate biscuit from the packet and hid the remains of the feast deep in the grey bin in the corner, underneath other rubbish. Then she turned up the volume on the radio and went to the bathroom, locking the door behind her. She bent over the toilet and put two fingers down her throat. Guilt was leaving her together with the contents of her stomach. Her throat was hurting and she felt good. It was her second time today.

The woman on the doorstep said her goodbyes into the phone and pressed the middle button which made a brief beeping noise. Putting the mobile in her pocket, she closed the door firmly and locked it, then walked down the street without looking back.

The book got a bit damp around the edges since the rain was quite persistent and the orange canvas bag not really waterproof. Trina remembered she had a random sheet of plastic in her pocket and wrapped *Greyscapes* in it before returning it to the bag, a little too late, but mostly doing the trick. She hadn't started reading the book yet, even though she'd been carrying it with her for the last twenty four hours. Somehow it wanted to wait and she let it, looking out for the right moment.

"The sea is calling you." She turned this sentence around and around in her head so many times that she seriously started doubting she'd seen it on that road at all. Must have been her imagination. An illusion. A trick her eyes played on perception. Or a sign ...

Trina was now rather determined to go and see for herself what it was that the sea wanted from her. It seemed weird, utterly improbable, but she noticed that walking in the direction of the seaside filled her with a sense of purpose, as if it was a right thing to do, the only right thing to do. The streets were still empty, the rain that earlier appeared to be quite settled in had become a drizzle and the sky hung low, steel-coloured. Trina put headphones into her ears and one of her senses got detached from the world, as the mp3 player superimposed a tune written a few years ago in Stockholm onto the present scenery of a seaside UK city, synesthetically.

Suddenly she remembered a dream she had years ago – she was still living with her parents then and in the dream their house, normally as inland as it could ever get, was right next to a beach with a vast stretch of ocean in front of it. Their home was in its usual place, it was the sea that got close, travelling half of her home country just to create the landscape Trina since then missed and, now she thought about it, identified with. Maybe that's why she moved to this city on the border of the ocean? She never really thought about it, never realised what pulled her in this direction. A bit of a whim, a bit of necessity, maybe coincidence and here she was, hurrying seawards as if her life depended on it.

Sea breeze ruffled the pages. No one around, just him, the space and the novel he was reading. It seemed only appropriate to be here, on a bench by the beach, with this book that has the ocean as a point of reference. Water merging with the sky, transpiring oneness into the world, the life, dangerous

and peaceful, familiar and unknown – not as opposites but merely as two points of the same dimension. He looked up from the page into the distance and once again had to resist the pull of the waves. Standing on the shore, he often felt like wanting to wade in and never come out again, an inexplicable fear and yet an extremely powerful attraction. Practically feeling the water rush over him and through him he closed his eyes and one salty drop escaped and rolled down his cheek. It surprised him.

He shook his head and glanced back at the safety of the city behind. The book slid off his lap and closed, displaying the title. *Greyscapes*. He picked it up. "...a couple of children, drawing colourful designs with chalk on wet tarmac. She bent over them, but they didn't notice or pay attention. The drawing..." No, wrong page, that was earlier, he had read it already. Flicking through the book he finally located the relevant fragment and started reading again, picking up where he left it. The narrative became a life.

She was walking towards the sea down the sand, the city and the world behind her. Nothing mattered any more but the infinite water in front of her. She didn't know why she had to do it, but something was pushing her into the cold, sequential waves. The tune in her ears increased in intensity and Trina walked straight into the water as Jocke Berg started singing the opening lines.

...och som en viskning
ser vi syner nu igen
Det här är nåt
som inte ens har hänt...*

The music and the sea became a feeling. That fleeting, eternal longing for something undefined that haunts you and makes you want more, makes you want to grasp it all, but at the same time you know it's not about getting somewhere, defining or attaining something. That experience is constant and there is no limit to it and no final meaning outside of it and there is no goal, or the goal itself is the journey, the never-ending journey.

A car honked in the distance, loudly and long.

* ...and like a whisper
we have visions again
This is something
that hasn't even happened...

Men mot gummi, glas och metall
betyder ett mirakel inget alls... **

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Both quotations come from the song lyrics of "747" by a Swedish band "Kent".

** But against rubber, glass and metal
a miracle doesn't mean anything...