

Espoo, (FI)
June 7th, 2020

Dear Jorge, / *The greener green*

Someone new came into my life and turned things upside down.

I had been 'collecting' the birds on the campus and near the sea since the last time we were in touch. I have heard or seen about 30 different species of birds now that I have listed in an app. One of them is something totally different from what I knew.

On May 9th at 01:34 AM I woke up from a call, a sound, like in a dream, very loud and unreal.

His (I say he because I believe that with this species it's the male birds that sing) call has depth, an echo and a volume that I only know from instruments and intricate sound installations, but it's still different since the sound is direct from the being and not translated into any other material than the vibrations of the air between the tall trees and brick apartment buildings. I imagine it could function as a voice, but the sound is nothing like any voice I've known, bird or otherwise.

The clear volume is both a song and a call, a scream and a growl, and adds a veil of mystery to the night that has never turned fully dark during these long Finnish days before midsummer.

The following night I was listening to him and I was thinking of how to describe him to you. This is what I came up with: 'It is a critter that has spent the 90's in a living room with kids playing Mario Bros and Street Fighter and later migrated to the jungle.' He seems to sum up everything happening at both the edge and the middle of a rainforest or jungle.

There is a gargle, a roll, roar, click, scream, chirp, drip, blink, peep, whistle, lure, drum, and these sounds seem to get a different order every time they are rehearsed. The exact and staccato quality of the sounds reminded me of nineties video games, but then he adds reality and emotion into the sounds he produces, like musicians that devote their life to one instrument and physically become one with them. Here, in the south of Finland they call him satakieli or nordic nightingale.

I feel a bit uncomfortable speaking about 'the jungle' to you. I have never been to a jungle and also do not know much about it. Maybe it's an assumption to expect that you do know about the jungle. Since you are born and brought up in Brazil and have a deep interest in ecology I am sure you at least know much more about this, in case you haven't had the chance to visit a jungle.

Nonetheless, I will speak more about it and explain a bit of what this concept of jungle means to me.

Very soon I thought about the paintings of the French artist Henri Rousseau to express the feeling that this particular experience that I link to 'jungle', evokes for me (1). I was introduced to his work at an early age. I was about 10 years old, and took painting and drawing classes once a week. During one of the classes, the teacher, Eveline, showed us an image of one of the many large 'jungle' paintings Rousseau made. I remember being a bit underwhelmed by his style. It was not as technical as Rembrandt's work, and not as funky or original as the paintings by impressionists and pointillists I had encountered. But I did feel the mystery of the jungle he was trying to depict.

And again, looking at them now, even on a screen, I feel the dampness of the soil, the thickness of the humid air filled with countless scents. The soft hairy petals, sturdy branches, the sharp leaves leaving traces and rashes on my skin and concave chalices containing a mixture of water and small insect corpses for dryer days to come.

There are sounds and creatures in all shapes that move beyond my comprehension.

They illustrate the lack of sleep and constant lurking danger that stories tell about this idea that comprises my concept of jungle.

It should come as no surprise that Henri, who had never left France in his lifetime, and I, apart from some BBC Earth episodes, have been pretty much using the same sources to learn about the jungle: zoos, botanical gardens, and children's books.



1. Henri Rousseau, *Le Rêve*, 1910 (public).

It was almost 200 years prior that the philosopher Jean-Jaques Rousseau, who was very fond of botany, wrote that 'nature' was something one could find in the colonies. Although not more than 50 years ago Gilles Deleuze, as a homebound petit-bourgeois, continued this thought in his writing, relating 'nature' to the colonial imaginary of Africa and Asia.¹

This thought, that most of my education is based on, is established within the colonial system that studied, determined, ripped out, and imported exotic more-than-humans that once were part of another biotope. The tropical plants that I have encountered have been categorized, explained, and described by numerous white men who also, for example, described 'female' plants 'married' to more than one 'male' partner as prostitutes.² Anything other than heteronormative--whether human or not--would not be accepted by other scientists or the church.

Realizing the colonial, male gaze present in Rousseau's paintings makes it more difficult for me to imagine freely with them.³ Brushing away, ignoring, or simply not knowing this modern layer of colonial implication creates space for imagination in the naive stories of these canvases. It is rather another space that I am seeking, one that is not naive but imagines symbiotic futures despite these traumatic oppressive structures.

In Apichatpong Weerasethakul's film *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010) I experience this space more genuinely and less exoticized (2). Dreams and reality get mixed, especially at the borders between human settlement and natural areas. The protagonists are accompanied by humidity and sounds of all kinds of insects that continuously stretch my understanding of how an insect could express it's being through sound. In the film, living and deceased, human and non-human have an open and non-judgmental relation with each other that sometimes becomes sexual. In his exhibitions I have also felt how Weerasethakul also in other works blurs dichotomies of nature/culture, dead/alive, human-nonhuman, day/night.

¹ from Lecture by Ovidiu Tichindeleanu 5-7-2020.

² Theresa Castro, *the mediated plant*, 2019.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/14/arts/design/14rous.html>

I can imagine my companion, the nightingale, there. They prefer to hide in the thicket and most people have never seen, but only heard the nightingale. I have seen pictures and know how plain they appear. But still, even after listening to him daily, for over a month, I hear more than a bird. The humans, non-humans, hybrids and past-lives in Weerasethakul's film seem to hide with the gale in the thicket.



2. still from Apichatpong Weerasethakul's film 'Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives', (2010).

Since his arrival, the living room has a green hue from reflecting the radiant green wall of life about ten meters from our living room window. I am not sure if I forgot how green, green is at the start of Spring, or whether green in Finland is greener. Maybe green is greener because of the reflections coming from the nearby sea. Because of this amazing excess of green, on every Zoom call when I face this verdant display, my face on the laptop screen seems to have an unhealthy glow from this reflection. I look like one of those late medieval portraits of which the color of the faces is changing over time from the metals used in the paint and all the people in them look very sick. I sometimes explain by turning my laptop and showing what is causing this color and that it isn't nausea.

After a week of working night shift, the nightingale started singing his song during the day. Which gave a new perspective to my relationship with reality. Dreaming to be in the jungle at night was one thing, but this stretch of reality now had its impact in broad daylight.

Just like the days spent in quarantine, the song of the nightingale seems to melt time and experiences into a blur that doesn't fit into either short or long term memory.

Just like in a dream, the familiar and strange exchange. I hope to approach this as welcoming the strange stranger to do their thing, without understanding the situation and undergoing or accepting the uncanny. It is the introduction of strangeness that this bird brings that creates an uncanny experience of what I thought was familiar.⁴

While spending time to become more acquainted with the bird resort surrounding the campus, any visit carries a kind of strangeness and not knowing in ways that feel dreamlike. In this dream I never know when the nightingale will start his part of the ever-changing chorus.

Unlike the blackbirds, finches and willow warblers around here, the nightingale seems to work in deliberate shifts, he probably has to since unlike the others, he —just like me—doesn't sleep through the night. Nonetheless, the moments when he starts singing often come as a surprise. Meanwhile, sounds from the kitchen, like my partner doing the dishes, can mix in or be the song of the gale in disguise.

⁴ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 2010.

The song mixes with my dreams, a synesthetic scene where I can't make out where the echo of the lush green bushes in my imagination stops and the song of the nightingale starts.⁵

The nordic nightingale, the one I refer to, is different but closely related to the nightingale. They look similar but different, they sound similar but different. The song of the Nordic Nightingale is described as 'very explosive with large crescendos, very loud and more powerful' than that of the nightingale on the 'vogelbescherming' (bird protection) website. The nordic nightingale likes to be hidden, although not as extreme as their not so 'nordic' kin and prefers to be close to a larger body of water. They choose locations that become green for short periods of time after rain.⁶ check.

Even though these birds only spend their breeding season in these parts (North-East Europe to temperate Asia) for about 60 days per year, they are called Nordic. This nightingale travels long distances as it spends the winter, after a break in Ethiopia, in Zambia and nearby countries in southeast Africa (3). It seems that their time there is similarly short and they spend about 8 months of the year traveling. Does it still make sense to call them Nordic when they spend only a short time here or is their breeding location, more than Eurocentricity, guiding for taxonomy? I wonder what name they have in southeast Africa.

Due to the extreme changes in climate in Africa these migratory birds are struggling and declining. Perhaps the song I hear in this Eurasian taiga is becoming more and more a memory of what the landscape used to sound like in Zambia.

I was inspired by a storytelling workshop recently organized by Casco with the artist Jumana Emil Abboud who told a story hosted by the online radio platform Stranded.fm. After sharing a beautiful story, about a young girl outsmarting a mighty tiger protecting their territory, Jumana shared some insights into her relation to storytelling. One of these was the importance of recognizing the heroine within your own story. Through abstraction and exaggeration, she created characters and sceneries from her everyday life to share and extract lessons. So now I am trying to think about how the nordic nightingale and I could be two characters in my own story.

I wonder if you know any fairy tales or stories about nightingales? For me, they now seem the most natural thing. These stories try to explain and add a fictive and didactic narrative to the song that would keep children and adults up during the bright Nordic summer nights. The one I vaguely remember is from the Dane, Hans Christian Andersen. It's about a Chinese emperor who demanded a nightingale to sing in order to help him to recover from his illness. What illnesses could be healed by birdsong, I wonder? I heard that during the lockdown this Spring a lot of people started dreaming again. During sleep one practices freedom.⁷ That ability had been obstructed by the oppressive structures of our modern society. Now, space to imagine has arisen.

The song of the 'pekin robin' or Chinese nightingale, that I found online, is nothing compared to that of the 'nordic' nightingale, but I bet Hans didn't know that. Listening to these sounds of the nordic nightingale and imagining with this feathered stranger has led me to daydream and create a story for you during these confusing times. I guess that is part of recovery.

What heroes and heroines have you encountered this Spring? and remember that in fairytales anything is possible, right?

With love,
Marjolein

⁵ <https://soundcloud.com/marjolein-van-der-loo/nordic-nightingale-61420-1114-pm>

⁶ <https://sciencenordic.com/climate-change-denmark-ecology/scientists-solve-old-mysteries-of-bird-migration-routes/1442007>

⁷ Eva Meijer, De nieuwe rivier, 2020.