





DEAR FRIEND,

I hope you're feeling a bit better than I am today.

My headache—a mysteriously accurate connection cable between my upper and lower brain—is telling me that something important is not quite right. This error message first appeared last winter, when I fell into a quarter-life depression. It accompanied me more or less constantly for six months, turning off only when I was baking or jogging and getting unbearably loud when I was at school, dissecting yet another problematic aspect of this doomed world at our nice yellow roundtable lined with unfortunately incompatible individuals. The first time I realised a substantial lack of headache was probably my third day here. I thought I left it behind in the city, as it meets me there like clockwork anytime I go. But now it's here. Fortunately, I know that it's just indicating some sort of cold that I caught from my mom, which allows me to spend these few valuable garden hours in bed to write you this letter.

I pulled up a huge cartful of carrots today from just two square meters of land, and then dug up half a furrow, bit by bit, to fertilise it with manure from the neighbour's cows. This shit will set and spread and give life to a lot of tiny beings and turn into their shit. Through countless digestive systems, dung is unlocked—translated—into elements that, come springtime, the strawberries will be happy to make use of. Tomorrow is apple juice pressing day. It's probably been fifteen years since I was here to see that happen.

Despite all the increasingly apparent peculiarities of living with one's grandparents, I'm glad to not live alone any more — at least for some time, until mid-October, when the garden's to-do list comes to an end. I promised myself to return with them in April—spring is the most important time to learn anything about gardening—but I have no idea if I will actually be up for the challenge again. That's the tricky thing about living according to one's headache once it's there: unreliability. The headache is a Missing Soul Alert. There's no point in doing anything if you're not wholeheartedly “at it with the soul”, as Tõnu Õnnepalu points out in his latest (anti-)nomadic diary, which grandma got for herself from the village library and I unintentionally devoured. “The soul will always get going first, it's impatient; forbid or will it, it won't listen. It's wild and disobedient, dragging the body after itself. [...] Each soul has its own song that it follows. And everything else comes along, getting lost, lagging behind—but eventually, it always does.”¹

Ever since we're asked in kindergarten who we want to become, we habituate ourselves to keep going based on some sort of coherent future projection.² There has to be a narrative, a plan, something to move towards, right? When a plan fails, we intuitively need to make a different plan. I recently met up with a friend I hadn't seen for some time and told him about some thoughts I've been playing with to help reorient myself in the world. Getting a driver's license to commute better to the countryside, connecting electricity and water on an empty plot, building a woodshed, then a small sauna with

a kitchen corner, then finally a larger house and a garden, if not a whole grain field. While talking, I realised the inevitability of a whole lot of headache in my story. Why do we need similar bound-to-fail fantasies to avoid aimlessness and depression? I jokingly suggested starting a philosophical movement with plenty of trend-potential called vegetationism. Besides following the soul, it would promote becoming free of belief in progress, internalised tendencies towards purity, grand narratives, and, of course, meat.

Yesterday, grandma went to her primary school class reunion. Class of '48, four people left. I can't really imagine a reunion happening with any of my classes. The 21st-century weakness of the feeling of being-in-something-*together* and strength of the centrifuge of everyday life will surely prevent these collective efforts from ever happening. Even you, friend. I've always thought of our friendship as one of those life-long ones that can withstand years of separation without any awkwardness. But the older we get, the larger grow the holes in our correspondence, and I wonder how much silence a relationship can bear before substantial alienation creeps in and breaks the taken-for-grantedness we've imagined for ourselves.

I've finally pushed myself through the academic anthem of life crises, Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, which I had been attempting to read ever since February when I became “a subject who acknowledged the broken circuit of reciprocity between herself and her world but who, refusing to see that cleavage as an end as such, takes it as an opportunity to repair both herself and the world.”³ (You might get the idea of why pushing has been necessary.) Via excessive articulation, Berlant also proposes the consoling ideas of letting go of normative grand narratives, yet there remains one that she deems worthy of belief: companionship and community. The contemporary precariat has no other option for escaping the grid of cruel, unfruitful optimisms than to team up, tread the water together, calling back and catching up with each other's souls.

In fact, this was precisely the initial idea behind my “plan” to move to the countryside for good. In several small-talk situations during the past months, I've, again half-jokingly, been promoting a self-sustaining communal household in the soon-tropical Estonia as a pension plan for our under-waged, freelance generation that will most probably become a mass of impoverished *personas non grata* for whatever kind of governing systems will be left. Or, at the very least, it would lift the paralysing, soul-deterring stone of complicity off our backs a little more than when continuing our inevitably hypocritical and gestural creative class lives. Or, at the very least, we would just have each other. But this is a fantasy that I cannot possibly shape on my own.

Anyways. Let me know if you could come to visit! There's plenty of apples for everyone.

TAKE CARE, MARIA MUUK

1. Tõnu Õnnepalu, *Aaker* (2019), Tallinn: Eksa (p. 371, my own rough translation).

2. I wonder if that anachronistically career-oriented question is still posed to children now, and what they might answer. I'm imagining pencil-drawn interpretations of being a YouTuber or Instagram influencer. Or perhaps climate protester?

3. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Durham: Duke University Press (p. 259).