aliens:
an island

by
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**ALIENS: AN ISLAND**

Uljana Wolf

Translated from the German by Monika Zobel
…on Ellis Island, fate also appeared in the guise of an alphabet. Public Health officers gave arrivals a rapid examination. On the shoulders of doubtful cases, they chalked a letter indicating the nature of the suspected disorder.

— Ellis Island / Georges Perec and Robert Bober
falls under miscellaneous. *dumbfounded, flabbergasted*, or unofficially: “factory no want old men.” and no women, either. how should one know, with one century on the shoulders, what day it is. check here: the first one on land, the last lucid one, or, if you’re too old, it’s doomsday. yes, this body i packed myself, this son i bore myself, with ears and ten toes on the floor, another one lost on the shore. grief is four. lynching five. do i know where to go? am i a piece of furniture? oh land of possibilities, endless.
“take your wig off.” after thirteen years of experience, nothing appears alien to him, hairdos don’t, towels, towers. in the light of the entrance hall, on the scalp of the frozen lady—he sees honey combs, yellow and crusted. “therefore the name: favus.” his younger colleagues step forward—their name on the other hand is “watchdogs of the golden door.” they point at the knob, wave her away: “sorry lady, contagious skin disorder.” now only the glow of her fungus comes close to the golden door.

-x marks the spot? you bet. we are convicted by simply being present, at the drop of a hat, at the top of steep steps, in six seconds everything’s revealed: we are the spot itself. rotten islands. wrapped in rags, sick sea in the body, imbecile, unstable, at best left to twist in the wind. a fluttering ticket stuck between our teeth, name, passage, the treasure map. we are the treasure, we dug ourselves out. inside the luggage room: “one glance at the bundles, and i know it all. the knots reveal who tied them, their trembling hands.”
X suspected mental defect
⊗ definite signs of mental disease
B back
C conjunctivitis
CT trachoma
E eyes
F face
FT feet
G goiter
H heart
K hernia
L lameness
N neck
P physical and lungs
PG pregnancy
SC scalp (fungus)
S senility

known here as stray jacket disease. collars raise up on the back of the neck, over stiff nape, fear. “all idiots, insane persons, paupers.” we left the marbles, the loose screws, the bugs, in herzogsreut and bischofsreut, and what’s padding our lapel, an unpaid bill, proving only this loss. white as snow we settle: head over heels in chalk. jackets stray through the villages back home, along with the rejects marked by x, spreading their sleeves.

tween deck takes its intercourse. meaning: no room of our own. the idea of “miss liberty,” too often misconceived as received, then struck and stuck. expectance esperance, another misnomer. “contact isn’t prohibited for sailors, machinist, stokers.” topsy-turvy a welcome crush for some, and not a chance in hell to turn the oven off. then with arrival various falls “from gaze,” to lose one's face on s.s. vaterland. “are you sure you’re not pregnant?” “yes sir, i think i am.”
“and the glint of eyes ... suggested tuberculosis.” and really: the x-rayed torso, it radiates. bright, hellish bright, health certificate, duplicate. the wings, the lobes, folded without shadows. decades later there’s the need for another image: “the chest x-ray must be carried in the hand-luggage for representation to an immigration officer.” a stare with narrowed eyes which we feel through the ages (and it doesn’t waver)—a flight of breath, a cough and it caught up with us. even our arrested silence harbors germs: “the most democratic creatures in the world.”

our line from antwerp: red star on a black flag. and yes, we’re almost glowing on the lower deck, our crooked backs closer to the sea, we sense a surge in every eddy, and grasp that every eddy is a path which beat others before us: “as voluntary servants to the said samuâfl c., master of ship harmony.” the names of our ships end luckily in -land. “would you mop the stairs from the bottom to the top or the other way around?” “inspector, i didn’t come here to mop stairs.”
we remember. *april was the cruellest ship*, captain de groot, company kress & rodenbrock. we were on board and did not move: too many, too heavy ("öd und leer das meer"). they spoke of famine fever and nervous fever, "lacked the monetary means to appeal." some ate their fingers, others were even missing a mouth. the dead unburied in our middle. the living only sailed in dreams. we were already the island of tears and our eyes therefore were red and bare with each arrival.

“kioshk” of the mohegan, or: gull island. oyster island, shipowner paws' island, customs officer dyres', and samuel’s island too. island of thomas lloyd, last island for robber anderson. prison, fort gibbet, gunde depot. island of the deported, tiny island, hardly visible in the ocean's noose. an island—anyone who got away, barely alive, a red J in his passport, almost half the noose. not the island of his sister, of his cousin, of his father—"they were hung on the spot in the village square." sorrow island, loose ends. knots, knots, gaining ground. unbound. to cast the line: “their instant needs are food and water.”
seen in this light: with one hollow leg still at home. that drags out to sea. a life and limb, running the gauntlet “5 or 10 feet,” before the inspector’s eyes. but how do we walk when we’re from afede, daaden, talysarn, from tarnów, biczce złote, dolná súča or kreshopel. better not with “bobbing up-and-down motion.” better to springfield, “which springfield?” “the cheapest.” better to "seekseneveno pillsburs", which, if you could lend us your ear, leads to second avenue pittsburgh.

“thousands of trachomatous aliens.” in the public eye we are a menace that will bring blindness soon. east wind, salty breeze, the seedy water of the third class: as if we wanted to slip under the eyelid of the state. it’s already too late. “teachers, watch for sore eyes among pupils.” but the border guards have no time to wash their hands. that our eyes must go to seed. spreading from one field of vision to the other. perhaps they want us visibly sick. “scientific management.” otherwise, we could simply become too many.
to be eye-caught. what we wanted to avoid. we had trusted them, as far as they could reach, bare or blue, no blind eye, that didn’t stay dry, thereby always peeled, shooting the stars. so close, we can’t aim anymore. instead the inspector, his hand, with a “button-hook,” that fishes for our lids: “such a fright.” or freight. ruled with a rod of light. cold steel. we recall the women who buttoned their dresses with it. recall the buttons. were they mirrors. did brightness give them away. were their eyelets locked.

what needs to be concealed. the weak spot of every migration, mutation of the abdominal cavity. as in cellar, chamber, “closet”, everyone clams up inside their own skeletons. the organs suddenly seem to be displaced (especially around 1913 among east-european jews). first a victim of pogroms, now of anatomy onboard. and yet whoever came to bust a gut still gets caught. “i believe a doctor can find any disease he’s looking for.”
| X | suspected mental defect |
| × | definite signs of mental disease |
| B | back |
| C | conjunctivitis |
| CT | trachoma |
| E | eyes |
| F | face |
| FT | feet |
| G | goiter |
| H | heart |
| K | hernia |
| L | lameness |
| N | neck |
| P | physical and lungs |
| PG | pregnancy |
| SC | scalp (fungus) |
| S | senility |

**the heart that had been set on the railing, at arrival it was gone. the steep stairs bring everything to light—what skips too much, this pulse, can’t possibly belong to us. “heinrich, the stethoscope!” there is no place to hide it. when the heart hammers home, every irregular beat is written down. even among the shuffling feet, the pounding is singled out. “hello, and die gezundheit?” in thirty-six languages they eavesdrop, through layers of clothes, for our sore spot.**

**first steerage in the face, then fence before the nose: “genuinely like cattle.” which face should we put on the matter? steering through is no game, daylong hurdling on pallets no resort, only we know. in the wrinkles, please, you can read everything, the heads we beat against walls know only one instinct: to head for the greener grass. maybe that’s why the big hall is called stock market. maybe we are the livestock. the frontier we assumed was farther west.**
“my field is the world.” the dirt below the nails. that is to say not filth, only an ounce from the place where one first arose. not on a bed of roses. my turmoil, my topsoil. next one up: two weeks worth of blood in the shoe. the only pair he had, that carried him over the water. show your feet, show your shoes, watch the guards. “poor physique is not a diagnosis.” but poorness is. only the ones with sufficient funds may plow through the new world, toeing a tight rope.

“kathl now in munich in surgery.” weeks afterwards, tired from the crossing, this choking of the throat: never touched by a man, but the inspector’s hand grubs. how he sorts things out! the good ones, like kathl, in the pot, melting down. the bad ones with goiters in the crop: take, dear, your beautiful dress, go back. the embroidered neckband waiting in line soon became a sign for the bavarian swollen gland. the G drawn with chalk didn’t stand for good.