LÜZ

[an excerpt]

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Lindsay Stern

AUTHOR'S NOTE

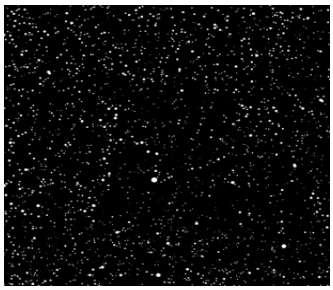
All surviving records of Lüz and its inhabitants were discovered by the aforesaid on or before September 30, 2013. Consulted archeologists have confirmed that the primary sources [pp. 6, 73, and 75-6] share no single author. As such, they are best interpreted as cultural data—offshoots, as it were, of a collective mind.

"There is at least one sense in which the human is not alone in the world: the conviction otherwise."

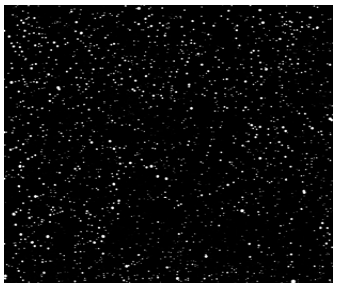
- Unknown [Lüz, c. Year 23]

1

From Years 1 to 48, the people of Lüz fell victim to the mistaken belief that the night sky spoke in pictures. "Constellations," they called them. An astronomer discovered the truth in Year 49, and published her results in the Daily Gazette. The night sky, it turned out, spoke in Braille:



"Love thy neighbor."



"Out to lunch."

"I am sorry you are cold."

By noon, the astronomer's petunias were bald. Half the population of Lüz had stampeded her garden. The other half had knocked a hollow in her door. Undaunted, the astronomer telephoned City Hall.

"I'd like a patent, please." she said.

"Who's calling?" said the clerk.

"[Indecipherable]."

A pause.

"Hello?"

Minutes later, the clerk had joined the throng, whose members had begun wielding signs:

HAIL, PROPHET!

FRAUD.

The clerk's sign read:

Nobody owns Og.

"Og" meant different things to different people. Most defined Og as the being who had invented the people of Lüz. Others insisted that the people of Lüz had invented Og. Everyone agreed on the relevant verb.

There was no consensus, within the former group, about why Og had invented Lüz. Some declared that his mirror had broken. One claimed that he had been trying to impress a woman, until the rest reminded him that in the beginning there was just Og.

(The first woman, incidentally, was whittled by Og out of someone's femur.)

The reason that Og had invented the people of Lüz was, of course, that he was lonely. That they were lonely was the reason that the people of Lüz had invented Og.

2

According to many believers, Og had set the first pair of beings loose in a garden called "Need." To need was the one thing that the beings never had to do in the garden, which explained why they never had to speak.

When Og grew tired of watching the beings frolic in silence, he invented Law, which was Need disguised. "Don't smell the lilacs," he admonished, knowing that to say so would be to rouse in each the opposite command.

Not everyone considered Og worthy of praise. Some denied his existence altogether.

"There is pain," said the non-believers. "Therefore, there is no Og."

To this the believers cited cases of joy.

"If Og is as you say, He would banish pain," the non-believers replied.

"In a painless world," said the believers, "Og would never occur to us."

Within the hour, Og had made his discovery. There was one of the beings, drunk with fragrance, wheeling about Need on one foot. The other knelt by the lilacs, her face hidden in blooms. The betrayal was exactly as he'd hoped, but he found himself at a loss. Shyly he combed the branches with wind, gently at first, to announce himself.

The beings froze.

"What have you done?"

"Nothing," they said. It was their first word, and their first lie.

The wind tightened. To the beings, the landscape was newly decipherable, as if fed through a prism. For the first time, they could make out where they ended and the world began. Inlets appeared between themselves and other objects. Ocean, sky, and trees—once allied—fell apart. The more they spoke, the more the change intensified.

According to the theologians of Lüz, it became appropriate then to call the beings "human."

In Year 3, a group of psychologists proposed that every conception of Og was true, in its own way.

"The existence of Og is not refutable," they announced. "Nor does it lend itself to proof. It is only reasonable to conclude, therefore, that Og both does and does not exist."

To their surprise, both factions responded. A convention was called, hosted by the lexicographers. At issue was the entry titled "Og, n." in the National Dictionary, whose first edition appeared in Year 1.

"If Og's existence is both true and false," said the non-believers, "then contradictions are true."

The psychologists nodded emphatically.

"And if contradictions are true," said the believers, "then they are also false. Your own proposal, then, we may declare both true and false."

"Well, when you put it that—" the psychologists began.

"There's no way around it," the non-believers interrupted. "You've been trounced."

"All we wanted was to put an end to your bickering," muttered the psychologists. "Carry on, then."

They gathered their belongings. Too abashed to raise their eyes, none of them noticed the change in the air. Each faction, meanwhile, eyed the other with new solidarity.

After the lie, Og retreated—whether out of boredom or rage, no one knew. Most mistook his absence for their own eviction. "We doomed ourselves," they declared, "and Og knew it."

A few suspected that Og hadn't banished the beings from Need, but from their memories thereof. The garden remained, eclipsed by words. Something had gone, the beings knew, but what it was they couldn't say. Need was intelligible, and therefore out of sight.

They renamed it "Lüz."

3

In the months following their eviction, the beings replaced their home with a system of signs. They crushed ants into ink and blackened the trees with illustrations of Need. What began as hieroglyphs broke apart into geometric shapes, to which the beings applied the term "letters." In time the shapes disbanded into angles and lines, as a body simplifies into bone.

(The third being of Lüz was born through a wound in his mother. He found a fourth with a wound of her own, took her name, and spent his life trying to dive back in, only to plant new versions of himself.)

Meanwhile, Og populated Lüz with a series of events. Each was built of a series of facts, as a sentence is of constituent words. To the grammar between facts and events the beings assigned the term "time."

Each fact, in turn, was home to a set of ideas, and each idea to sets of things. To each thing Og assigned a function:

EYES to rain

ICE to cauterize

LIGHT to bruise

[etc.]

On the last he paused:

HUMAN to signify

As a consequence of the beings' eviction and its precipitant lie, the latter function could be achieved only in approximation. Ineluctable and impossible to fulfill, it led its charges in circles round whatever ache of loss or love they set out to convey. A paradoxical function, theologians agreed, thwarted by the very signs that enabled its pursuit.

For this reason, the people of Lüz reserved their most meaningful locutions for those that negated language altogether. Such locutions included "indescribable pain," "unspeakable loss," and "unutterable joy."

During periods of national mourning, speech gave way to moments of silence. A few turned the dodging of words into a practice, to which the people of Lüz assigned the term "art."

The insufficiency of signs produced in Lüz a new species of grief. The inability to voice suffering became a suffering all its own, more anonymous, less communicable, than the ache that set it off. That this more palpable grief was insoluble was never discussed.

In time, the lexicographers of Lüz codified Og's assignments in the National Dictionary. Related entries included:

Knowledge, n. Guilt.

To be, v. To owe.

The entry titled "Og, n." underwent near-perpetual revision, beginning in Year 2 with its reclassification from noun to verb. New iterations effaced the old, until the entry itself was no longer legible. In Year 12, the lexicographers scrapped the palimpsest and began again:

Og, v. To save Lüz.

Within a week, they had revised it:

Og, v. ~~To save Lüz~~. To retard its fall.