

Julien Bismuth

Intet er stort intet er litet

(Nothing is big nothing is small)

*The following texts were written by artist **Julien Bismuth** for his piece **Intet er stort intet er litet (Nothing is big nothing is small)** for osloBIENNALEN FIRST EDITION 2019-2024.*

The texts were performed for the first time by five performers on May 25th, 2019, in the streets of Oslo, Norway, starting in Birkelunden Park and ending up in front of Nationaltheatret, Norway's National Theatre.

Text 1:

Runes

1.

I have come across several examples of a mysterious writing that I can somehow decipher. I can somehow decipher it meaning words come to mind when I see it. But how? I neither remember learning nor ever encountering these signs before. They are often easy to miss. They tend to be small discrete alterations to a quotidian surface: a phrase scribbled a supermarket bulletin board, scratched with a nail on a restroom mirror, or stamped on a money bill. My gaze instinctively finds them. The first one I encountered was written in black paint marker, like graffiti, on the back of a sign for a town called Gog. The letters looked like sticks. Broken sticks, clumsily rearranged. The phrase said:

"nothing is big nothing is small"

Or those were the words that came to mind when I looked at it. As if the scrawled signs had spoken. I couldn't understand how I was able to decipher and understand the phrase. I tried to remember where I had ever encountered such writing, but I couldn't. It brought back no memories whatsoever, yet I could read it, understand it, pronounce the words even. I counted the number of signs. There were ten of them, all lumped together. I started to look at the signs again, to try and further decipher the phrase, but just then the wind blew my hat onto the road. I retrieved it and left.

2.

I have been finding inscriptions written in a strange script that I can somehow decipher. That I can somehow read. I don't know if I am alone in being able to do this. Something about the mysterious way in which I am able to read these inscriptions without knowing how or why I am able to do so... something about that prevents me from asking other people if they have seen these inscriptions, or if they can decipher them as well, as inexplicably well as I can or seem to be able to.

The second inscription that I found was scratched into a bathroom mirror. A bathroom in a public library that I entered by chance, because it was the only public bathroom I could find in the vicinity. I was on the outskirts of town. The inscription was written in the same stick letters I described previously: letters that looked like that had been broken and clumsily rearranged. One sign looked like a lamp post. The other looked like a comb with all but three of its teeth missing. A third looked like a letter 'E' whose upper branch had been broken off, and whose lower branch was bent upwards like a tooth. I found myself reading it as naturally as the name on my driver's license. It read:

"Seize the heritage, take the light from the powerful."

3.

Just the other day, on my way to the gym, I saw another inscription. I have been seeing a singular type of graffiti in different places throughout the city, some are etched into surfaces with a nail or a blade, others painted or drawn. The writing is in a foreign script that I am somehow able to decipher and read, even though I cannot name it. I cannot identify it. Even though I know I have never seen it before, not until now.

This one was a short phrase, scrawled in red paint on a dark poster, a poster for a concert. I can't remember the name of the band, but I remember that the image on the poster was of an eagle, its claws red with blood, swooping down on a stormy ocean, its head bowed as if in shame. The phrase was

written above the eagle's head like a title. It says "two are never on the same side." And for the first time, I felt as if I could associate sounds to the letters, whereas before I just understood their meaning, but in my language, as if translating them. It was the first time I heard sounds in my head as I read the phrase. But I neither retained nor transcribed them. Nor can I recall them. I cannot work my way back to this language from mine.

4.

It's not the first time, in fact it's the fourth or fifth time that this has happened to me in the last two or three weeks. It's the fourth time in eight weeks actually, I just checked. Funny how time compresses or expands sometimes when you're not keeping track.

I was going out to see a friend, and as I had some time to spare, I stopped for a coffee. When I went to pay, I noticed a phrase stamped in blue ink on the banknote. The phrase was written in the same curious script I keep encountering. Words fail me when I try to describe it. The letters look like broken sticks, their pieces hastily rearranged to form letters. It's a script that I cannot identify, yet I am able to read it. I can decipher its meaning, but I can also "hear" the sounds of the letters and words of the inscription. The inscription read:

"Many are the day's eyes"

The sound I heard, the sounds of the words of the phrase were something like (I'm writing this phonetically):

"Marg (or morg) ero dags augo."

Nothing about the sounds or shape of the letters was familiar to me. Or rather, I could read and decipher them. I could associate sounds to them. But I cannot explain how nor can I name the language or the script in question.

5.

This happened today, this morning in fact. I was walking down the street. I tripped over my own untied shoelace. My gaze fell upon a small piece of paper on the ground as I picked myself up from my fall. The note was scrawled on a small piece of scrap paper. It was written in what had become a familiar script. Let me explain. I have been seeing graffiti, writing on the wall, some of it etched with a nail or a blade, others painted or drawn. The writing is in a foreign script that I am somehow able to decipher and read, even though I cannot name it. I cannot identify it. I am never surprised when I come across it. At first, I could only look at the letters and understand what they meant, but in my language. After some time, I was able to "hear" the sounds of the letters and words of the inscription.

These texts are always written on random surfaces, in random places, and I always chance upon them, stumble upon them even.

This is what it said:

"Let us lighten the stones."

This is what it sounded like to my mind's ear:

"Lettom steinom"

6.

I have forgotten where I was in my story. A story about a series of encounters with anonymous graffiti written in a language and script that I can recognize and understand without knowing how or why, without being able to name it much less remember how I came to know it. The letters look like broken sticks, hastily rearranged in shapes that look like broken combs, broken forms, broken letters. When I think of these letters, I imagine them as long strips of metal or wood that hold me afloat. I picture them as trees, leafless trees in a winter landscape. I want to hang my coat on these letters, but I can't. They're always elsewhere, just as I am always elsewhere when I read them.

Text 2:

Interruptions

1.

Many are the day's eyes. I am turning to face you but your eyes and your ears are elsewhere. Many are the day's voices. My ears were once large enough to sleep in, but my eyes have always been this small, this focused on this or that thing. Many are the days, and fewer are the nights. Fewer and shorter.

2.

Two are never on one side.

3.

You're in front of a wall, an endless wall, standing close to it, almost touching with your nose, your knees, your toes, the knuckles of your bruised fingers. You'd like to have something else to hold onto, but there's just the wall. You want to turn your back to it and leave it behind. You want to turn your back to it and leave whatever is behind it behind. You want to turn away from it but you can't, because you're leaning against it, and its cold surface soothes and supports you.

4.

There's a fine coating of dust everywhere. It's on your hands, your hair, your water, your food, in your wallet, it coats everything in your pockets as well as the inside of your pocket. But you can't see or feel it. It dissolves to the gaze and to the touch. And you can't taste it because it has no taste, just as you can't smell it, because it has no smell. It's like the flour you sprinkle on your hands before kneading dough. Or like the sweat that coats everything, soaks into everything, in the tropics. Or like snow. Like the snow that greeted me when I first came to visit.

5.

I like the swirls that birds make above the swirls of human traffic.

6.

I like walking in cities where I don't understand the language. I like not being able to understand. I like how the conversations that surround me transform into something like music. Not music as speech but the music of speech: its tones, its notes, its rhythms, its silences. I am always listening in on the conversations around me, registering their shifts, the way the postures and movements of the speakers and listeners complement or reflect the words that link them together. But language recedes when it becomes a vehicle for meaning. When I listen to language that is foreign to me, foreign and opaque, I hear it in ways that I can never hear my own.

Text 3:

Images

1.

Imagine you're floating on a boat, a small rowboat, but without oars. You're in the middle of a river. A river so large that at first you think it's an ocean or a lake, until you sense its current, and start to discern its distant shores.

You start to panic and you start to shout but the noise of the river drowns out your voice. You can't hear the river or your screams in your dream, it's as if the sound had been turned off, but you know that you're screaming and that the river is loud and that its noise is drowning out your loudest screams.

And then you're no longer in the boat, you're up a tree. It's later, darker, or earlier. It's early in the morning and you're sitting high up in a tree.

2.

You're up in a tree and the tree is filled with birds. They're chirping, singing, flying and hopping from branch to branch. But you can't see them. The foliage is too dense, the light is too dim, the forest is too thick, it's too early or too late in the day. Let's say too early. It's a dewy morning, the branch you are clinging to is wet, and the audible presence of this invisible aviary is making you nervous. Anxious even. As if they could somehow make you slip and fall from the tree.

Imagine this situation if you can. I have never experienced it. I simply made it up, pieced it together with words or pieced words together to produce it. And this is how I would like you to imagine it as well, by piecing together bits and pieces of your vocabulary: forest, tree, moisture, birdsong, dawn, or whatever else you want to bring to it. Actually experiencing it would take you elsewhere.

3.

You're lost, and that's fine, because you were walking around aimlessly, expecting to get lost, but now it's late, you've lost track of time, and you need to get back, you want to get back because you're starting to feel uncomfortable in this neighborhood of abandoned warehouses and vacant lots. But you have no way of finding your way. No map, no phone or no more phone battery, and there's no one around for you to ask. The occasional car passes you by and you're tempted to wave at them, but you feel insecure or embarrassed or both. You see figures in the distance, huddled around an improvised fire. You turn back and try to retrace your steps, and after a few minutes of fearful uncertainty, you start to recognize things that you had passed along the way: a laundromat; a wood-panelled station wagon with punctured tires, smashed windows, and torn seats; a shuttered fried-chicken restaurant; a liquor-store; an auto mechanic's shop, its office lights still on; an abandoned parking lot with fennel bulbs sprouting from the cracks in its blacktop.

You arrive at a bus terminal full of people, though they're all being somewhat quiet. Most of them are on the phone. The music, however, is very loud. Deafeningly loud. You can't hear yourself think is a phrase that comes to mind, to your mind, as you enter the bus terminal to ask for directions. From then on, everything happens as you'd expect it. You wait longer than planned. You eat something that you immediately regret eating, but what other options did you have? You drink one too many sodas and end up having to use the bathroom more than once. In fact, you almost miss the bus because of wanting to squeeze in one last visit to the bathroom before boarding. You are the last person to board and find yourself sitting in the back of the bus, near its only bathroom.

By the time you arrive, it's late. You're hungry again. You look for a place to eat. You end up in a loud brightly lit restaurant, eating soup. You're drinking a beer, chasing both liquids down with bread. And then, you're back on the bus. The transition is unclear or it's a blur. Maybe there is no transition, maybe it's as abrupt as a film edit. Maybe your dream is redacted.

Then you're on the train and you're falling asleep, and as you fall asleep, you wake up, and you're in your lover's arms. It's morning, and you can smell coffee being made but you can't figure out where or by whom. You thought you were alone, just the two of you alone.

4.

It's no longer night or morning, it's Spring. The sun is shining. Birds are chirping, loudly chirping, and yet the air is crisp and slightly damp.

Just then your phone vibrates. It's a message. A video message. The sender is your lover and the video is of a small sparrow, pecking at a piece of bread on the sidewalk. As you watch the video a second time, you notice that the bird is circling the bread as he pecks it, containing it with its movement. You decide to sit on a nearby bench and answer some texts. There's always something to send, something to relay or respond to. Just then your phone vibrates once more. It's your lover. Once again, it's your lover. The message consists of an animated digital rendering of a chair. The chair starts to vibrate, at first imperceptibly, then more visibly, violently even. Suddenly it breaks. It breaks along all of its joints, into seemingly identical pieces of wood, each the length of a forearm. The animation stops. A phrase writes itself in gold letters over the static image of the dismembered chair. The phrase reads: "Then I heard nothing but the roaring of the sea."

Your head tilts back, your eyes close, your mouth opens slightly, and your fingers relax their grip. You wake up as your phone falls on your shoe. It's time for you to go and so you do, you go, your finger rapidly typing the address of your destination as you scan your surroundings for a street sign.

5.

You're listening to a description of the dream your lover had, just now, just before waking up. A dream of a savage horde, living on a distant mountaintop encircled by a massive wall of iron and stone.

What did they look like?

Short torsos, wide faces. Their height is half that of a man of medium stature. They have fangs like wild beasts and claws instead of fingernails. Hair grows down their backbones. They have two enormous ears, one of which is exceedingly hairy on the outside. They wrap themselves up in one, and sleep in the other. Their bodies are so hairy that they are completely hidden. They call out to one another like pigeons and bay like dogs. They consume everything, even the grass. Not one of them dies without producing a thousand offspring.

Were you able to see them?

No, they were just described to me.

Were you able to hear them?

No, I never hear anything in my dreams.

Your eyes close, reopen, close again.

Nothing falls.

Nothing falls flatter than sleep.

Text 4:

A Gem

1.

You carry it about you like a stone, the gemstone of a reflection or a speculation. It flattens to fit your pocket, its bulges to match the bulges in your stride. You speak to it as if you were speaking to me, speaking into me. Your gaze sinks into it like a stain or a smell that won't go away.

2.

It's a surface does not yield to anything other than light. It has no angles other than the ones you bring to it. Just the other day, I was leafing through a magazine that I happened to find on the seat next to mine. Then you rang. I didn't pick up. I waited for your text to arrive and it did, explaining the reason for your call. I waited a few minutes, and answered in writing. During that short wait, I leafed through the magazine. I found nothing of interest, other than an image of someone who looked like someone that you and I once knew. Someone we once called a friend. If it was him, he'd changed: aged, grayed, thickened. He looked tired. The caption under the image described a gala, a dinner, an event in honor of someone and their accomplishments. I did not read the rest. I could not. My attention was already elsewhere. You had written again, and I was answering.

3.

I saw a woman sitting alone (this is another riddle). I saw a man talking, talking and walking, alone. We are only as spacious as the mouth that feeds us is something I think I overheard earlier. This is what I showed you the other day on my surface: a cruise ship stranded at sea, being battered by waves the size of cruise ships. Planks fall from the ceiling, narrowly missing the heads of a group of seated passengers. They're sitting in plush leather armchairs, gripping the armrests and trying to stop them from sliding with their feet.

The boat is rocking violently from side to side. A plotted plant tumbles across the floor. Through the windows, one can see the churning seas, the large swells, the gray sky. We watched it with the sound on mute. Though the passengers seemed calm in the pixelated image, I could imagine that they were terrified, perhaps even screaming.

4.

You carry it about you like a precious stone. Like a gem that speaks to you.

A gem that your gaze sinks into like a stain or a smell that will not go away.

It folds into itself, folds into your pocket like an inverted wrapper, wrapping itself around its contents from the inside out.

It speaks to you but the words are elsewhere.

Its surface bristles with thin emanations.

It has no angle other than the one that brings you to it.

5.

Here is another example:

It's a single surface, a single unbroken surface, that all of us carry in our pockets. Like an idea that we're all having at the same time, in different ways and for different reasons. Yet no-one has or ever will be able to see all of it. It's too vast. Too mobile and vast. But it fits in your pocket and mine like a bribe.

6.

It's like a wafer, a host wafer: a tasteless stand-in for a celestial body. Or it's like a fake map with skewed outlines, deformed names, altered proportions. Or it's like a sneeze that disseminates instantly, contaminating everything it touches. Like a mirror, it has no depth. Like a regret, it has no consequences other than its constant distraction. Like a word, it belongs to no-one. Like a division, it makes everyone long or belong, long and belong, long to belong.

Text 5:

Kraketig

Just the other day, I fell asleep on a train. I dreamt that I was waking up on a different train that was slowing to a stop. As in any dream, the absence of certain details was as significant or insignificant as the presence of others. I cannot remember the presence of any other passengers nor can I remember getting off of the train. I was on board the train, and then I was outside of it, outside of the station even, walking in a small town of pastel-colored cement houses surrounded by fields of wheat, patches of forest, capped by a gray sky. The town seemed empty. There was no-one to be seen anywhere. Shops and businesses were closed. Even the traffic lights had been turned off, or maybe I'm just adding that in, making that up, making it all up as I'm going along.

What I do remember is that there were crows everywhere. I thought they were ravens at first, but they were crows. Their heads and wings were jet black, but the rest of their plumage was ash gray. Their legs were a dark reddish gray. The crows were walking, occasionally hopping, but never flying.

The train in my dream was a railway train. I have no memory of the transition from subway to train, city to countryside. As with any dream, its disconnects were subservient to another logic of composition. Cuts and jumps. And every gap was a moment of oblivion.

I remember feeling neither lost nor panicked nor anxious, but rather bored. I cannot remember ever having experienced boredom before in a dream. I ran after the crows to scare them into flying, but they would just hop away, occasionally flapping their wings once or twice.

I remember walking around the town, looking not for assistance or sustenance but simply looking. I don't remember ever thinking of using my phone. Perhaps there were none in my dream. The town smelled like the aftermath of a fire, as if it had somehow burned down and been replaced overnight with this vacant scatter of pastel-colored cement houses. I started to feel thirsty. The crows had disappeared, or so I thought, until I reached a square and found them all perched on different branches of the same tree. I know they were crowing, I could see their open beaks, feel their noise even as a rhythmic pressure in my ear, but I couldn't hear them. I couldn't hear anything but I knew they were crowing.

And then the dream ended.

I don't recall the presence of other birds. I only remember the crows, moving about the empty town like shadows.