



# 2051

## UTOPIA IRAGAN

- EKAITZ GOIENETXEA CERECEDA -

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## 2051 Beyond Utopia

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**Ekaitz Goienetxea Cereceda**

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Wispy clouds float overhead, making ever-changing patterns in the blue sky. Blown by gusts of southerly wind, they form curly pigtails in the heavens. The fiery orb, hanging above the horizon, paints the sky in different shades. The dawn colours slowly spread over the vast canvas of the sky. Reddish purple. Bright orange. A spill of yellow and blue. Changing and growing like watercolour tendrils, sparking and gleaming as they dance across the roof of the world. Reflections and shadows dance lightly over the metallic surface of the sea.

The sun melts the snow on the high peaks.

The raging torrent rushes down to the valley in an unstoppable flow.

Far away, across the vast landscape, a black dot, moving at great speed. It traces a line, and then wipes out its trace as it goes. It skims along the surface, not touching the ground. Over all the bushes. Under all the clouds. Slithering across the landscape like a snake. A ripple of air follows it across the grassy plain. It moves off into the distance. It crosses the far horizon.

On the horizon lies utopia. That's what the old sayings tell us anyhow. But for every step you take towards it, it moves one step away. It's impossible to reach. The more persistently you chase it, the more it slips away. So what's the point of utopia then? Just that, say the old sayings. It spurs you on.

Train 2051 crossed the horizon and moved beyond utopia.

Finisterre. Mesopotamia. Khunjerab. From west to east. From south to north. The whole geographic continent. Susa. Ethiopia. Obaba. Names of those places kept alive in the oral tradition; places which no longer appear on any map. Karakorum. Samarkanda. Xian. Distances and borders are erased. More than at any other time, civilization has the world within its grasp, under the dominion of movement.

Rather than running on iron tracks like the locomotives of yesteryear, train 2051 runs through a furrow that is vaguely reminiscent of a water channel. It's as if it's running over a fine thread, like a smooth, aerodynamic wind vane. Magnetic levitation. No obstacles. No wear. As it passes, it leaves a thin line on the ground, a groove that is filled in and erased from sight by the wind which follows in its wake. Behind it, train 2051 leaves the seed of biodiversity.

Train 2051 runs on hydrogen. Plastic is available in abundance and hydrogen is obtained in two chemical stages from synthetic marine materials. Movement is clean. It is ozone and ocean-friendly. The Atlantic. The Arctic. The Pacific. In the first stage, the plastics are thermally degraded by means of pyrolysis in tapered reactors and huge heat masses until they are completely devoid of oxygen. Then, the gases produced are used in the steam-powered catalytic reformer of the second stage. 1,201 clean kilometres per hour. No carbon dioxide emissions. Troposphere. Stratosphere. Clean atmosphere. Glistening oceans.

Racing cirrocumulus clouds. Circular creases in the sky. In ever-growing vertical masses. Herald the coming of rain. Rays of sunlight shine down through the cracks, here and there, locked in a dance with the restless shadows. The scene is filled with small, quick movements. The puffing of the steel windmills. The tickling of the glacial pool drills. The trembling of the trees' breathing apparatus. The slithering reflections of photovoltaic rivers. The fluid train line tracing the eyelids of the landscape.

The clouds grow fatter and blacker across the sky.  
The rains are coming soon.

Train 2051 slows down until it comes to a complete halt in the middle of the plain. A process of transformation is underway. The carriage-caravans that spread out behind it start to change. The 6x6 modules seem to converge; then they stop and pile up, one on top of the other, taking on a new shape. A malleable metamorphosis. Columns. Towers. Skyscrapers. An elastic metamorphosis of steel, like the mechanisms developed by certain animals in accordance with the laws of evolution. Like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. Like a tadpole becoming a frog. Like Gregor Samsa waking up one morning as a giant insect. Station train. Now the mode of transport is a city, a city contained in two giant columns, standing stock still and upright against the horizon.

A pause.  
A flash of lightening splits the sky. Zap.

The passengers are safe inside the giant city station. The modules' intermodal connectors have formed a campsite citadel, and all the city's needs are met within. Market. Hostel. Recreation. People appear in groups on the upper balconies to smoke oxygen cigarettes. Those with families use this time to greet their relatives. On the lower floors, they set up local food markets and eateries. Those who are hungry for other things take refuge in ephemeral sexual encounters in the bedrooms. In both towers and all the floors and corridors, there are long queues for the Darkrooms and toilets. Within the huge city, its inhabitants look like tiny flees.

The heavy shadow of the clouds' darkness.  
Pieces of the broken sky prepare to fall.

The station is not a place. The station is a moment, an instant, a fleeting second. A temporary pause in the journey of an ever-moving society. An ephemeral pit stop that is over almost before it starts. It's like what was known as a Sunday in the old religious civilizations. The giant station towers stretch and start to dismantle themselves. Skyscrapers.

Columns. Foundations. Once everything is in place, the modules rearrange themselves, linked together neatly in a line; carriages once again. The amphibian train 2051 speeds off towards the south-east, swift as the wind.

The first fat drops of rain begin to fall. A sudden breaking of water from the heavy, expectant clouds. A rumble of thunder can be heard on the mountaintops; too late. Crash and clap. No one hears the downpour roar.

Geographical distance annulled. The entire content, here. In the blink of an eye. The technological obsolescence of a bygone era wiped out. A travelling city that needs no map. Movement is its only goal and only path. A nomadic architectural structure that never grows old; an updatable form of town planning that never loses its way and is constantly reinventing itself. Again and again. Over and over. Forever. Boundless perennality.

Infinite sustainability.

In train 2051 everything is fast, running at 1,201 clean kilometres per hour. The windows are transparent, interactive, informative interfaces used to choose the colour of the outside weather, to download the basic rules of peaceful coexistence and to vote on the logo for the next station. A lizard. An eagle. A horse. Because a logo communicates faster than a thousand languages.

In train 2051 everything is on-line and there are 7,111 different language channels to choose from. All services can be customised and adapted to suit each passenger's individual needs and whims. The dubbed computer voice whispers in your ear. Your chosen language in your earphones.

In train 2051 everything is at hand without you ever having to leave your seat. Video conferences, live concerts, holiday destinations - all streamed onto the screen in front of you. Places of pleasure. Games of life. Friends for frolicking. Sit-app. Plazapp. Hi-app. You can even engage in some flirting with a view to establishing intimate relations through the simultaneous multiplex video-windows.

In train 2051 everything is now, at this very instant. Your smart travel ticket makes all information readily available to you. Applications to augment real time. New trends in data-trading. Upcoming headlines from the prophet of the future. "The anniversary of degrowth, coming soon". All citizens are interconnected, facing the same way and holding hands.

Yeah. Right.

It's always warm inside train 2051. The casing of the convoy is made of rain and sun receptors, in case of a power emergency. Even when the temperature or climate outside change, the conditioned air inside the carriages remains the same, thanks to the geothermal magnetisation device built into their underbelly.

It's always peaceful inside train 2051. It holds all cities inside itself. Those it has recently dismantled, and those it will construct in the future. The citizen-passengers are diverse.

A virtual ochlocracy empowers each individual by respecting everyone's idiosyncrasies. Wolf. Whale. Penguin. Help us choose the logo for the next station. All opinions are valuable. If you agree, blink once. If you disagree, don't blink (even once). Remember to pick your favourite language channel before opening Voteapp.

It's always diverse inside train 2051. There are people of both sexes and all different ages from all over Eurasia and a whole range of different cultures and languages. All are one, all are sharing the same journey. Within this rich seedbed of social diversity, thanks to the customisable technology, the carriages are a hub of peaceful coexistence.

The propaganda pill you have to swallow in exchange for your three coins gets longer and longer. Boundless broadband in a tight, narrow sleeve.

In train 2051, freedom is in everyone's hands. Citizens only have to remember three basic rules of peaceful coexistence. One, no religious symbols. Two, no national flags. Three, no public weeping. Traditions and pursuits involving local customs, beliefs or sadness, while permitted, are considered inappropriate in public. To this end, Darkrooms are provided in which individuals may indulge in their personal customs in private. Blackrooms, folkloric black places. In order to reduce the risk of addiction, limited use of these Darkrooms is recommended.

Remember. No religion. No flags. No depression. In order to respect diversity, public displays or expressions of local customs are strictly prohibited.

In train 2051, respect is in everyone's hands. If you witnesses a violation of the basic rules of peaceful coexistence, please press the black square button located at the top of your main screen. An updated version of the rules are available for consultation on your window interface in seven thousand, one hundred and eleven languages. If you have any doubts, please raise your hand and one of the hostess-functionaries in your area will be happy to show you where the button is located.

Uniformed hostesses walk up and down the aisles, pointing out the window-interfaces with sustainable smiles on their faces. Few passengers turn to look at the windows, and still fewer look out of them.

In train 2051, everyone has a voice. All you have to do to listen in your own language is tune your earphones in to the right channel. To say something, all you have to do is record a voice message and press the green circle to make it immediately available to all inhabitants of the train-city. Plazapp is full today.

An endless mosaic of faces spreads across the screen. You can zoom in or endlessly out, to spy on every single person sitting in every seat in every module in every carriage.

A strapping youth thoroughly enjoying a DJ session, hands clasped over his earphones, head moving in time to the beat. A red nosed allergy sufferer, sneezing all over his screen. A live gaming addict hypnotised by flashes of light, an angry frown on his face as he strives to reach the next level.

Someone scraping a spoon frantically around the bottom of an empty yoghurt pot, determined to get every last little bit. A sleeping non-beauty, snoring loudly, far away in the land of dreams, a long line of dribble running down her inflatable travel pillow. A novice violin player, practising his scales. A silk cloth seller, showing off his wears with a frustrated look on his face. In desperation he shoves the cloths aside and offers his earphones to his reluctant buyers. A karaoke fan who, despite putting her heart and soul into it, doesn't seem to realise that she is out of tune because the volume in her earphones is so loud. A child, blue in the face with crying. Journalists consulting their tarot cards in a futile attempt to keep up with current events. Time brokers, shouting nervously. Virtual profile surgeons talking about special offers. A woman in a red dress who looks like cat, mewing in heat. A crested cockerel crowing at the wrong time of day. Some anonymous individuals in sheep masks bleating at a lost shepherd. A crow wearing a tie, beating itself up about being black. An insatiable crowd turned into artificial wildlife on a train in which there are no other live animals (unless you count the logo images people are voting for). A white rabbit. A panda bear. A letter. No time for love songs. The DJ carries on, not caring a jot whether or not anyone is listening to the endless scratching that can be heard over the sub-bass beat, completely unaware of the young lad who is totally immersed in the session, his hands clasped over his earphones. Even though they are sitting side-by-side.

Train 2051 wishes you a pleasant trip.

I live on that train. Here I am, next to the window in seat C2 of the third 6x6 module of the nineteenth of the train's 2051 steel carriages. The publicity report showing on the main screen has just finished. I've been given my three meagre electronic coins. I go into the music archives; after listening to that grating computer voice I think my ears deserve a rest. Something soothing; something acoustic; an instrumental track perhaps: [bit.do/2051](http://bit.do/2051). I press the green circle, the recording costs me an e-coin.

I'm Inko Soare, a qualified on-line translator.

I'm out of work at the moment though, just like most of the people on train 2051.

There are more opportunities here. That's the promise that got us on board. New professions, new languages, new cultures. The unemployment rate on train 2051 is more than 61%. Most of us earn a few coins by listening to the official propaganda video. We need these coins for food, personal hygiene and leisure activities. You get three coins for every viewing. I know the advertisement for utopia off by heart.

Anyone who wants to treat themselves to, say, some local spirits or a packet of oxygen cigarettes, or a session in a personal customs and pursuits Darkroom, either has to watch more propaganda sessions or somehow get a job that only a privileged minority have any real hope of landing. New professions, they call them. Data compilers. Power engineers. Profile surgeons. Pharmacy dealers. Sustainable smiling hostesses. Shouting salesmen who constantly swap local merchandise but never actually sell anything. Silk. Leather. Cotton. Melons. Aubergines. Aromatic spices. Oh yes, everything is available to the passengers of train 2051. Shoes on the floor. Socks hanging up. Empty suitcases. Sugar. Salt. Pepper. Everything, and nothing at all.

I live on very little, moving from station to station. A full stomach, the occasional wash under the armpits and a bit of oxygen now and then. That's all I need. Well, that and a little bit of sex every once in a while of course. Not that often, just once every two stations or so. Just scratching an itch, you understand. Because train 2051 is always warm, but loneliness is cold and Darkroom sessions are expensive.

At the wolf logo station I shared a rented room with a passionate dark-skinned woman. Two e-coins each for a whole night. At the whale station I spent some time with a short-haired girl with pretty eyes. You don't need words to set up an erotic encounter. Just one blink and you're in. They don't always last a whole night. Sometimes it's just a quick, half-baked orgasm and see you later alligator. At the penguin station it was a blonde. We got a room at a half price discount. We got dressed, paid the rent with our cards and went our separate ways, each of us lighting up an oxygen cigarette as we went (the last one in the packet in my case).

Note: I must buy a new packet at the next station.

No names. Not a single word. Not even a "see you at the next station". It's better like that. Because after screwing, after standing naked in front of each other and revealing all your bodies' secret codes, then unless you speak the same language there are really no mysteries left to be uncovered.

The fat man who has been sitting next to me since the train dismantled penguin station and started on its way again won't shut up. He's speaking to the screen in front of him in some kind of oriental language, a dialect from somewhere along the south-east coast I think. I can't understand a word but the harsh tone of his voice pierces the instrumental music coming through my earphones and tension seizes up my body as his grating chatter wears away at my already thin patience. But I dare not say a word. Even though he has a voice like a shrill whistle, his body and facial expression are grave and serious. And besides, any attempt, no matter how small, to make conversation with a fellow passenger, no matter who they are, is considered the height of bad manners on train 2051. Not to mention exceedingly strange behaviour.

I want to concentrate on my instrumental music.

I press my earphones closer to my ears, trying to block off any outside interference. The fat man beside me has three windows open on his screen at the same time. Three faces, and him, all talking (or gesturing at least) at the same time. One moves his arms up and down, banging around as if trying to point to something outside the frame of the screen. His dog-like face is bright red, and I imagine him barking like a Rottweiler. Another one is smiling a small, sly smile, looking sideways into the camera as if he were whispering whatever information he's currently imparting into his shirt collar. The third person keeps moving out of the camera frame and then jumping back in as if trying to give the person watching a fright, before doubling up in laughter. I'm not sure exactly who the fat man sitting beside me is talking to, or indeed if any of the three people on the screen are listening to him, but he does not shut up for even a second, not even to draw breath. And there's a horrific stench coming from his armpits.

The music in my earphones stops. They've turned all the monitors off. All I see now is my face reflected in the black screen in front of me. I look tired and washed out; dark circles under my eyes, greasy hair and a scraggy beard. I'd better find time to shave at the next station. After buying a packet of oxygen.

I hear the familiar chimes that precede passenger information messages in my earphones. *"Today is the anniversary of degrowth. Let us share a moment of silence to remember."* The icon for silence appears on the screen, a finger touched to a pair of lips. As I remove my earphones I realise that the fat man beside me has stood up and walked off.

Silence reigns in the carriage. The central network has shut down all electronic devices. The only sound is the subtle inertia of the train's movement.

On the window, a ghost town slowly appears from the right, far off in the distance, across a vast plain. The buildings are the deep black of abandonment.

Everyone on the train is staring at the windows. We are all aware that a blanket of silence has fallen over every carriage of train 2051. We have all, every one of us, been struck dumb. We feel a shiver, like a breath of surreal air on our skin. Dogs, sheep, crows, cockerels - all living creatures are holding their breath. Not one child is crying, not even a whimper. It is a moment of silence to show respect for the past and for its memory, so that the Cold War of the Building Race may never happen again. 75 years have passed. Seventy-five seconds. One second for every year. One. Two. Seventy-five.

The ghost town moves to the left, finally disappearing from the window. The black of abandonment goes too, disappearing with the buildings.

The train's electronic devices come back on, along (it seems) with the voices and bustle of its passengers. The carriage is once again filled with its usual collective mumbling din: crying, snoring, shouting, out-of-tune karaoke singing, violin scales, meowing, bleating, cawing and out-of-hours crowing. Indecipherable. Indistinguishable. All mixed up together.

Everyone has gone back to what they were doing before. Both the jobless and the gainfully employed. The working minority disappears down the aisle as the data compilers, profile surgeons, power engineers and sustainable hostesses all rush off to their jobs. Automatic citizens who rest only at the ephemeral stations and during the brief seconds of silence in memory of the degrowth. They call it a working life, but it's really a life of work.

Someone new comes to sit beside me. It's a woman. She's wearing a napkin like a mask. Her ears are covered by earphones. I cover mine and try to tap back into the track I was listening to earlier, even though I know it's no longer available. Another coin gone.

An alarm pops up on the screens.

I take my earphones off but the carriage is just as it always is, filled with its chaotic collective racket. No one seems troubled by the flashing light. Everyone just carries on talking to their screens. The passengers have developed a filter of indifference to the red light.



The wolf's coming the wolf's coming the wolf's coming. They perceive no more disquieting message than this when the red light comes on. The siren that comes on with the alarm light is almost impossible to hear over the constant din of the carriage.

The cause of the alarm appears on the video surveillance screen: an old man has been caught flashing. He's standing in the middle of the aisle with his overcoat open, arms outstretched, foaming at the mouth and shouting his head off (you can't hear what exactly he's saying). He's displaying a T-shirt, chest puffed out in pride, turning this way and that in the aisle. Is it a T-shirt of a national sports team? I don't know. But judging by his enthusiasm and desire to show it off, I'd say it was from one of the old nations. I guess he must have taken advantage of the seconds of silence to proclaim his allegiance to the world. And then some. It's a display of nationalism taking place very near here, in carriage number seventeen. Just two carriages along, although no one takes any notice at all.

The woman beside me is watching the propaganda video, flicking between language channels in her earphones as she does so.

In the live feed on the screen, hostesses are ushering the old man up the aisle. I expect they'll diagnose him with folkloric-affective disorder. *"Any expression of local customs may be used against you."* Crying, praying or any proclamation of national pride. The body sometimes has urges, and I see no harm in that; I understand where he's coming from but seriously man, that's what Darkrooms are for. "No religion, no flags, no sadness". Get a grip mate, it's not that hard.

A black structure of some kind whizzes past the window. There and gone in the blink of an eye. A long-gone station without a name. In other words, one of the old stations. Even if it had a name, there would be no time to read it. Most likely from before the International Building Race Disarmament Covenant. We are now in the desert. *"What will the next station's logo be? Vote for your favourite!"* Wolves. Whales. Penguins. People generally tend to choose extinct animals for station logos. Eagles. Tortoises. Letters.

The woman beside me continues to flick through the language channels on her earphones.

There's something about her. She is dark skinned and has tattoos on her neck, shoulders and arms. She is wearing a baggy paint-stained sun top and has a small, leather handbag full of pins, badges and patches. Uncombed curly black hair frames her face: small nose and black eyes adorned with dark blue eye-shadow.

She's attractive and (I wager) not unaware of that fact.  
If she were to remove her mask, I'm sure a smile would be revealed.

There's something about her. Perhaps it's the gypsy swarthinness of her skin. The straps of her sun top hang lazily across her shoulders and I swear she's not wearing a thing underneath. I have no trouble at all imagining the skin which lies along the path traced down her chest by the tattoos covering her neck and shoulders. The suggestion of the freedom lurking under her baggy top fires my imagination. She takes a puff of oxygen and then blows it out, down into her top.

Remember to buy a packet at the next station.

Or maybe it's her smell. The smell the woman has about her is somehow familiar, somehow real. Over the carriage's permanent smell of newness there is another that lingers - broad, long and slow.

She looks at me.

Then at my notebook.

Was that a slight wrinkle in the blue edges of her eyes?

Did she smile?

She removes her mask and yes, there is a smile playing around her mouth.

She is smiling and looking at my notebook.

No way.

- Thank you
- (...this can't be happening...)
- It's beautiful, what you've written about me, about the way I smell and all. I like it.

Her smile lingers. She's talking to me. I'm dumbstruck.

- I'm Nora. Nora Blu. And you?
- (...)
- Can you talk? Or can you just write in your notebook...?
- I... I'm Inko... You ...you speak my language?
- Yup. We share the same mother tongue, handsome.
- I didn't... S...sorry (shut the notebook, Inko).
- Don't worry, you didn't write anything offensive. So, you're Inko, right?
- Yes, Inko. Inko Soare.
- Pleased to meet you, Inko.

I'm Nora Blu. She told me her full name. She spoke my name aloud. I like the way she says my name, pronouncing each syllable clearly, the *in* with a small chuckle, followed by a well-rounded *ko*.

- It's good to meet someone who speaks the same language, isn't it? It doesn't happen often.
- It's never happened to me. I've never talked to anyone on the train, not even in another language.
- Well hi then. Welcome to this conversation.

To this conversation. To the place this train has never yet reached. Her voice is unusual. It's slightly rough yet warm at the same time. It's a voice you can understand. A full voice, a true one, word for word.

- Why do you write, Inko?
- Err...because I enjoy it and because I can write what I like in my own language 'cause no one .... understands. Usually.
- And do you write only in your mother tongue or in other languages too?
- Just in our language really. Even though I'm a qualified translator.

- Our language, you say. But the language you write in is yours; yours and yours alone, because you never show it to anyone. If you let me read it then perhaps it could be mine as well. But until then...

She folds her arms behind her head and leans back smugly in her seat. That damn smile is amazing. Like she couldn't care less what's in my notebook. Her lips are cracked, maybe because she likes to smile or maybe just because she chews them. She wants me to let her read my notebook. She wants me to show it to her. There's something mischievous, slightly dirty, about her. Well I won't show it to her.

- Why do I write? I don't know... Putting thoughts to paper gives them body, some kind of physical form. They become real.
- But aren't they real otherwise?
- Thoughts? Oh come on, ideas aren't material things, are they? Imagination or memory are like mist. They can easily get forgotten and disappear.
- So you want them to last then?
- Umm. I don't know. Maybe I just want to see myself reflected somewhere.
- But your notebook is silent, Inko. Do you know what's truly real? Truly physical?
- What?
- Shouting. Let's do it.
- You want us to shout? Why? No one will understand us.

She takes a deep breath, her chest and ribs filling out the baggy sun top, and starts shouting. It's scary how loud she is. I turn my head towards the window. I can't bear to look at her. I feel embarrassed. But she just carries on, and then she takes my hand and holds it in a firm grip. She's shouting with her head thrown back and mouth in the air, as if she is trying to blast a hole in the roof. No one tells her to be quiet; no one even turns to look at her. Even the hostesses just walk past with their sustainable smiles clamped onto their faces. No admonishment. Nothing. I'm thunderstruck. I can understand what she's saying. The other passengers just carry on like before, each one immersed in the world within their earphones; each one conversing with their own screen. The noise level in the carriage is louder now. Nora's shouts have forced everyone to speak up a little in order to be heard over the background racket. Plazapp is full, and loud. Nora continues to shout at the top of her voice. She's still holding onto my hand and is keeping time with her other one, hitting the seat, tap-tap-tap, the intensity of her tapping lending greater emphasis to her words. And even if no one else does, I understand her. I alone hear her, loud and clear. My ears have never been so receptive. My heart has never felt so touched. I hear her deep in my flesh. Over and over. Again and again. Four words. I repeat them time and time again, with Nora.

- Listen to this! Please! Listen to this! Please!

We continue to shout and yell all the way to the next station.

In train 2051 everything is fast. In train 2051 everything is now. In train 2051 everything is everyone's. Everyone's opinion is vital and the Tortoise is the logo which received most blinks for the next station. Because a logo communicates faster than a thousand languages.

Welcome to tortoise station.

I have a feeling I won't find time to shave this time round.

As soon as the carriages have become floors we make our way straight down the corridors to the hostel. I buy a packet of oxygen and we rent a room. White walls, a wide bed and a small window in the ceiling. I turn the window's electronic interface off and light up. Nora takes the cigarette from my hand.

- If you're writing, you must be writing for someone.

She exhales into my face.

Oxygen in my face doesn't bother me in the slightest.

- I don't know who I'm writing for. For myself perhaps?
- But what happens when, long after you're gone, someone else picks up the notebook? Oh! Just imagine it's found by a translator! Just imagine he or she translates it into some other languages, some other words, and then puts it into other translators' hands and.... hang on! Just imagine that civilization has changed so much that some of the words in the notebook have long since fallen out of use and...
- That oxygen must have gone to your head.
- Wouldn't you want your work to have offspring? To still be around in some form three, four... twenty generations from now?
- Mmmm...

It took me a while to understand the true nature of her question.

- I don't think so... No. I never wrote anything with the idea that it would be around forever.
- Well be careful, Inko; such things have a nasty habit of lasting forever.

Such things. Those words written in my notebook. Things. She passes me the oxygen cigarette and rummages around in her leather bag, looking for something. Then she squats down to rummage further. One of her straps falls down her arm. Her tattoo leads down her skin, all the way to where the curved swell begins to rise. She finally finds what she's looking for. A box of matches. She catches me watching her, but doesn't comment. I pass her the oxygen cigarette to give me time to get my breath back.

- Do you like to play?
- What, with fire?

She smiles.

That damned marvellous smile.

- Watch closely. Then let's see what you're made of.

She takes out a match and strikes it against the side of the box. Phiss...the red phosphorous head lights up with a small hiss. The head begins to burn, the flame starting to consume part of the white stick below, crackling and dancing. We both stare at the match. The tiny flame moves slowly yet relentlessly down the wood towards the other end. Soon it will reach Nora's fingertips, but Nora doesn't blow it out. She wets the tips of her other finger and thumb with spit from her mouth and slowly grabs hold of the burnt head of the match, which is now black and shrivelled. She does this with great care so as not to break the fragile thread of wood left behind by the flame. Then at last she can take her other hand away from the slow-moving flame, leaving it a clear path to the end of the match and allowing it to consume the last piece of white wood with its crackling heat.

The tiny flame reaches the end of its journey, takes one last breath, and dies. The match is black and burnt, from end to end. Nora looks at me, her eyebrows raised in challenge.

- Now you.
- But you only have a few matches left in your box...

She looks down again and seems to shake her head slightly in a gesture of disappointment at my inability to understand anything.

- How many pages do you have left in your notebook, Inko?

She takes a long, leisurely draw of oxygen and exhales even more slowly.

- I don't much care for things that are forever.
- What about your tattoos?
- I'm not forever, my love.

My love. She's angry with me, but she called me her love. Such nuances do not even exist in the multiple language channels of the on-board computer. What I wouldn't give for a tape recorder. What I wouldn't give to record that voice so I could put that lifeless droning that can be heard on all the computer's language channels in its place. Again and again, over and over, once and for all. Tormentor, beloved, kindred spirit. Real. True. Physical. In the language that offers me oxygen.

- Last drag?
- Ok.

But then she takes a long slow pull, sucking the last of the oxygen out of the cigarette before passing it to me.

- But you just finished it.

She shakes her head and then opens her mouth slightly to show me the cloud of oxygen inside; it hovers there, moving neither forward nor back. No inhale, no exhale.

- Come get it.

I stole your breath  
 smoky and damp  
 your tore out my speech

we bit our lips  
 to eat each other's words  
 tasty beats

phonic matter  
 the voice's flesh  
 throats' sound

we are cave music  
 nestled on a navel's lap  
 booming echoes of the  
 earth

sounds are roots  
 mother tongue is a station  
 naked force of gravity

gripe in your belly  
 a cry can be heard  
 at the foot of the mountain

the rim of the skin  
 the membrane of the flesh  
 the coursing of the blood

we are syntax  
 grammar-mates  
 we our ourselves

a single instant  
 eternity beyond the world  
 improvised by us

let us remain forever  
 here at the intersection  
 between seconds and  
 centuries

I can still smell you in the room. When I woke up, I saw the matchbox thrown carelessly onto the floor. It was open, almost empty. Just three matches left inside. Maybe you went to the bathroom. That's what I thought. I thought you'd come back. Come back to show me that smile again. Come back to get your smell, or at least your box of matches.

But you never did.

I left the room before the station turned back into a train; no time even to wash my face. I took the matchbox with me and put it in my pocket with my notebook. It was all you left me with. Not a word. Not a scribble. Not even a "till the next station". Such things could last forever. Nothing but a memory, a memory of your name, your smell and your voice. And the questions we asked each other just before we fell asleep in each other's arms, and our sweat mingled on our bodies.

- What are you thinking about?
- Have you ever considered just getting off the train at one of the stations?
- Oh Inko...

Oh god, the way she said my name, the *in* with a small chuckle, and then the well-rounded *ko*.

- ...have you any idea how many stations there are yet to explore? The continent is too vast, Inko, and life is too short.
- But what if the place I want to go to has no station?
- What do you suggest then?

A language. A framework for understanding one another. A relationship, in other words. In the warmth of your voice. In the moment you smiled at me for the first time, with the feelings that hearing your voice and being able to understand your words stirred in me. Nothing but an empty memory now. Living only in my imagination. A memory that can disappear as easily as the clouds. Just like the moment I stole the oxygen from your cracked lips. What I wouldn't give to tattoo those memories onto my mind's eye; what I wouldn't give for them to be etched so permanently into my brain.

- I can speak five languages, ours and four others. And you?
- They are all available to us, right? You just have to choose the right channel on your earphones.
- Oh please! You can hardly call that language! That automatic computer voice isn't real; it has no intonation and allows for no nuances. When you choose our language channel, for instance, apart from the fact that there's often interference, what you do hear isn't real. It's tasteless; bland. That's not my language.

Language is what united us, even when we disagreed.

- Do you only write in your mother tongue?
- Yeah. That's just what comes naturally.
- From deep inside? From that part of you that was joined to your mother...

- Maybe. I once read that that's the first sound we hear, the sea that is the amniotic fluid inside our mother's womb.
- How do you say *goodnight* in the other languages you speak?

*Lahko noč, dobra noć, Gou nãcht, Oíche mhaith agus codladh sámh.* I hadn't pronounced those words in years, except into a screen mike. It had been ages since I'd spoken them in front of a living, breathing, fellow human being. *Goodnight.* Then we lay still for a while, listening to the silence. *I love you,* she said suddenly. You loved me. But what you really meant to say at that moment was *Goodbye*; it just came out differently. *I love you. My love. Sleep well.* Things like that. The last words of a woman who knew she was going to leave the next day, without leaving a word. A synonym of *goodbye. Goodbye, Inko.*

I had to wait a while for the modules to turn back into carriages and for train 2051 to resume its journey. It felt like forever. I had left a whole world back in that bedroom, along with a temple of language. In the old religious traditions, such a place was known as home. A station worth stopping at. A train passing through a body. The rim of the skin. The membrane of the flesh. The coursing of the blood.

I went into a bathroom to wash my face and heard a whole city there within, in that festering hole. A liquid wind orchestra I had simply never noticed before, contrasting sharply with the memory of your voice. Loathsome. *brrrt, pffft, plonk and braaaah.* Sounds from different bowels, from throats with no vocal chords. All languages linked together in the sewage channel, no matter the speaker, no matter the listener. From deep within. I clasped my hands to my ears.

- I like your scraggy beard, your small eyes, your curly hair.

I wanted to hear that voice again.

That was my language. I wanted to stay in that language.

You found me, Nora.

When the carriages had once again arranged themselves into a line, it was time to find a seat. I started walking, moving through the train. From module to module. From carriage to carriage. Train two oh five one. Nora, I repeated to myself as I looked at the faces of the passengers staring at their screens. Nora I repeated to myself as I searched for the one face that would look up from the screen and smile at me, that damned lovely smile, that would say *I'm pleased to see you.* Or to put it another way: *language-mate.* Or simply *hello.* Welcome to this conversation.

As I moved down the aisle, I'd occasionally think I'd spotted you, Nora Blu, in the distance. I'd catch a glimpse of your messy dark hair over the back of a seat ahead, a seat that was hiding your dark, blue-lidded eyes, your gypsy skin, your sun top and that tattoo on the nape of your neck. But it was always someone else, never you. No tattoo. No blue eyelids. No smile.



No one lifted their gaze. Every face was glued to the screen on the back of the seat in front, talking to whatever image was projected there. All together. Indistinguishable. Indecipherable. Sneezed jockey disk allergy-ridden game yogurt live pot empty scraping sub-bass snoring sleeper ugly frustrated enthusiast karaoke salesman silk out-of-tune crying cloth journalist child future newspaper library time broker surgeon nervous profile cat cockerel sheep high sales out-of-hours shepherd crowing black lost bleat crow itself.

Everyone was pouring out their diatribe ceaselessly to the shining lights coming from the screens in front of them. No one gave anyone else a chance to be heard. Rumble rumble rumble. Seven thousand and eleven language channels in every earphone, but deaf to the person sitting next to them. In train 2051 everything was just noise. In train 2051 everything was virtual. In train 2051 the passengers had been rendered illiterate by an overdose of multilingualism.

I staggered along. There were shoes on the floor. Socks hanging up. Empty suitcases. With every carriage I passed through, the queues for the Darkrooms grew longer and longer. Suffering from folkloric-affective disorder didn't seem so senseless that morning. I could see myself joining that queue before too long. Hungry for nationalist porn. Or perhaps an orgiastic ceremony or event. Oral poetry booming out of the loudspeakers, thousands of fans in the stands, all alert. Alert to the melody, the rhyme, the message. All in one language, all together. Thunderous applause and collective rejoicing. Demands, emotions, weeping...

The long lines of downtrodden, desperate nationalist porn addicts queued up outside the Darkrooms, no longer able to control the unease generated by the train-society that outlawed all individual cultural expressions in the name of respect for peaceful coexistence and diversity.

I passed through hundreds of carriages without anyone raising their eyes to meet mine. Even the hostesses I passed on my trek just carried on pointing to the windows with their sustainable smiles etched onto their faces, inviting passengers to download the updated version of the new train 2051 rules. No one looked at the windows beside them. Yet alone out of them at what was beyond. Here, no one spoke our language. Here, no one spoke at all, unless it was to a screen. Here, no one said a word. Where were you? In what carriage? My warm-voiced Nora.

My beloved language-mate.

You, who said that life was too short and the continent too vast to leave the train at any one station. But the train would become a station and the station a train without anyone ever setting foot outside. They all stared at their screens, and none of them looked at each other. They had earphones over their ears, and no one listened to the one beside them. Everything was fast, everything was now, everything was here, and yet nothing was anywhere, nothing was any time and no one was anyone at all. The continent's virtual vastness was what made life too short.

A disjointed civilization that moved like a maniac from ephemeral station to ephemeral station, hardly giving you time to smoke an oxygen cigarette in between.

I was exhausted. I was ravenous and my legs could hardly hold me up after having traipsed through countless carriages searching for you. I sat down in the aisle seat of row B1, module two, carriage one thousand seven hundred and thirty-four of train 2051. Next to me was a thin man with a face like a lizard. I needed a rest.

I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the blank screen in front of me.

- I like your scraggy beard, your small eyes, your curly hair. I'll keep them in my memory for real-life fantasies.

I knew that, obliquely, you were warning me of the ephemeral nature of our relationship. You had tattoos, but you yourself weren't forever. We knew that. I made you no promises, nor asked for any in return. After the countless sexual encounters of past stations, ephemerality was a familiar friend. But unlike in those past stations, this time you spoke to me. You gave me your name, the sound of your voice, the smell of mutual understanding, the flesh of our mother tongue.

You carved an absence in my soul, and as you so rightly pointed out, such things have a nasty habit of lasting forever.

I turned on the screen. Hi-app. Sit-app. Maybe I could find you through your screen. Nora Blu. No luck. Plazapp was full, but you were nowhere to be seen. No virtual profiles matching your name or face. Maybe you gave me a false name. Or did you ask a surgeon to change your virtual profile? Were you perhaps one of those rare creatures (like the station logos, long extinct) that didn't use virtual apps? Perhaps you were nothing more than a gust of wind in my imagination, the product of digression, something which disappears as the memory of you fades?

Nora Blu. I uploaded a voice message and waited, hoping you'd answer. List-en-to-this, please.

I took out the matchbox. I lit one of the three remaining matches. The lizard-faced man sitting next to me didn't even notice the smell; for him, the world outside the frame of his screen simply didn't exist. I tried to burn the match from one end to the other, like you had shown me, carefully taking the burnt head between two spit-soaked fingertips, without breaking the thin thread of black. Perhaps I thought that if I succeeded, it would somehow cause an answer to my message to appear on the screen. It was almost like an invocation.

I wanted to believe it was possible, that even if I couldn't find you, you would find me. On the interface. Looking out the window. On the language channels. Somewhere.

Help us choose the logo for the next station. If you agree, blink once. Otherwise, don't blink at all, not even once, until the screen light burns your retinas and you can stand it no longer. Because a logo communicated faster than a thousand languages.

Remember to pick your favourite language channel. Forget you can strike up a conversation with the person sitting next to you. List-en-to-this, please.

The flame continued along its path.  
Connections. Links. Digital labyrinths.

The semiotics of train 2051's logos was not designed to ensure everyone could understand; it was designed to make you forget that the person beside you had their own language. Beneath the incomprehensible murmur of the train's collective fauna, and above the bubble created by each individual's earphones. We were all illiterate. In the name of virtual peaceful coexistence.

What language would the lizard-faced man next to me speak?

I succeeded in burning the whole match. But nothing happened. My hopes of getting a reply from you disappeared with the last tendrils of smoke. Plazapp was full, and my desperate call to you was gradually getting buried beneath a thousand other messages, all unopened and unread. Nora Blu, did you hear? Did you perhaps send a reply that in turn was lost among the thousands of mislaid missives? Getting lost was the only road. The train continued on its journey. 1,200 noisy, deaf and illiterate kilometres per hour, over and over, never-ending, infinitely unbearable.

I was writing for you.

If I couldn't find you, then perhaps there was a possibility that you may, at least, find this notebook. I wanted to believe you could be on the other side of the page; I was desperate to hang on to the idea that you would read these words, desperate to know that you would understand, hear and feel the language of these sentences. To be sure that what I was doing was real. I needed you, Nora. I needed you to write to, to talk to. Even though I had the feeling that I was moving one step away from you with every page I wrote.

What was the point of utopia otherwise?

And what if my notebook were to fall into someone else's hands in some far distant future? I wouldn't be around forever either, but such things as written words might well be; such things had a nasty habit of lasting forever. But then, who would *You* be? If you were someone else, instead of Nora Blu, when some other eyes read this, then who was I writing for?

Note to you: I apologise for all the mistakes and crossings out.

I'm sorry I described Nora's face to you, oh hopeful hypothetical reader of the future. I'm sorry I depicted her dusky skin and the tattoo that crept down into her baggy sun top. I'm sorry I dwelt upon the smell of her messy curly hair and her dark blue-lidded eyes.

I wonder what language you speak? As Nora once said: just imagine. Just imagine a translator finds this notebook, and just imagine that civilization had by that time changed so much that some of the words I am writing were no longer in use.

Note to the translator: I apologise for not explaining the meaning of those long-lost words.

Please feel free to invent your own words to replace them. Write from that place deep within you.

Please know that I was writing for you (too) as I was uninhibitedly vomiting everything I had to say about the unbearable fauna of this damned train up through the sewers. I needed a you, be it Nora, a translator, a reader. An excuse to use language. But the truth is, I was talking only to myself.

A whole city was travelling in that train.

Plazapp was full.

But there were no yous.

I shouted. List-en-to-this, please! Once. List-en-to-this, please! Twice. More than with conviction, with desperation. List-en-to-this, please! Three times. No one looked at me. The fourth time I didn't even get through the whole thing. List. En. Did the lizard man next to me turn his head towards me? Impossible. No way.

And if I dared to speak to him, just like you did to me? Thank you, you said, thank you for what I had written in my notebook about you. I should have been thanking you, for giving me the courage to speak. What would lizard man say to me? What would I say to him?

Did he even speak our language? It may be that he looked because he sensed a sound missing once I stopped shouting. That's all. But maybe he understood my language, and was just pretending not to because he didn't want to speak to me. Before I met you I too preferred to listen to music through my earphones; no words, just instrumental music, isolated from the background roar of the carriage. And anyhow, asking a fellow passenger to take his or her earphones off was considered the height of bad manners. Not to mention exceedingly strange behaviour. Had we really sunk to the level of never speaking face to face? It didn't matter. I decided to risk it.

In my mother tongue or in some other language. Just like you did, with a smile. There were several other languages I could try too, if those I spoke well didn't work: some I could get by in, having learned them in my translating tutorials, others I could vaguely understand from my language channel hopping on the computer. After all, it couldn't be that hard to communicate with the person sitting next to me. Of the seven thousand, one hundred and eleven languages spoken on the train, I had a choice of eleven.

I would simply look at him and start talking. Even if we couldn't speak each other's language, we could always use gestures until we found some way of making ourselves understood. Until we stumbled on a linguistic station. Hello. I'm Inko. That's how I would start. I'd place one hand on my chest and say: Inko. In-ko. I'd tap my own chest with one hand and hold the other one out towards him, eyebrows raised, as if to say: and you? I'm In-ko. And you? Names first. Establishing who we are. And then possible languages. Trying to find out whether he spoke a language I spoke, or if he was at least capable of understanding one of them. Names and then language. No, hang on: a smile first would be best I think. Rest a hand on his shoulder, in a friendly manner, to get his attention, but without frightening or irritating him either. And then smile. Like the hostesses, a sustainable smile. Yes. And then names and after that languages. A smile, names and then language.

What did we have to lose by trying?

An alarm went off.

In train 2051 everything was here.

In train 2051 everything was now.

In train 2051 everything was fast.

Plazapp was full. Images of the arrest quickly spread around all the interfaces. It was a clean, respectful, professional and exemplary operation by the hostesses, the perfect way to illustrate the new fourth basic rule of the train. No religion, no flags, no crying and, the latest one, no touching. The video of the arrest constituted the perfect educational-informative material for illustrating what the law of peaceful coexistence dictated should happen to those who broke any of the updated rules. Easily understood by all of train 2051's cultures, languages and races. No words required.

It clearly showed one passenger touching another on the shoulder, over and over again. The victim of the shoulder-touching abuse pressed the alarm icon on his screen and tried to move away from his abuser-toucher, squashing his body back against the window as far as it would go. From the moment the red alarm light came on until the arrival of the hostesses, the victim stayed in that position, illustrating the seriousness of the attack. He attempted no other move, made no attempt to touch back, not even in self-defence, since that would be as dangerous as violating the new fourth basic rule all over again.

The tension in the images was palpable. The shoulder-toucher continued his attack and disgust and terror were clearly visible on the victim's face. The feelings were so intense that they were almost akin to sadness and were evidently putting the victim at risk of breaking the third rule. The victim was in a tight spot indeed, but he pressed himself firmly against the window and managed somehow to hold back the tears that were threatening to well up in his eyes. He was doing well. The hostesses would arrive soon and get everything back under control. Ten arrived in total, just as the new protocol established to handle cases of peaceful coexistence rule-breaking dictated: five hostesses from either end of the aisle.

They politely offered the offender a mask and invited him to take a deep breath of the laughing gas contained inside, a laughing gas recommended by nine out of every ten virtual pharmacists as the best way to relieve tension and diffuse potentially troubling situations. Without touching the offender, the hostesses deferentially invited him to move down the aisle, their sustainable smiles never wavering, not even for a moment. Then they locked him in one of train 2051's waste recycling modules. A clean, memorable arrest, with no touching, no crying, no religion and no flags.

And everything recorded in minute detail. Plazapp was full that day. It was a good moment to air it publicly. The images were replayed again and again, as the train continued its journey. So that such a case of rule breaking would never happen again.

It was always peaceful inside train 2051. It would continue to carry all cities inside it. The new ones it would take apart, and the old ones that had, at some point, been the future. It was always diverse inside train 2051. There were people of both sexes and all different ages from all over Eurasia and a whole range of different cultures and languages. It was always warm inside train 2051. When the temperature and climate outside changed, inside, a second-to-last match could carefully burn itself up entirely, head to toe, like the second-to-last flame of hope.

Just before train 2051 passed by utopia once again, one of its carriages caught fire.

The train simply shed its outer skin, like a giant snake. The biodegradable blackened remains were left in its wake. The train sped away, far away, tracing a line over the landscape, and wiping out its trace as it went. A man-like being lay on the ground along with the blackened remains, his limbs outstretched.

Another train passed by the body, very close, and then another. Whizzz. New trains came and went, like wind-blown clouds. From the east and to the east. From the west and over the centuries. From the north and from the south. From nowhere to no place in particular. With more or fewer carriages they built their city-stations, infinitely sustainable.

Distances and borders have been erased. Obaba. Ethiopia. Susa. Without an oral tradition, names disappeared. Xian. Samarkanda. Karakorum. The whole geographic continent. Khunjerab. Mesopotamia. Finisterre. Under the dominion of movement.

Wispy clouds floated overhead, making ever-changing patterns in the blue sky. Blown by gusts of northerly wind, they formed curly pigtails in the low-hanging clouds. The slanting silvery moon, hung high above the horizon against a dull, dark grey background. The colours of the stars slowly disappeared, tiny in the sky. No reflections danced on the metallic surface of the photovoltaic sea.

The silvery moon shone its fading gleam across the cold black sky. The mountain peaks were being covered once again with snow. The seasons changed ever faster on the planet no one ever visited.

A back dot standing on two legs. A man-like mammal standing ant-like and tiny at the edge of the immensity of that orographic accident. He stared for a long time into the distance, until, suddenly, he took a step forwards. And then another.

And then another.

Towards the horizon.

**Translation: Diana Draper**