

*Dearest son, dearest Aleksander.*

*Whenever I see something new, I tend to feel I should describe it to you. Even though you're still too young, far too young, to read this—much less to write back—I will record my experiences in letters to you from now on. I can't think of anyone better to tell about all this than the person I left behind for it.*

In the course of his life, Aleksander had often set out to read his father's letters, but he had never had it in him to believe a word of them. He remembered all the times that he had tried. Each time, he had read with an open mind for as long as he could manage, but eventually he realized it was hopeless as long as he had to keep his mind open by force. Even the greatest openness he could muster bore traces of a smoldering mistrust, which flared up as soon as he reread his father's words.

The sequence of sentences always seemed somehow predictable. Maybe it was because he knew the stories by heart—that's what his wife believed. Deep down, he thought it was more probable that he recognized a familiar way of thinking. Whatever it was, it irked him. Why should he have to read this? Why should there even be a document like this, addressed to him? He'd never asked for that. A pang shot through him whenever he read, "I wish I had taken you with me," or "If only you could see what I'm seeing now . . ."

"Whenever I see something new, I tend to feel I should describe it to you," his father had written in his first letter. An opening sentence praised by countless readers. But when Aleksander read those words, his mind went back to the moment that his mother, her voice unsteady and strange, had first shown him his father's original, handwritten letters. He was five; his father was already dead. That morning, she had seen him staring at the bookcase. He had just learned how to write his name and recognized it on one of the spines in a uniform row: his father's collected works. The man was famous to the outside world, and a stranger to him. He was sixteen the first time he read *Letters to Aleksander*, the words addressed to him at the ages of two, three, and four. It felt outdated, too late. He was not the first reader, but the last.

The air conditioner in his room sprang to life, blowing with all its might, as if trying to make him forget that he was in a motel on the edge of the desert. Why was he even on this absurd trip? He hated America. He ran his fingers over the dust jacket, the embossed letters of his father's name, his name, and flipped the book open.

Dearest Aleksander,

Whenever I see something new, I tend to feel I should describe it to you. Even though you're still too young, far too young, to read this—much less to write back—I will record my experiences in letters to you from now on. I can't think of anyone better to tell about all this than the person I left behind for it.

By the time you are old enough to read this, the things I've seen today won't seem nearly so unusual. It doesn't matter if I'm still alive then—whether you can appreciate my astonishment will depend on your own imagination. I have no idea if you have that kind of imagination; you were just a few months old last time I saw you. But I'll assume you do. After all, you are my son.

Imagine a group of uniformed men: soldiers, high-ranking officers, physicists, and journalists like your father. They're huddled together in a dusty trench dug just for the occasion—the excavator is still there, casting a shadow over them. Before their eyes, the desert stretches on for miles, the view uninterrupted except for a distant mountain range. There is nothing to see. Silence. A warm breeze drifts over their heads, making them all equal.

A siren wails across the level sands from various directions. There is no way of telling where the source of the sound could be.

– One minute, someone says.

People start pushing and shoving.

– Stay down.

– But I'm sticking out.

– You'll be fine. It won't come to that.

– How could you possibly know?

The last one pushes at the others again. They settle into a mass.

– Do you have children? he asks me.

I nod.

– What are we doing here, in God's name?

– Shut your trap, another man says.

The silence lasts for seconds. Instinctively, the men bow their heads. I can feel the boy behind me laying his on my back. I can't be sure I'm not imagining it, but even with my forehead pressed against the sandy wall of the trench and my eyes squeezed shut, I see a flash of light. Suddenly a shock wave travels through the ground, rippling the desert floor like a sheet. Then a low roar comes crashing over us, pressing us down, as if bulldozers were rolling over the trench.

Without raising my head over the edge, I open my eyes. Sand and dust fall onto my neck. I can't see a thing, not even the wall of the trench, my fingers digging into the dry soil. The sand gets into everything—my nostrils, my ears, the collar and sleeves of my jacket. When all I can hear is the whisper of shifting dust, I finally dare to raise my head a little. I can feel a warm wind, warmer than the desert air.

– It's coming this way, the man next to me shouts. There'll be nothing left of us.

Through the dust cloud, I see a column of smoke, growing larger and larger at the base. The smoke rises, consuming itself, and for a moment I catch a glimpse of the frenzied glow at its core. The silhouettes of the Joshua trees are the only indication of the distance.

Aleksander glanced up from the page and looked at the field of Joshua trees through the window of his motel room. They stood far apart, angular and still, unmoved, looking to him like the permanent occupants of the landscape, beyond the reach of time. In all their encounters with humans, they radiated this untouchable quality. Instinctively, you kept a certain distance. They were not like the cactuses and yuccas, which seemed so much more vulnerable and expendable—less absurd, too. He felt certain that the respect commanded by Joshua trees came partly from fear of their inexplicable forms.

On the way there, he had seen the garbage piled along the road, around small towns and gas stations: torn-up tires, rusted metal parts, yellowed reams of paper, and broken glass, lying in the scorching sunlight. When he thought of the area buried in ash in his father's story, a few square miles of land where Joshua trees were reduced to radioactive dust and sand was fused into glass, he could not begin to image the energy this required.

His father had guessed right: the things he had seen that day had become less "unusual" over the years. Aleksander knew there had been tests and knew what those tests had led to. In a sense, he knew more than the people who had witnessed the explosion from their hiding places. Nevertheless, he could not escape the impression that with the passage of time the events of that day had only grown more abstract and all the more unimaginable.

Now that he had traveled to the scene of those events, he was disappointed to conclude that his father's letter hardly made them any easier to imagine. What he needed were more details to put things in perspective, like the silhouettes of the Joshua trees and—ironically enough—the man who had asked his father about his children. It irritated Aleksander that his father had not had more of an eye for details of that kind. There were no more than a handful of them, rare exceptions in an article that could easily have been fabricated by someone who had never been there. It was his father's shaky grip on reality that disappointed Aleksander most about the letters. He seemed oblivious to the fact that seeking out and writing about the most extreme situations had only driven him further toward the realm of fiction.

Can you imagine, Aleksander, in what state the men emerge from their hiding places? I, too, beat the dust from my clothes and look around.

– The excavator, I say.

No one seems to hear me. Everyone is looking up, where the plume of smoke has grown as tall as a skyscraper. The excavator is lying on its side, toppled over like a toy, its tracks protruding into the dusty air. Aleksander, it was one of the strangest things I have ever seen.

*This text is the point of departure for a longer story that Nickel van Duijvenboden will write as part of a long-term collaboration with Geert Goiris, which began in 2008 and will culminate in an independent publication. It was read in May 2010 at Geert Goiris' exhibition at the Hamburger Kunsthalle, Germany and published in the catalogue Geert Goiris: Czar Bomba at CAB Burgos, Spain.*