

A Week of Kindness

KEITH NEWTON



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#43

ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES

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CONTENTS

<i>Series Editors</i>	Maria Anderson Andy Fitch Ellen Fogelman Aimee Harrison Courtney Mandryk Victoria A. Sanz Travis Sharp Ryan Spooner Randall Tyrone	Introduction	vii
		Part 1: 1933	1
		Part 2: The Week	19
		Part 3: Weimar	49
		A Note on Max Ernst's <i>Une semaine de bonté</i>	60
		Author Bio	62
<i>Series Assistants</i>	Cristiana Baik Ryan Ikeda Christopher Liek	Acknowledgments	63
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I CAME TO
ASSIST AS
SPECTATOR
AT THE
BIRTH OF
ALL MY
WORKS.

– Max Ernst

INTRODUCTION

I found a book. That's how this project started. I was 25, I was traveling alone for the first time in my life, in Europe, in Germany, a place I'd been afraid of but had quickly grown connected to. Like any traveler, I was more watchful, more curious than at home—more open but also more suspicious. Because everything was new to me, there were discoveries everywhere, and it was in the bookstore of an art museum, newly constructed out of an old train station, that I found the book.

It was Max Ernst's *Une semaine de bonté*, and from the cover to the first pages to each page I turned to next, I felt something unlock. A way of seeing, a way of rendering, a way of *using* the things you found in the world. But I also felt new mysteries reveal themselves, mysteries about what things meant and how stories were told and how much of the past is swept away from us.

I took the book with me wherever I went after that, to new cities and then back home to New York, writing down what I saw and what I thought while I looked through it. What I wanted was to get inside of someone's creative process, to try to see from the inside how something was made, and then look back inward into my own creativity and see what I found there, looking in that way. I also wanted to explore the interrelation and penetrability of one medium and another, art and writing, images and words, to see not only what was translatable, but what was even expressible in the first place.

All along, I was focused on an aspect of the book that's often overlooked—the narrative element, the idea that these strange, disjunctive images formed “a novel in collage.” What did that mean? Ernst was telling a story, but what was it? And if there were a story being told, who were the characters? What happened to them? This was the story inside the book, but there were other characters emerging outside the book as well, first Max Ernst himself, “Max” as I came to call him, and then me too, the traveler and the finder. What was I doing in this story and did I even belong here?



PART 1: 1933

The threat of the irrational is undiminished by its recurrence. The irrational is never familiar, but it is never unknown. Chaos passes across the night sky as the flight of birds in a storm and vanishes in the daylight. The white moon is in the sky and there is lamplight in the elegant halls. Under the streetlamps outside the station, the gypsy speaks in the words of the dead man Apollinaire, to tell whoever passes: *You know when you have damned yourself.*

Max boards a train leaving Paris. He is traveling south, across the mountains. He carries a suitcase with him. The suitcase is packed with books and pages from books. Journals, magazines, catalogues. A suitcase of printed images, of materials. Max has a novel to make but no story to tell. The books and pages are from the last century, French pulp, late gothic, illustrated serials, novels with engravings, scientific publications, natural history, astronomy, fashion advertisements, technical manuals, botanical and zoological reproductions. *Le Tour du monde*, *Le Magasin pittoresque*, *Magasins de nouveautés*, *Astronomie populaire*, *Physique populaire*, *Attributs de commerce*, *Les Damnées de Paris*, *Mémoires de Monsieur Claude*. When Max is finished, the seams will not show.

The materials are images from the years before he was born, and from the years of his childhood, when the dark pine forests near Brühl first entered his dreams, born as he was at the edge of a haunted forest, a witches' forest. He later writes down his memories of the place where he was born. *Max grew up there and became a beautiful child. His childhood is marked by some dramatic incidents, but was not particularly unhappy.* From the train moving south through the countryside, he watches the lines of telephone wires stream along the tracks. The wires cross against the sky above the sloping farmland of the river valleys and then night falls going upward into the mountains and morning comes in the brightness of the mountain light, the slow winding through the lakeside passes. *Max never forgot the enchantment and terror he felt, when a few days later his father conducted him for the first time into the forest.*

Max had been given a pebble by a friend and he displayed the pebble in the Villon Gallery as a work of art called *Objet trouvé* because the pebble had been found outside Cairo in the desert sands of the Sahara near the Sphinx. The shape of the pebble replicates the names of its form: stone and egg and portal and eye. The pebble is round and smooth and, if placed like a guard within a gated doorway, is a witness to the strangers who pass in the street, who examine and judge.

Max lives in Paris, where he shows the art he makes, and he visits his friends in the north of Italy, but once his home was in the Rhineland, and he remembers the forests there and the landscapes along the river. *Maybe he was seduced by the nostalgia provoked by passing trains and the great mysteries of telegraphic wires which move when you look at them from a running train and stand still, when you stand still. To scrutinize the mystery of the telegraphic wires (and also to flee from the father's tyranny) five-year-old Max escaped from his parents' house.* The wires that run through Brühl, and are followed slowly on foot along the tracks, also run from Paris through the countryside to the south, and are followed across other borders, followed back to other homes, along the tracks that cross through tunnels in the mountains and through forest clearings. Their precision is traced across the earth.

The train stops at Milan. Max is traveling alone and has farther to go, into the hills of Piacenza on a later train. He wanders through the station, into the bookstalls. *Blue-eyed, blond-curly-haired, dressed in a red night shirt, carrying a whip in the left hand, he walked in the middle of a pilgrims' procession. Enchanted by this charming child and believing it was the vision of an angel or even the infant of the virgin, the pilgrims proclaimed "Look, little Jesus Christ."* Before the last train, near the exit of the stalls, Max finds another book for his suitcase, the illustrations of Doré, the waters of the Tigris rushing down through rocky cliffs, Eve asleep in the garden, Satan flying toward the earth. He waits another hour at the station and then watches as the white spires of the city fade and the train enters the dark provinces. *When someone asked him: "What will you become later?" little Max regularly answered: "A railroad guardian."*

The themes of the week are the uncertain rules by which its games are played. Disguise and reversal, to know who's in control. The theatrics of the week reveal what must be imagined to be desired. The pictures once authorized for contemplation and wonder are recognized in scenes only half-remembered, if only ever half-lived, the visions of a city that no longer exists. The decadent life has come and gone; the sacrificed men are buried; the alchemists have lost their positions; Max himself is dead, he says so; Max's father, *the strange painter*, is dying, the stern judge, who teaches and condemns; the Court of the Dragon is demolished; the bright arcades, built in iron, are gone, and the panoramas, drawn from nature; the fairgrounds and exhibitions are closed; the crowds are gone, taking their amusements, and the speculators gone from the barricades.

The towers of Vigoleno castle, Max's destination, rise over the green hills. A fortress on a promontory, a walled city above sloping vineyards. Inside the gates, narrow alleys lead under the fortifications, lit by torches. There are other guests, other encounters. A private theater with a private script. The hosts have many friends and extend many invitations. The opera is at Busseto and all the guests and servants and villagers arrive for the performance of *Aida*. In the dining room of the castle, Max finds a painting of St. George and the dragon and buys a canvas the same size. He takes the old master out of its frame and hangs his new painting in its place, a dense wall of trees with the image of a bird against the woods and a giant sun behind. The servants think they recognize the fragrant woods of Amonasro's home. The phantoms of the child's dreams return again through the forests of Brühl, like other children or animals lost in the woods, called back to their homes, where the sinister and official forests are more scary for the child's growing older. *If so it may be important to state that Max always preferred wine. When he was two years old, he secretly emptied some glasses, then he took his father by the hand, showed him the trees in the garden and said, "Look, daddy, they move." Look, daddy, and look, little Jesus, look, father, and look, son, look again and look and look. When someone would ask him: "What is your favorite occupation?" he regularly answered, "Looking."*

Max later records the events of his sixth year. *First contact with nothingness. First contact with hallucination.*

When Max had left his wife and son in Cologne to live with his friend Paul and Paul's wife, Gala, at Paul's house in Paris, where Max and Paul could make books together out of Paul's poems and both spend the nights with Gala, the three friends went on a journey across the ocean. First Paul got up from his table at a restaurant and didn't come back. Then Max and Gala followed him to Saigon. After the three friends traveled into the Cambodian jungle to see the temples of Angkor Wat and after they returned home to Paris, Max moved out of Paul's house. *Max and I were at Verdun together and used to shoot at each other*, Paul remarks. In the first photograph that the three friends appear in together, Gala is wearing Max's iron cross. Paul and Gala had seen Max's collages at an exhibition organized by their friend André and met him the next summer at a farmhouse in the Austrian mountains. Max served as an artillery lieutenant on both fronts, while André served in a hospital on the other side of the Western line. Max never went to André's hospital, but he was injured twice, by the recoil of a rifle and by the kick of a captured horse, and André remembers the afternoon he saw for the first time the collages Max had made, how they had *struck us like a revelation*. Max had watched the sky fill with warplanes from his station in the German trenches, where he painted watercolors. *Max Ernst died the 1st of August 1914. He resuscitated the 11th of November 1918 as a young man aspiring to become a magician and to find the myth of his time.*

As the vegetation is cleared away from the vast stone, the sight lines are trenches cut straight through the earth, where the immensity of the ruins demystifies sight. Art is not the transmutation of the self. Art is a form of sacrifice. A test: to reconstitute, to perpetuate, to absolve. The week of kindness is the reversal of creation, the dismantling of created forms.

One rainy day in 1919, finding myself in a village on the Rhine . . .

The father is disturbed, he is disoriented, he is refused his proper name. Max still lives near his German home. André and his friend Philippe leave their apartments to take a nighttime walk through the streets and don't come back until morning. In a glass-covered courtyard behind the toilets of a cafe, a young girl in a communion dress recites obscene poems. Max brings with him to a small hotel by the river a catalogue of educational supplies, the *Bibliotheca Paedagogica*, as the ships pass by on their way south from Cologne.

One rainy day in 1919, finding myself in a village on the Rhine, I was struck by the obsession which held under my gaze the pages of an illustrated catalogue showing objects designed for anthropologic, microscopic, psychologic, mineralogic, and paleontologic demonstration. There I found brought together elements of figuration so remote that the sheer absurdity of that collection provoked a sudden intensification of the visionary faculties in me and brought forth an illusive succession of contradictory images, double, triple and multiple images, piling up on each other with the persistence and rapidity which are peculiar to love memories and visions of half-sleep.

As the lamps are put out in the walkways of arcades and on the landings of apartment-house stairs, a traveler headed farther south than Max, having seen in a rain-darkened field an abandoned train by the side of the tracks, notices like Max that the figures he passes in the half-light are not who they seem to be. If one is to believe the description of Max Ernst contained in his identity papers.



PART 2: THE WEEK

From the east of the country, from the borderland of the enemy, the lion-headed officer fulfills his mythic commission. The medals on his chest, the feathered scales of his mane, authorize his rank in a history of conquest, in the symbolism of a permanent order. As officers, as courtiers, as jailors, the lion-headed men infiltrate the city, as criminals, stalking the wharves where the ships come in, as murderers and thieves, marauders and charlatans, madmen and beggars. In the streets men watch the transformations, the apparitions, the unnatural growths of human bodies. They watch as passing spectators, hands in their pockets, caps shading their brows.

The beautiful women are sorrowful, their round breasts hang like moons. The beautiful women are enchanted, they are in love, they might be seduced. Their eyes closed, they wander in peace, in the certainty of love, through the countryside. They bow naked in the street to pray. They dance naked to the gypsy flute at the outskirts of the city. The beautiful woman lifts the hair entwined on her arm. Her face is rapturous in the tavern, as a naked body is lowered from the ceiling in its spidery descent. She is impassive, secretly curious, as a dead body is discovered under the billiard table and bells ring overhead.

Destruction at sea, and rescue, as the shadows of men lengthen against the sky. The crime committed, the purse is opened, the money counted. The men are beaten, tied up, terrified. A handkerchief is tied across the mouth of the abducted woman, her body strapped to a machine, ropes bandaging her waist, twined through her arms, a stake between her knees, the ropes geared in the machine. The guards wait for their master in the train car.

The lion-headed man waits in philosopher's robes, an imperial medal hanging from the creases. In the cafe he watches the dancers, waits for his provocation. Guarded by an ancient religion and the modern state, this is his hour of possession, as republican knight, priest, and lord. The late-night revelers in his arms are his only in costume, German braids, fluttering sashes, long black gloves, golden bracelets, flowered ruffles of a showgirl's dress. He watches the evening's preparations, the serpent rising from the trailing base of his mistress's gown, the deadly cat crawling up the frame of a gilded mirror. The maid has done her work, the beautiful women are prepared. The shell, symbol of Venus, projects from the pubis of the corset, reptilian spikes lining the ridges, as the demonic servants attend her, serpent, cat, and claw, a feline tongue licking the round curve of her breast. The translucent gown clings to her body, the animals lurk in the luxurious suite as in the forest, the bracelets wound from wrist to elbow. Out of the arm of the couch a hand dangles as if from a ruffled sleeve.

She rides high in his lap, come out of the sea on the waves, the foam of her sash uncovering her breasts, pearls on her neck, pearls on her ears, the shell on her head like a crown, his cigar smoke streaming white like her black streaming hair. It is all so familiar. Her hair tied down under a white shell, her dress woven with satin and lace, a brooch pinned below her neck. The birds she holds in a jar squeal from hunger, the lion-headed man holds up a severed hand for them to touch. The night ends in violence. In a cheap bare room, in slippers her lover plays with a feather on the soles of her feet. In the halls she is beaten with his sharp-pointed cane. Blood on her white dress, her womb exposed, her long hair dragging on the floor.

In the dangerous streets the official crackdown. The women are shot and left to die on the pavement. The season of the guillotine. Rows of troops guard the site, frozen beneath the trees with raised bayonets. The prisoner lies next to an open casket that holds the bleeding heart of Christ. The executioner awaits his officer, who stands on the scaffold in patriotic certainty and revolutionary contempt. In the shadow of the guillotine, its blade raised again, the lion-headed minister holds up the severed head, its eyes closed, its neck streaming blood, as the hole in the machine appears round and white like the moon. At the outskirts of the city, where the road turns by the white statue of the lion, past an empty farmhouse and distant poplars, the robber escapes from the graveyard with two skulls as loot.

The great flood rises in the drawing rooms, in the bedrooms where the beautiful women sleep. They are drowning in their nightgowns, they are dying in the flood. They will be cleansed and purified, their sins washed away. They will be punished for the crimes of others. They are innocent and they are the cause of the destruction. The past is washed away: intention and evidence. Railroad bridges crumble, train cars plunge off the rails, armies storm over fallen bridges, sinking into the river, cables swing loose, swords flash in the fading light, banners drag like sails in the fading wind. The figures of giants rise or fall above the waters, sink through the air from the towers of the tracks. They stand poised with feminine scorn, as cabaret dancer and foreign queen, over the clock of a gothic tower. They sleep in the shadows of dying soldiers along the riverside. A gargoyle's silhouette broods over the hanged man's body half-sunken in the waves, where a lighthouse shines at the pier's end for an empty sea.

The beautiful women sleep as the great flood rises. The flood washes through their bedrooms, through the private chambers of their sleep, their breasts exposed above the loose silken sheets, their arms raised dreamily above their heads, jewels shining on their ears. The bed of the beautiful woman is a prison. Iron bars are pressed against the bedframe, curtains hang through the cell. The man with crossed arms, in a tight black coat, gravely watches her sleep, watches her naked body, watches the flood rise in her bed. Jailor and protector, he stands guard over her sleep.

Some are saved, some are drowned. While the beautiful women dream, men struggle in the flood. Shipwrecked they cling to staved masts. Young bodies are pulled lifeless from the water. A dead man's spread arms grip the ropes tied to bolted rings. Smoke fills the cheap room from the fire in a metal pail by the bed, with handles like ears, and eyes and mouth cut into the side like a jack-o'-lantern. By the still pool the head of a girl rises, flowers braided in her wet hair as she looks down gently below the surface. Down the rushing stream, the dead woman's body is lifted onto the steep bank with a rope coiled around her chest. Another body churns in the waves. Even in the city there is no protection.

The flood rises in the cemetery, pouring through the gates of a tomb. A wooden casket leans against the wall. A woman emerges through the open door, her face hidden in shadow above her high-necked jacket, her tournure still trailing out of the tomb. She watches the dead woman wash up on the stone in her nightgown, as if carried from her bed, a man kneeling beside her, a hand gripping her hand, the other in her hair. The woman escapes through a back door into the street. Her bare feet step on the surface of the rushing water. She looks back. The chain of a locket hangs from her fingers, glowing in the streetlight that burns on the wall in a glass box.

There are witnesses to the crimes. There are accomplices. The animals appear everywhere they should not be. The men from the east have business in the streets. Their service is needed, their counsel and loyalty. They enter the elegant homes, but keep their interests to themselves. The penitent, his waist wound with leaves, crawls into the path of the carriage in the street. The man from the east watches a coachman raise his whip above his horse, as the evening lamps are lit. The clouded shape and jagged silhouette of the dragon spreads down from the roof of a building, outward from its facade like sculpture, spreading in the dusk. The prisoner, criminal or slave, his naked body bound with rope at the arms and neck, walks unattended through the street. A couple stares with shrewd curiosity. Another man kneels before him, white-bearded, in a dark suit, his hands raised to bow.

The man from the east arrives at the dragon's court, at the entrance to the narrow arcades, his reptile tail hanging from his white robe beneath the dark sash at his waist. There is illness. A child is sick. The rooms are watched through half-opened doors. A woman listens through a closed door. Near her, on the floor of the hall, the winged dragon, her companion, twists its long neck to hear. The dragons appear at doors and gates, the snakes appear, and the bodies of the dead. The beheaded odalisque sits in the street against the wall at the entrance to a covered passageway. Within the house, the figure of an actor, a decayed corpse, still plays his role. The dragon claws at the walls, the snake coils on the stone.

Christ dies again on the cross. The woman makes prayers in her bedroom as the dragon watches from the carpet on which she kneels. Angelic figures rise toward the ceiling. A maid prepares her lady's hair, her white dress trailing behind her toward the chair covered in a gauzy sheet. The rooms are haunted by scenes of sympathy and devotion, sacrifice and cruelty, within the paintings on the walls in gilded frames, where other interiors are disclosed, other passages of transformed life, biomorphic fragments, vegetative induction, channels of anatomic dissection, horses' hooves on hard dirt, tight young shoots, delicate fingers, the veins of a leaf, gunfire, a rising wing.

The man from the east falls with his head to the floor, the alien crouched on top of him, its face sheeted with reptilian armor. The creature on the floor, bat, pig, rodent, moves on its skeletal leg, jointed like a wing. The women comfort each other. They hold each other's hands on the couch as the long reptile crawls on the dark-haired woman's body, its claws on her arms and face, its head in her hair. The man from the east presents a dagger to his master, who receives it folding his hands behind his back. The meeting takes place in the back room of a cafe, two men raising an index finger from a closed hand in greeting, stout in their dark coats. A ghostly woman crouches naked on a chair in the corner. Rats crawl with information.

Past the outskirts of the city, in the snow-covered courtyard of a house, the messenger has arrived, his pale wings lengthening out from his black overcoat, trimmed with fur. The white moon glows through the icy branches of the trees and the snow is piled along the slope of the roof. The messenger's beard is thick on his long, thin face. He has come through the snow in the night to see her, and now he has arrived, as she comes eagerly toward him at the open door. He raises a thin finger to his lips. The naked woman hovers near them at the doorframe, a wreath of leaves covering her below the waist. She turns her head away in pain, knowing that she's been seen.

The bird-headed men bring with them a new time of violence. They have brought no instruments or symbols of their intentions. No one is a stranger to them, only an enemy or victim or accomplice. There is no other authority to restrain them.

The bird-headed men are transformed. They are defiant. As a frightened woman rises naked from an open chest and a fallen candle smokes out on the floor, the man tears at the feathered collar of his neck, his female breasts exposed, to release the white bird-head, struggling upward in its birth. A woman of the house acts to maintain order, and with a raised arm and pointed finger makes demands. His hands in his pockets, in idle curiosity, the bird-headed man stands outside the gates of a strange house, whose high stone walls are cracked and discolored, with low weeds growing across the top. His round eyes stare into the shape framed at the center, into an opening like a lens.

In the circus yards, the bird-headed woman is the master. In dark tights and dark bodice and wide skirt, she holds her whip like a trainer ready to strike. At night she watches in excitement as her companion rattles the bars of an empty cage. At the prison, the bird-headed man has come for the woman at the window. He stands on a prisoner's shoulders to reach her. Another lies dead in the street. His long dark head, his dark coat and wings, his shadow against the prison wall are darker than the gray sky in which the moon is round like his eye. They both hold the bars that separate them, through which she recognizes the savior who haunts her.

They parody the formalities of murderous honor. At the edge of the woods in the early morning, the bird-headed man fires into his opponent's head. The long rifle smokes at close range, the wound bleeds from the man's temple as the pistol falls from his hand. No one else watches, no one else knows if he was taken off guard. Below the coattails of the rifleman, a tube extends upward from his swollen rear, giant bulbs of the brain. The bird-headed man hangs helpless from a tree, his coat torn through a sharp branch, as an imagined hand reaches for the woman's naked breast, in the seclusion of the woods. Her eyes are shut, her dress falls off her shoulder, down her arm. In the woods at night, the woman with dark hair, barefoot, in a dark dress, watches the agony of the bird-headed man as a headless serpent rises out through his mouth. Through the back streets by the piers, the bird-headed men escape.

In a cheap room, the young woman has made a desperate bargain. The bird-headed man appears at the door, as though he'd been called. Near the foot of the bed, the naked man, a white sheet draped over his body from stomach to thighs, is bent backward against the wooden frame. Only his feet touch the floor, his rigid body hangs backward in the air, his fingers and toes bent and stiff like claws. The woman has been abducted. She is barefoot, in a white dress. Her arms and chest are bound with rope. A white cloth is tied over her mouth and nose. Her terrified eyes look into the lighted cell as the bird-headed servants of the house carry her through the basement.

The young men are half-dressed in strange rooms, in the late hours of the night. They've had their encounters. A table is overturned, plates and glasses and an empty bottle are thrown to the floor. Long dark hair falls from the woman's bird-head, her white nightgown loose on her body. The man holds her at her waist as her hand reaches violently for his face. They have turned on each other in revulsion. He throws her from the window of a dark room above the cafe. The bird-headed man leaps from a high window and descends with his arms extended, slowly sailing downward. A naked woman lying against the wall raises her arm in defense. A man standing in the moonlight in the street, on his way to a late meeting carrying a plume of bulbs like a bouquet, is startled, paralyzed. The bird-headed man waits at the doorway, his arms crossed, his shoulders pushed back in reproach, as the woman appears in the hall in a white dress, carrying her lamp, the plume of bulbs like a high crown on her head. She sits at the table. Beneath her plume she covers her eyes in shame. The bird-headed man stands over her behind the chair, stern, patrician, his head and beak rough with age, his dark coat closed tightly on his chest, his white collar tight on his neck.

Before the masquerade, the bird-headed man advances toward her in the hallway of their hotel, rooms 33 and 34. She wears the plume on her head and carries her fan. The black mask covers her eyes. In the bedroom where the jackknives are mounted on the wall and against the table, where the candle smokes by the bed and the hand pulls aside the sheets, she stands in her nightgown to examine in the candlelight a book with studded leather covers, the marking of the nail heads like a constellation. In the office, she approaches the clerks at their desks. A rigid body falls backward toward the floor. The plume casts shadows across her face, her eyes are hidden.

The train is stalled in time, abandoned in all pasts, all histories. The door of the train car is broken off, the window stripped out: the car is exposed to the vision of the Sphinx, the reversion of its human eyes watching the passage. The beasts, dog and rat, climb the side of its head as scavengers in the ruins. The traveler remains in his seat, as the legs of a dead body extend across the floor. Under a black bowler, his bird-head is rough with hair.

The bird-headed men are tracked through the woods. The woman is tied up into the branches, her feet bound to the trunk. Her long dark hair and long white skirt are blown in the wind, as if she were floating upward through the forest. Her shirt is pulled open, her breasts exposed where a wound runs across her skin. As he crosses the clearing, the bird-headed man carries a body on his shoulder, wrapped in a white sheet, bound at the ankles.

The bird-headed men mark their final hour. The killings begin, possession and mutilation. Rooms will burn, demons take shape in the attacks. The skulls piled on the riverbank whiten in the moonlight. The cliffs rise steeply on the far shore and clouds pass across the moon.

The rooster-headed men appear among the contortions and ceremonies of death. Roosters shadow them through the streets, follow them to the deathwatch and into the vaulted crypts. The beautiful women are laid out on biers, lowered into the floor of the tomb, fallen at the foot of a stairway, at the foot of a bed, with a white quilt pulled to the floor, in a pool of blood. Half-hidden by the heavy curtains of their box at the theater, the ladies, with their companion the rooster, watch discreetly through opera glasses the crowded scene gathering below. The rooster-headed men renew the methods of their authority. Traitors are hanged, cat-o'-nine-tails lashed on the rack, women carried off from a raided train. The flag of liberation is raised on the rooftops of the city, the brotherhood of revolution, the towers of Notre Dame clear in the distance, a rooster mounted on a chimney, birds shooting off in every direction through the sky.

The men from Easter Island have returned to the city. They are known by their access and by their influence, but they remain strangers, exiles, cheated, tormented, incapable of restraint. The mantis is on the dressing table, the mantis is hovering among the curtains. The beautiful women are falling through space, falling through time, their white dresses blowing as they fall through their rooms, through the streets, through the sky. They are falling in terror and strangeness out of space and out of time.



PART 3: WEIMAR

Germany in the winter. December 1999. I've been in Europe for two months—I'll be here for another four. At first, Italy and Spain, then colder, darker, farther east. Germany and later Poland. In a cafe in the train station in Weimar, where I go to check my email, my waitress and I start talking when she realizes I'm an American. Very few foreigners pass through Weimar in the winter. She's been studying English since she was 10, but has never actually spoken it outside of class. I'm planning to stay for two days, I tell her, on my way from Berlin to Prague. I wouldn't have even thought to stop, but a friend had been here a few summers before and told me to go. The only hostel still open, where I sleep on a bunk bed in a tiny room and have only passed a few other people in the halls, is institutional and lonely. Her name is Rebecca. She's very pretty, with short red hair. I ask her if there's anything to do at night and she tells me she might go out to see a friend's band. The night before I had a beer in the only bar I could find, which quickly filled up with skinheads. I realize later that I stayed longer than I should have. When I get to the club, in a converted factory, I can't find her in the crowd, but I'm glad to be there and get lost listening to the music. An hour later, she approaches me. We talk and her English is slowly getting better, but I keep having to repeat things. I walk her home through the

empty streets. Her apartment is in a three-story yellow house on Abraham Lincoln Strasse. She kisses me but won't let me come upstairs with her. We spend the next afternoon in the park that runs along the Ilm river, designed by Goethe when he lived in the city. Snow covers the narrow lawns and we walk along the path that traces the park's length. Near the center, we pass two identical cottages whose white walls are covered in a pattern of crossed wooden beams under high-pitched roofs. She tells me that one was Goethe's garden house, which he restored for himself on arriving in the city, and the other is a perfect replica, turned at an angle to the first, built by a local professor to preserve the original, but also as a study in simulation. The professor is gone now, but she's a student at the same university and she believes entirely in the theory of simulation—that the modern world, first America, now Europe, soon everywhere, exists not as reality but as reproduction. I stay a day longer than planned and then the next day she asks if I want to live in her apartment with her. She has two roommates, Bruno and Claudia, but her room is big and they don't mind if I live with them for a while. While she goes to classes during the day, I walk through the city then down into the park, along the same path we walked the first day, to a small cafe she'd taken me to, where I eat scrambled eggs and drink a bowl of coffee, reading and taking notes for some unknown project. Some days I go to the Bauhaus museum or the Nietzsche archive in the house where he died. One

of the books I have with me is Max Ernst's *Une semaine de bonté*, which I had found in the bookstore of the Hamburger Bahnhof just before leaving Berlin. Completed over a few weeks in 1933 while Ernst was on vacation in Italy, the book, also known in English as *A Surrealistic Novel in Collage*, is in many ways structured like a novel, particularly in its division into chapter-like sections. It consists of more than 180 collages based on source material taken from nineteenth-century illustrated novels, catalogues, and technical manuals. The book is broken into sections corresponding to the days of the week—the original subtitle is “Les Sept Éléments Capitaux”—each connected to recurring figures, themes, and symbols that are associated, in the book's construction, with an “Element,” an “Example,” and one or more epigraphs. The element of the first part, “Sunday,” is “Mud,” the example is “The Lion of Belfort,” and the epigraph is from Alfred Jarry. Rebecca has a break for Christmas and we travel across the country to visit her family in a rural hamlet south of Bonn. Her parents are incredibly kind and want to ask me a lot of questions about being Jewish, but they speak no English and I still haven't learned more than a few German phrases. Her mother gets very excited when she teaches me the word “schnee” during an unexpected snowfall. On Christmas, Rebecca's grandfather comes by for lunch and I'm shown a picture of him in his army uniform from World War II and told the story of how he was held captive by the Russians for nearly

a year. When Rebecca and I take a walk later above a quarry near her house, she realizes it's weird for me to listen innocently to stories of the Wehrmacht, but she says I have to believe her that almost all Germans at the time had no knowledge or involvement in the Holocaust. She assures me that as a foot soldier on the eastern front her grandfather was like so many others in not knowing the truth. When we get back to Weimar, I begin to look at the old people in a different way, couples I pass in the street, the woman who sells schnitzel sandwiches at lunch, thinking about how old they were during the war and what their roles might have been. I know that Weimar and the whole region had been strong supporters of Hitler, but 50 years have passed and I decide not to judge these strangers whose city I'm now living in. Much more pressing among Rebecca and her friends is the history of East Germany. We have a long night in Bruno's room for Claudia's birthday. Smoking joints and drinking red wine, we talk about the experience of growing up in the East. Bruno was raised in Weimar and his father is still a bartender at the most expensive hotel in the city, but he doesn't have much to say about the past. He wants to be a DJ in London and, like Claudia, who wants to work in the film industry in Berlin, he's ready to leave Weimar as soon as he has enough money. But his best friend Silke tells me about growing up in a small town outside Weimar, where as a kid she watched Potemkin villages literally being put up overnight

when visiting officials were about to ride through the otherwise decrepit streets. She was so upset by this sight that she's still unable to accept anything for what it is and doubts the validity of any facade. It's very easy to listen to her talk. She works as a nurse and is trying to get a job at a hospital in South Africa. She also tells me that Weimar is particularly well preserved for East Germany because it was used as a model city to show outsiders that the DDR still cared about German culture and heritage. Another friend arrives named Frank, who gives me an impassioned argument about the imminent disappearance of the German language and how Germans should fight to preserve it in the face of the world's hatred and suspicion. At a small museum, Rebecca and I see a photography show called *Die Wende und das Ende*, covering the period from the fall of the wall through reunification. Her favorite image is of three teenagers sitting on the base of the Goethe-Schiller statue outside the National Theater. Around Goethe's neck someone has hung a sign that reads, "Wir bleiben heir!" Rebecca has to explain: this was the chant ("We're staying here!") that protestors shouted before the wall came down, but the joke was that after "the turn," when everyone was heading west as quickly as they could, Goethe and Schiller were staying put in the East. One evening I'm looking through the photographs Rebecca keeps on her desk, black-and-white snapshots, when I come across a stack of her without

her clothes on, her body shadowy in some, fully exposed in others. I hold them up for her to see and laughing she grabs them from me. She won't tell me at first but it's Frank who had taken them a year before. They had been very serious and had only broken up a few months ago. It's strange to me, but this doesn't make me jealous. It makes me like Frank even more, especially his conviction about saving his language. Rebecca and I are supposed to go out to hear music that night but there's a heavy snowstorm and we never leave the house. Sometime after midnight, lying there naked, we realize we've run out of cigarettes. I get dressed and go outside to buy more. Cigarettes cost five marks and you buy them from vending machines in the street. There's one right outside on Rebecca's corner and I walk downstairs holding nothing but a five-mark coin, cold and weighty, in my hand. The snow is still coming down hard and swirling in the wind overhead, but when I get to the vending machine I stand there for a minute in the glow of the streetlamp, holding the coin and watching the snow in the dark air. I look up and see Rebecca standing in the window of her room looking down at me. I don't think I've ever loved the world more than at this moment. A few days later I finally take the trip I'd been avoiding since I arrived in Weimar, the trip to Buchenwald, on a hill just outside the city. I hate the idea of Holocaust tourism and have been resisting it since I arrived. But finally it doesn't feel right to spend all these months

in Weimar visiting the pretty parks and palaces without seeing the camps as well. It's a particularly cold day and at the top of a windswept hill Buchenwald is a terrible place, the coldness pushing in from every side and rising out of the frozen ground. Almost all the buildings have been demolished except for a few kept to house the museum and administration, leaving a barren field to wander around in. In one of the buildings still standing a basement room has been left intact, painted entirely in white and bare except for a series of hooks attached to the wall, high enough so that hanging by the wrists a person's feet would be lifted off the ground. The room has every sign of a clinical operation. In the museum are photographs of Weimar during the height of the Reich, crowds cheering for Hitler in the square outside city hall that I walk through on my way to Goethe's park. I think again of all those old people I pass every day, whether any of them are in these photographs. This feeling is familiar to me, the sudden sense of living among people you know nothing about. When I return to the city, I force myself to walk exactly through the same streets and squares. Back in the park and at the cafe, I slowly feel at home again, but when I tell Rebecca that night what I'd felt visiting Buchenwald, we have an awful fight about how unfair it is for Germans of her generation to feel guilty for things that happened so long before they were born, even though that isn't what I'm saying at all. Really

we're fighting because I'm going to leave soon and neither of us wants that but we both know it's happening. I'm running out of money and I know I'm not going to live in Weimar, or with her, forever. A few years later I'm reading an interview with Neo Rauch, who grew up in East Germany and still lives in Leipzig, where he studied at the art academy. He says about his paintings: *It seems to me that I am drawn back further and further, that elements from distant periods are knocking on the door and want to be let in.* When I read that, I think of Max Ernst, that he could have said something similar. I hear knocking too and I'm scared by it. Everything wants to be let in, to be let back in.

A NOTE ON MAX ERNST'S *UNE SEMAINE DE BONTÉ*

By the time Max Ernst boarded a train from Paris in the summer of 1933, heading south across the Alps for a three-week visit to the restored castle of Vigoleno near Milan, it had been 14 years since his personal discovery of collage. He had been an artist since he was young (as a soldier during World War I, he painted watercolors in the German trenches while watching the sky fill with warplanes), but when he took an illustrated catalogue of educational supplies, the *Bibliotheca Paedagogica*, to a small hotel on the Rhine in 1919, he had a visionary experience that transformed his art. This was the year that Dada groups were being organized in cities across Europe, with Ernst one of the founders of the Cologne movement. Within a few years his collages were widely recognized, strange and inventive images that, according to André Breton on his own first viewing, had “struck us like a revelation.” By the end of the ‘20s, Ernst’s restless creative output encompassed

not only collages, paintings, and drawings, but also experimental techniques such as frottage and decalcomania. Two collage books appeared in 1929 and 1930 (*La femme 100 têtes* and *Reve d’une petite fille qui voulut entrer au Carmel*), and now, on his way to Italy at the invitation of Maria di Grammont, whose guests at Vigoleno included many of the period’s artists, writers, and musicians, Ernst had a new project in mind. It would be another book-length work, based primarily on engravings from nineteenth-century illustrated novels, books with titles like *Les damnées de Paris* and *Mémoires de Monsieur Claude*, overlaid with cuttings from scientific publications, natural history, astronomy, fashion advertisements, technical manuals, and botanical and zoological reproductions. He finished *Une semaine de bonté*’s 182 collages during his three weeks in Italy. Earlier that year, the Nazis had begun their rise to power, beginning with Hitler’s appointment as chancellor on January 30. Printed the following year in Paris in five separate booklets, whose covers each bore a different color, *Une semaine de bonté* heralded this new time of violence and transfiguration, using the outmoded images of Victorian mass culture, evoking intimate scenes of dehumanization in an unfamiliar artistic language we’re still struggling to translate.

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