

Can you sound like two thousand?

*So I run to the river
It was boilin', I run to the sea
It was boilin', I run to the sea
It was boilin'
All on that day*

– Nina Simone

I sensed something burning not too far from here last night. There wasn't any smoke, at least not from our viewpoint, but I could definitely feel something burning and the vibration of a certain life – human, maybe – sustaining that fire. The contradiction between the fire's apparently small scale and its powerful, almost unbearable heat was somehow magical; and its keeper, from what I could sense, was a magical creature.

I kept paying attention.

Massela woke with the sun. I didn't feel tired at all, but it was the end of my shift and I knew I should rest. Heading to my hammock, I let them take my place and keep watch. I said nothing about the fire, but I could notice them sensing both the heat and my curiosity towards it. Without using words, they asked, 'What was that thing?' I didn't know how to respond so I simply shared my confusion with them.

They seemed to worry about it more than I did. I had to fight the urge to exchange looks with them. I wanted to eye-communicate that we were safe here, at least for now, that the invisibility spell we had cast was strong enough

to hold, that we could breathe and collect ourselves for a moment, aware that staying too long might put us at risk. Our eyes would soon become obsolete, and we knew that. Our ability to hide depended on our commitment to avoid the gaze. Our knowing the world depended only on our collectively-enhanced sensing abilities and the soon-to-be-obsolete use of clandestine vision technology, capable of narrating our viewpoint through an encrypted network.

'Stop overthinking!' Massela said, using words. Then, using pure energy, they pushed me out. I could sense their drowsiness, which they channelled to me so I would get to sleep faster. When we collectively sense, overthinking ceases to be individual. One should always know how to stop it, to stop sharing, before it becomes too overwhelming for everyone else.

I woke to the feeling that there was something at the gate. I tried to reach out for Massela, but Raoni intervened: 'Calm down! Breathe! You are too anxious.'

Massela was busy with something and we were busy keeping ourselves in protection mode. The gate was clear, I could sense it now, but there was something going on not too far from here.

'Breathe in... Breathe out... In again...'

Raoni's voice was stuck inside my head.

'And out...! Slowly... Lower your frequency! Don't let your anxiety transform all of us into a target! We need to keep a very low frequency now...'

Breathe...!

Slowly...!

As if you were dead.'

We are nine hiding out here.

We've been around for a while – at least for the last three quarantines. But never in the same place. We're constantly on the move. Our protection spells are fragile and don't last indefinitely. It's no small thing to make such a big group vanish amidst the forms of social control that are used these days. Today is not like the early 2020s, though most of us don't even remember the 2020s that well. Except for Massela and I, everyone here grew up during the Lockdown Era, so the only memories from a world without quarantine either come from our shared memories or from the old media files in our archives.

Not many people today recall what freedom of movement was, and those who do remember what a fictional construct it had always been. The borders and checkpoints might have multiplied in the last three decades, but they were invented and weaponized long before.

We move separately. Alone or in groups of two. Sometimes it can take months for all of us to reunite. Massela and Raoni are always the first ones to go so they can set everything up for the rest of us. They are followed by Lava and Ravena, Telma and Atina, Rose and Arely. Each duo takes a different route and is responsible for transporting a set of essentials, from tech and food to rocks and medicines.

I am always the last to depart. My job is to hide all of our traces, be they material or not. The rest of the group call it a cleaning job, but I call it encryption. It's more like an exhaustive overlapping procedure, in which I bury our traces under tons of speculated memories, fake prophecies, dirty information and other forms of sensorial noise. The idea is not to erase, because although I no longer trust in History, I value the possibility of witnessing. And so, I let things remain very, very well hidden.

I travel alone and for the most part it's okay. I was already a loner nomad before the 2020 events. Besides, most people would rather not travel with me, because sometimes it can get hard.

I sense a lot. And I collect almost everything. If I'm sharing with someone, then this person will inevitably have to deal with the weight of all the things I scavenge during my trips: acoustic residues of long-gone voices, fragments of unfinished conversations, traces of dreams that are about to be forgotten, fictions that weren't powerful enough to make into reality... I gather them all. I sew them into my sensors.

And I never erase anything.

'I won't go.'

The thing about collective sensing is that talking is strictly unnecessary. You do it only for impact. As when you want to state an irrevocable decision.

The group had decided to move down south. Across São Paulo to the borders of the Liberated Zone, where the southern states of Brazil had been before the Paraguayan Retake Movement liberated it from Brazilian domain. The territory initially became part of Paraguay, but its sovereignty was questioned by cross-continental indigenous movements and organisations that fought for the creation of a nationless zone, lawfully liberated from both Brazilian and Paraguayan nation-states and their institutions.

No one should assume that the Liberated Zone is an established place for liberated life. It is a war zone. Indigenous groups and all sorts of non-citizens are constantly assaulted by post-national militias operating in sync with the neighbouring terrorist nation-states.

This wasn't the reason why I decided not to go

with them. I wanted to track the fire. And I'm convinced I should continue my quest. It may seem counter-intuitive, as Massela had fiercely pointed out when they first learned of my plan. I also knew this would be a pointless journey for the rest of the group, which is why I've accepted this as something I must do alone.

'Fuck off!' Massela shouted after a long silence.

I could sense everyone's anger towards my decision. They perceived it as a betrayal of sorts. As something I was doing out of anxiety... A miscalculation. I hated it. I hate being disregarded. Anxiety might have played an important role in my decision, but not as the fuel - more like a compass, a navigational tool. And not only anxiety, but anxiety-in-relation, anxiety as an anticipatory device connected with (not governing) the rest of my sensors.

The truth was that I was also tired of not being allowed to connect with my anxiety. I was becoming sick from taming it time and again for the sake of the group, instead of sharing how I embrace and transform it. They believe it's a matter of protection, but my fears of being anxious around them are now the source of my own anxiety. To suppress it is a form of holding back. And if I can only stay with the group by crystallising my anxiety into a pathology, then I would have to renounce what I've been nurturing since long before the first quarantine: my ability to sense and interact with the not-yet.

We began sensing the lockdown in 2017. At that time, we were both baseless, moving non-stop, our senses all over the place. When we came together, we'd study different modes of assembling our sensing apparatuses and learn about the coming collapse. We knew it would come, but there was no hint of what and how and when it would subside.

It was only two years later, in the first days of 2019, that we saw the break we were about to be pushed into: the Lockdown Era. Those days seemed to us like a whole century.

We tried to prepare for it, but 2020 encroached upon us. We were as unprepared as everyone else. We were pulled apart by the circumstances. When borders began to close and closures multiplied, I failed to rush towards our meeting point. Massela was there preparing for my arrival. Our plan was to stick together, but the collapse changed our horizons: we were besieged by indeterminacy, confined to a biopolitical state of exception, physically separated by miles...

And yet, somehow, we could still sense each other.

After a while we realised that we had been preparing for it all along. We had developed such a deep bond as we had passionately studied the merging of our senses that we simply couldn't be pulled apart. We were together from a distance, at a distance. I could even sense Massela's temperature.

Communication wasn't really a matter of words or images: why bother formulating a mode of saying or showing, if we could express and share things that words and images couldn't even begin to articulate?

When everyone finally left our den, I began the encryption. I dug first, messing things around, mixing the traces of our presence with all the buried memories that were already there when we arrived.

This time the work felt different, I could sense the presence of a voice I'd never noticed before. It wasn't discourse, just sound. An opaque, mysterious, somehow magical sound. It might've startled me, but it didn't cause me

fear. I went on digging, unearthing all sorts of presence. I moved things from one place to another. I built, carefully, a dirty and noisy ambient – a whole architecture of confusion. A hideout within a hideout within a hideout.

Yet, the voice (why do I keep calling it a voice?) wouldn't let me finish my work. I couldn't locate it anywhere, and therefore I couldn't hide it amidst the sensorial dirt I was producing. In fact, it was getting louder. Maybe it wasn't properly there. Or maybe the fact that it was getting louder also meant it was getting closer. I suddenly sensed it coming in my direction. I feared it might put me or Massela, Raoni and the others at risk. What was this thing? How could I have been so unaware of something I was now sensing so intensely? Was I broken? If this thing was really closing in towards me, why couldn't I map its trajectory? And if it had always been there, how could I have missed it for so long?

I then became aware of the heat.

I had been standing above the fire all this time. The voice told me. Better said: since I could now hear it, I could sense the fire with more accuracy. The voice and the fire were somehow attached, as if the voice was an anticipation of the fire – a sonic manifestation.

For an instant, I became fearful again. Would I be swallowed by that enormous, strident source of fire?

Gradually, I started to sense gases moving from the depths to the heights, taking over the space. I was surrounded by vapour and particles of everything. I could feel the ground changing and my body boiling. I was mutating. Transitioning under the influence of the heat. It should have been unbearable, and maybe it was, but I surrendered. The fire took over my senses, burned them, and instead of ashes it produced new organs.

Skin radars, ultrasonic ears, infrared eyes, and many hands and arms made of pure plasma. I remembered the fire's keeper, the creature I had sensed when I first sensed the fire months ago. I wondered where they were now. Had they ever existed? Was I becoming them?

I dreamt of bullets and woke to the sound of gunfire. It wasn't happening here. Yet, I could feel it happening to me and happening now.

Massela!

I focused my awareness on our bond, and I tried to reach for them. They were unaware of my presence, but I could access their sensors, touch them. I whispered: 'Massela...!'

'Are you here?' they answered.

'Somehow.'

There wasn't time to explain. As soon as they recognised me, they could sense my transition and also the danger I had sensed. Almost a year had passed since we parted ways. I wasn't sure if we could still share our sensors. I had tried to communicate a few times before without success. It was different this time. The danger might've unlocked something.

Massela was alone, so I assumed they were in charge of keeping watch tonight. The whole place was under attack. There were other groups settled in the surroundings. Three militia trucks approached them fast.

I sensed Massela trying to wake everyone, but it wasn't working. They seemed... disconnected. I tried to reach Raoni but couldn't. Actually, I couldn't reach anyone but Massela. I decided to focus on the militia, to see if I could reach one of them, but their sensors weren't open – I could feel they were human in an automated, insensitive sensorial state...

'Shit!' One of the trucks was close to reaching Massela's hideout. I could sense desperation in their voice: 'There's nowhere to go. I'm fucked. It's over.'

Breathe in...!

I decided I would focus on the heat sources. Aside from the living bodies of humans and animals, I mapped the bullets, the tents burning, and an unusual gas formation surrounding the whole area. With renewed awareness, I sensed this same gas within all human lungs, except in those of the militia. They might've been wearing some kind of mask. They might've been the ones releasing the gas before the attack. Maybe I could do something about it.

Breathe out...!

I found Massela's heat signature and took possession of it. I could sense their anger – I knew that shit was invasive, but I had no other choice. Once there, inside their body, I tried to expel the gas and, at the same time, I kept a sample of it. I left Massela's body and took possession of the nearest militiaman's heat signature. Once I took hold, I contaminated his digestive gases with the toxic gas intended for Massela and overdosed his body. The effect was immediate, but there were at least 50 more of them to go.

I shouted to Massela: 'You need to wake up and organise everyone now!'

'I know! I'm trying...! But there are too many people here, too much anxiety... I'm drowning...'

'No! Breathe!'

I kept on burning the militiamen, but the attack wouldn't stop until they were all defeated. The gunfire was overwhelming. I wasn't strong enough on my own. I needed Massela and the others to fight alongside me.

'You need to scream! You need to embody the voices of two thousand and scream...!

It's the only way...!

And you need to do it now.

Now, Massela! NOW! Can you sound like two thousand?'

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