

Juan Guse

MIAMI PUNK

Hardcover

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Over night, the Atlantic Ocean has retreated from the coast of Florida, leaving behind a wasteland. Cruise liners are rusting in the sand off Miami, hotels stand empty, the harbour is deserted and even the glamorous advertising industry, once broadcasting ceaselessly, has shut down completely. A city is searching for an anchor in a reeling reality. Inmidst all this, we encounter a struggling working-class family, an overly ambitious indie game programmer, a young sociologist and an e-sports team from Wuppertal. Funny and sad, gloomy and labyrinthine: “Miami Punk” is a novel about the meaning of work, about authority and power and about lonely nights in front of the computer screen.

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Translated by Laura Radosh

The avenues are illuminated in the lonely city once erected by force on top of tropical swamp. The city stands and sways on millions of steel and wood piles driven by anonymous workers into mud and soft sand years and decades ago. Under the houses and garages, under the mangrove forests now accessible to tourists, under the office complexes and industrial parks, under the hotels, the retirement villages, and the rows of four-story condominium complexes, under the white-paved streets, the bus stops, the supermarkets, and the art deco shopping malls weathered by the salt air, even under the closed seaside gift shops, oceanography research centers, haunted cruise ship port, and the militarized police stations, under the nightclubs and the car dealerships with no customers, under the massive Rowdy Yates Complex in the northeast and the skyscrapers in the city center sinking slowly into the ground, as well as under the moldy school basements, the boiler rooms, the canalization, the electric and fiber optic cables, under the graveyards and the laboratories of unaccountable multinationals are rows of upright posts, anchored into the earth in good faith. Their groans under the weight of the city shove their way to the surface with the smell of rot, escaping from joints, fissures, and manhole covers like ghosts of the obliterated past, disappearing into the voracious night.

Working way under capacity, Robin's CPU cooler and dual graphic cards whirl quietly, connected by an old motherboard in cheap aluminum housing that nestles up to her naked left calf like a loyal dog after a long day. The air in the room is nice and humid, just the way she likes it. Robin takes a sip of iced tea. Through the screen of the open window she can hear the last mosquitos of the year dying languidly. They flock together one final time into a shape-shifting swarm, like that's going to change anything in the world. Otherwise, it's quiet outside 24 Terrace Street in Coral Way, a neighborhood in southern Miami. Only occasionally does Robin hear an animal push through the dense bushes in the backyard and collide with her



brother's heavy-gauge engraving machine—a remnant of another failed business scheme. Hideo has made himself comfortable for the night as usual in the open dresser drawer to the right of Robin's desk. He can get up there by climbing a small ramp that she built for him out of particle board. He's lined the drawer himself with oily towels, which doesn't really make any sense. Probably he saw something like it on a sitcom once and thought, that looks nice, that's the way it should be. He sits in his drawer, dusts his joints, empties his cache, and charges.

“Would you like to talk about the fight you had with Horacio, the game, your worries?”

“No thanks.”

“Would you like to talk about your mother and H.C. Rachael?”

“No.”

“That is OK, Robin. It is perfectly normal to sometimes want to be left in peace. It is just not good to let things fester.”

“...”

“Would you like to know more about modern and affordable cremation options?”

“Good night.”

“Your alarm will ring at seven AM.”

Most people are already home behind locked doors, having sex or sleeping, doing the dishes, listening to music, getting up to check on a sick child, reading, talking on the phone, or drinking triple-filtered water. Tonight, even the father across the street isn't in one of his notorious rages, sometimes so loud and clear that Robin has thought a dozen times: this is it, this time he's going to completely lose it and first shoot his wife, who has spent half her life fearing this day, and then walk calmly with the warm shotgun up the creaking stairs and pull his stepdaughters, who have hidden

and are already talking to the police on their phones, out from under the bed by their hair and murder them one after the other while he cries before finally turning the gun on himself. Instead: nothing. Silence everywhere, all is calm. No dogs are barking, no parrots screeching, no wrestlers' sirens wailing.

Judging by their Elo, Robin and the player with the username mariamartha_89 should be pretty much equal, even if Robin hasn't had much time for serious gaming lately. She decides to go with the Byzantines because of their full tech tree and counterattack abilities. Their unique unit is the Cataphracts, a heavy cavalry that's saved her butt more than once in the past. She tells mariamartha_89 to have fun in this 1v1 Arabia. Knowing with relative certainty—after a long day at the office working a job that makes her feel sad, tired, and vulnerable because she'd rather be spending time designing her own video games—that nobody is going to bother her in the next thirty to sixty minutes of this AoE2 game, no sudden calls from colleagues or Threed or the district court to set a new date, no nagging bad conscience about social obligations, gives her the strange and comforting feeling that she is safe and indifferent. It's just her, her PC, a gallon of cold peach ice tea, Wi-Fi, a working microwave next to her monitor, and her opponent, who has for some reason chosen the Chinese as her civilization and who according to her IP is staring at a monitor somewhere in Argentina,

A cool wind blows through the streets of the residential areas.

In the house next door, Robin's eighteen-year-old cousin Lint sinks into his TV armchair. The rubber buttons on the remote are hard to press, they're always getting stuck under the plastic casing. He's pulled down the shades. Lint just got back from the Congress in the north—like almost every night—and snuck into his room so he wouldn't wake his parents. The Congress is closed now. The auditoriums and conference rooms are all empty, the food booths abandoned, the tech equipment locked up. Pigeons fly under the high cement ceilings and fight to the death in the air vents for



a tiny bit of territory. The electricity is turned off, the printers are silent. Faucets drip in empty bathrooms. Everything waits for tomorrow, the eight-hundred-twenty-fourth conference. Only in the catacombs below the Congress, a handful of militant spiritualists may still be bent over conspiratorial maps, listening to melancholy music while Lint sits in his room, exhausted but not tired enough to go to bed. He can hear his father stumble half-asleep to the bathroom below him. Unlike almost everyone else he knows, Lint prefers to spend his free time in front of the glow of an old-fashioned television rather than surfing the web—free of the arduous responsibility for his own entertainment, at the mercy of the programming of the satellite TV station.

At this time of day, the local channels broadcast almost nothing but reruns, like the amateurish cooking show moderated by an old man in a grey-blue button-down shirt who recreates depressingly easy recipes for one-person households. Or the plastic surgery infomercial that reminds Lint of Amir from his sister Elsa's club, who lost the top half of his right hand to an alligator and now has three metal prongs sticking out from the rubbery seam that runs from his wrist to his ring finger, onto which he can attach silicon replicas of his thumb, pointer, and middle finger. Despite the prosthesis, he's still wrestling for the Violet Tigers. Lint channel surfs and considers trying out Secret of Mana one more time, which he borrowed from Horacio weeks ago and which has been sitting untouched in his console since. Or he could skim Levin Cop's diaries again and look up the sections that were discussed in today's lectures. Or he could just go to bed; it's late and he has to go to class tomorrow. That's an idea.

Her opponent hasn't started playing yet. In the first two days after her mother's accident, when Robin was spending the nights in the hospital, she got a good-hearted bribable janitor to open up a cleaning closet for her where she could get away from the clinic's hustle and bustle and from the overworked staff and play a couple of relaxed games of AoE2 against her Lenovo, like she and her brother used to do into the early hours as

teenagers. Tired and distracted they would stagger into school the next morning. To this day, she gets a strange satisfaction from exploiting the weaknesses of the AoE2 AI—the way it doesn't know that resources are finite, its lack of understanding of the concept of time, its incompetence when faced with unknown situations, its inability to get angry. One of Robin's coworkers in Nowak's IT department, who spends his annual vacations hunting deer with a semi-automatic weapon in Washington state, once said he always returns from those trips having experienced human dominance in its purest form, a feeling that sustained him for months in the office staring listlessly at his monitor. It's a conversation Robin replays in her mind a lot.

Her girlfriend Daria Finkelhor is sleeping at the other end of the city in a one-bedroom apartment in Tower 7, on the twenty-fourth floor of the Rowdy Yates Complex. She was lying on her couch and dreaming of the unloved and useless objects that residents of the adjacent towers throw out their windows and that collect at the foot of the buildings. These dreams are heavily symbolic. She's been woken up by the screams of the angry old lady downstairs. Daria looks at the clock. It's 1:47 am. She takes off her shorts because she thinks the elastic is damaging her organs and counts how many hours she has left to sleep before she has to be back at Agency 55, the public administration responsible for Miami's unresolved problems. She considers sending Robin an astute and loving text about her dream, but she doesn't know where she put her phone.

Meanwhile, municipal zeppelins and balloons circle above downtown, Miami Beach, and the desert to the east of the city. Cloudlike they hover and surveil the neighborhoods, the traffic, the Congress, and the group-based life of the people—from Little River and Shorecrest to Coconut Grove, from Flagami to Virginia Key. Their operation is more cost-effective than similar solutions and they are less likely to crash; by now they're well-established as the new landmarks of the city. During the day, they're used as

advertising banners, for some new shampoo for example, for local delivery services, or for a credit company's customer-friendly conditions.

And in the numerous clubs spread across Miami, wrestlers sit alone in front of telephones, waiting for a call from a citizen in distress or from an understaffed emergency response agency passing on a plea for help. But nobody calls this time of day as a rule, and so most wrestlers while away their late shift on the internet. Sometimes they comb eBay and Craigslist for used electronics, spare parts for their club's utility van, or a side job; others watch the highlights of the last Olympic games. The ten most spectacular freestyle throws, the top twenty Olympic icons, the London finals. Almost all of them play free flash games at the same time.

mariamartha_89 says >hf< back and the game starts. Robin immediately makes five more villagers, while commanding the three that she had from the outset to build houses, raising the maximum population from five to fifteen. As a rule, you should also simultaneously send out your scout in ever larger circles around your own village center to find the six sheep, the berries, the large and small goldmines, the stone, the boar, the deer, and the wood, and then, after forty to sixty seconds, take two of the sheep to explore the immediate area, sending the rest back to the village to be slaughtered, so that from that moment on, about a minute into the game, your food production has begun. After that, like a finely-calibrated factory, nothing under any circumstance can ever come to a standstill, because if it does, it will cause an avalanche; first the villagers' production slows, sparking a chain reaction in which forestry, gold mining, and the stone quarry also cease, as well as all farm work, causing the entire economy to implode and resulting in a break in the production of military units and technological progress, which in a well-balanced RTS like AoE2 can determine the end result in the span of a minute. So while the scouting sheep are on their way back to the village and after all the resources in the area have been discovered, Robin takes her scouts out to search for the enemy camp on the other side of the randomly generated map. She wants to



know where mariamartha_89's lumberjanes are working, since they're easy prey for militias, cavalry, and archers, making it possible to hurt the enemy economy early in the game. Robin is relaxed. Especially in the first minutes, when she only has a couple of units to command and maintain, she can rely on the fact that first build orders rarely vary and she can defend against attacks by taking only a few precautions. She lures the first boar without making any mistakes. None of the villagers die. Nobody stops working, everything goes as it must, unconditionally bound to the means of production. Seven villagers deal with the boar, four are picking berries, the rest are chopping wood. The scouts are out, resources are gathering. Robin is feeling good. She drinks some iced tea. A couple of strips of bacon are revolving on a plate in the microwave next to her monitor.

In New York City, in the underground belly of the United Nations building, multiple delegations are still negotiating at this late hour over the USA's application to expand its territory beyond the coast of Florida. The drawn-out multilateral talks are attended not only by the Bahamas, but also by Canada, Mexico, France, Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, Cuba, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Russia, and Columbia. Russia, Cuba, and the Bahamas are unconvinced by the Americans' arguments and inquire into contractual stipulations in the event that the Atlantic Ocean returns. Negotiations are made more difficult by the fact that documents have recently surfaced indicating the interest of American multinationals in the reserves of raw materials in the mountains east of the Bahamas. The tension in the room is high. More coffee and cookies are rolled in on a cart.

Robin carefully places the hot strips of bacon into her mouth. They are limp and salty. Her room is crowded with shelves piled high with boxes, books, and badly-sorted binders from her mother's old apartment. Somehow her loft bed also fits, as well as her overflowing desk and her own shelves full of stuff. Daria once said the place reminds her of an extremely efficiently-packed but ultimately non-operational firetruck. One poster is the only decoration. It hangs at the head of her bed and advertises E.T. for

the Atari 2600. Horacio gave it to her in their college days as a kind of memorial. She washes down the film of fat covering her inner cheeks with iced tea.

In the main distribution center of the USPS in Flagami, in the west of Miami, hundreds of people sort mail in a huge hanger where warships were formerly built. The women and men stand in front of a wall of cubbyholes labeled with the names of streets. There's an atmosphere of mutual appreciation, sympathy and solidarity; most workers are union-organized. Hackneyed rock music plays from an old radio on the windowsill. A light breeze blows in. Some coworkers are talking about the future of their work and automatization in the branch, others about dangerous diseases that the kids could catch at school. Many have neck and shoulder pain from always looking up. There's plenty to do, because all the pink slips, goodbye letters, threats, and payment overdue notices are still sent by mail. Some of the people who work here feel bad profiting from the misery of others. "Diphtheria," someone says, "a lot of kids get that." "Whooping cough," says another, "or *Haemophilis influenzae*." Everybody laughs.

After around three minutes, Robin locates the enemy camp. She wants to go slow this time, no drush or flush opening. Instead, she'll conserve resources at the beginning and middle of the game, defending herself against enemy attacks until she reaches the Imperial Age when, after her opponent has used up most of her raw materials, Robin will be in a better position to finance an all-out attack and march right through enemy defenses.

In the renovated garage below Robin's room, where it smells like burnt cables despite all the scented candles, her roommate David DeCoil, who grew up speaking German and English on military bases in and around Kaiserslautern or K-Town, has a thirst attack. He sneaks into the kitchen and drinks a pint of milk. He can just make out human voices emitting from the metal sink, which for some bizarre reason has the same radio frequency as SPP2. David listens for a while, then goes back to the garage. Since he

usually has trouble falling asleep again after getting up in the night, he reaches for Pessoa and reads “Sometimes I feel, I don’t know why, a touch of foretold death ... Perhaps it’s an indefinite sickness which, because it doesn’t materialize in pain, tends to become spiritualized in nothingness, the end. Or perhaps it’s a weariness that needs a slumber far deeper than sleeping affords.”¹ David tells himself that tomorrow he won’t take any breaks, he’ll concentrate on writing his novel, and won’t let himself get distracted. Not by books, not by the internet, not by himself.

All signs point toward a calm and orderly game. Now that she can stop worrying about a drush into flush by her opponent, Robin decides to concentrate on the production of wood and food, on keeping her villagers busy and improving her economy’s value chain. Everybody always has to be busy doing something, nobody should stand around doing nothing, even if there’s already a surplus of raw materials. The only thing she ignores for the moment is the gold to the north of her camp. Soon she’ll advance to the Feudal Age. Then she’ll build a mine there.

South-east of Miami Beach, a group of pilgrims armed with wire cutters sneak under the Coast Guard’s third barrier. Nine people have now crossed the former coastline and are marching into the darkness. They are wearing brand-name trekking gear, carrying enough food to last about two weeks, and there is nothing in the world that they fear more than a spotlight from above. The group is embarking on the dangerous trip to the mountains beyond the Bahamas. They are following in the footsteps of Levin Cops, whose diaries they have discussed exegetically at the Congress. For two of them, this is not the first time. After passing the barrier, there is no way back. In the coming hours and days, they will either be arrested by the Coast Guard, run into the arms of one of the two desert tribes, or remain unnoticed and reach the valley that starts between the Berry and the Abaco islands. It’s a seven-hour march on foot to the first station, left behind by

¹ Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, trans. Richard Zenith (New York: Penguin, 2003)



pilgrims before them and considered a fairly safe resting place. They leave their headlamps off. From now on, whether or not they make it is down to luck. They quote Cops to one another in a whisper to keep their spirits up and wear reflective foil over their clothing to hide from the infrared cameras. It is extremely windy and the sand makes the going difficult. One of the women is carrying a night vision device that she once bought at an army-navy store. They pray that the Coast Guard won't find them. They pray that they won't be discovered by traders or by the Japanese. And if they are, they pray they'll be able to bribe them. Just a few more hours to walk. Everything's going to be OK.

Not quite eight minutes into the game, something strange happens. The fog of war lifts and Robin's camp is suddenly surrounded by enemy villagers. Completely unexpectedly, mariamartha_89 has sent eleven workers to Robin, who at that point only has seventeen villagers. That means that mariamartha_89 (even taking into account that the Chinese civilization starts with three villagers more) has pulled out most of her population, a blow to her economy that can hardly be justified. The only explanation that Robin can think of, while the enemy villagers are closing in, is that it must be an unorthodox tower rush, which still doesn't really explain the amount of human material.

The active Congress participant Ana O. Boltanski gets back into her red car. Her last customers were terrible tippers, a young couple who dressed exactly alike and stood together in the doorway. Ana O. doesn't know which annoys her more. She has two more deliveries to make before she can return to the western branch and load up on more pizzas. Traffic is turbulent, but not dangerous—lots of city buses and scooters. She takes a shortcut through an empty parking lot at a busy crossing, shooting out the exit ramp onto the street and shaving a few seconds off her time to the next customer, who needs to get their delivery within the next seven minutes, otherwise they get their money back. Whenever she turns to the left, Ana O. can tell that the front axle's been damaged. She'll have to leave the car



with the mechanic at the main branch and get a new one. She won't be paid for the waiting time. Today's shift isn't nearly over. It's her fourth this week. Six more minutes for the delivery. Tomato-Mozzarella-Anchovies. Pineapple-Ham-Onions.

The real danger posed by the enemy workers only becomes clear to Robin when she sees that they have orders to fence in her entire camp, blocking her from all further resources. She's read about this experimental and very risky play, but she's never had to deal with it in a game. Before Robin can react, the stockade is already closed. Now she pays the price for not mining the gold sooner. It's currently outside the walls that mark the border between order and wilderness, between her and mariamartha_89. Soon she'll need that gold. But the enemy workers are already building a second ring. And since she doesn't have enough villagers to tear down the stockade, Robin needs soldiers badly. That means she has to level up to the Feudal Age as quickly as possible and tear down the walls, because every second that she doesn't mine gold gives mariamartha_89 time to recover from the economic impact of taking her workers out of the value chain. Lacking options, Robin orders her scout to attack the wall, but he gets killed. Robin has no other choice but to sit in front of her monitor and watch the reinforcement being built up while her own reserves shrink and she'll soon have no space left for more fields or buildings and there's nothing she can do about it.

An aging motel owner in Hialeah paces in his bedroom. He's lonely and wondering what's the sense of it all. The whole next week, the next quarter, the next winter. He thinks about his wife, who left him, and wonders what she's doing right now. He thinks about the people he has sent into the void. Up to now, he'd only once seriously considered hanging himself. He even went to the hardware store and got a saleswoman's advice on the different types of rope and their pros and cons. But in the end, he chickened out.

Finally, Robin reaches the next era and immediately builds two stables. Since she doesn't have a market yet where she can sell wood, she begins by producing more scouts, since they only cost food. And so she waits until her troop of mounted scouts is large enough to attack while her opponent is not only building the fourth ring around Robin's camp, but also watchtowers that shoot at anything that moves. Her villagers are dying, and her means of production are directly threatened, so she decides to send out her weak army of scouts. They should kill the workers first and then attack the enemy camp.

The thing to be these days is an orthopedist or a surgeon, the taxi driver thinks while ferrying four drunk businesspeople from the trade fair to the other side of the city. After a day full of meetings and discussions about containers, two Dutch women got sloshed with two American business partners at a trade fair bar. They are loud and showing each other photos on their phones. The American men are telling the Europeans horror stories about life in Miami and how the rest of the country looks down on this strange, crippled place. The foreign businesswomen demand that the taxi driver verify this claim. Orthopedist or surgeon. Orthopedist or surgeon.

Even before Robin's scouts reach the enemy camp, she receives notice that her opponent has advanced to the Castle Age, surpassing her economically. She's arrived too late. mariamartha_89 has recovered and there are several knights waiting for Robin's sorry counterattack. They crush Robin's scouts like car tires a flower bed. All that's left is a small pile of corpses next to a mill.

The researchers from across the world; the archeologists, geologists, ethnologists, oceanographers and botanists, anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists, psychologists, statisticians, good governance people, microeconomists, architects and city planners, the sports and media and religious studies scholars, the people from OSCE and DC, who have all come to measure the last corner of the city, to better understand Miami and its occupants, are all, by this time of day, either in their bedrooms near the UM

campus or partying in the east at one of the remaining overcrowded nightclubs and sending photos to the incredulous folks back home.

When Robin turns her attention back to her camp, she sees that to top it all off a castle has been build right in front of her village center, which is now under siege from a barrage of arrows. Her economy is ruined, she won't be able to recover and soon mariamartha_89 will send in her knights to massacre the remaining workers. There's no way to save this. Robin's mad at herself for being so careless. Deep in our hearts, we're all pathetic losers. Tomorrow she has to go back to work. She can think of better things to do. Lying with Daria on the couch playing JRPGs, for one. Robin is just about to type >gg< when she hears a whoosh and her monitor goes black. The lights are off. In all the other rooms too, everything is dark. The fan in her computer spins for a while before it stands still. Hideo wakes up from sleep mode and asks if everything's OK. Robin gets up and goes to the window. There's a brown sky over Miami. The same brown sky as always. She can see from here to Cooper Park, where depressed academics with headlamps jog their rounds to increase their lifespan. In some of the houses across the street she sees hectic flashlight beams scurrying through the rooms. One after another, the neighbors' diesel generators kick on. Most of the houses are cheap one-story bungalows. They look like they're ready to go on a trip. She can hear military drills from somewhere. Sometimes, it's just like that.

“Your alarm will ring at seven AM.”

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On a popular morning TV show, a spokesman from the Association of Miami-Dade County Waterworks, obviously struggling to make an optimistic impression, reported that in the meantime hundreds of these converted fuel trucks are driving daily into the city to provide water for residents, only one of many robust government programs. There's a cut to images of men in short sleeves, waving from drivers' cabs. From the

beginning, the vehicle procurement scheme worked closely and intensively with Ryder Systems, a local company, and the fleet is being continuously expanded. There has also been massive support from other big cities across the nation, just like the generous support received in the past. Financial, infrastructural, and administrative.

“And water-truck robbery has gone down by a large margin since we’ve introduced new security measures, thank God.”

“By a large margin,” the host repeated.

The spokesman explained that private investors were still pushing for a pipeline like the one that supplied Las Vegas; running from Southwest Florida to provide the whole twenty-fifth parallel of the peninsula with drinking water. Those plans were still on the table and were very real. Naturally it was a sour pill to swallow after decades of investing billions in drainage and pumps to push the rising water back into the ocean, but there was nothing to be done about it. The natural cycle of groundwater was not at a complete standstill—the Atlantic had not totally disappeared and homemade submarines still crisscrossed the Gulf of Mexico delivering drugs for America’s middle classes—“but the amount of water above and below sea level has decreased dramatically. There’s no way around that fact, and there’s no need to check the water level of Lake Okeechobee to confirm it.”

Especially in the first weeks and months, the administration had been unable to pump enough water into the city and had called on citizens to drastically cut their private consumption, otherwise they would be forced to pass emergency conservation regulations. But neither the warnings nor the measures helped. Flowerbeds, parks, and traffic-island plantings dried out, palm trees shed their hair, and honking cars full of hoarded groceries clogged the streets. Protests were organized and scuffles broke out daily in supermarket beverage aisles that ended in parking-lot fist fights between neighbors and acquaintances, between strangers and relatives.

“I think we all remember these early days well; how no one seemed to know what was going on or what should be done. But many things were done and still are being done and we have grounds to be optimistic.”

Asked about other attempts to bring water to Miami, the spokesman, who seemed to truly love his job, harked back to an online rumor that had circulated for quite some time, but in fact was mostly true, namely, the story of the aerial firefighting unit from Cherokee National Park. When the squad saw the devastating images on the news during their shift, within the hour they were in their specially constructed propeller planes and headed for the state capital. Nine waterbombers in total took off. Each machine carried almost two thousand tons of sea water in their bulging hulls, as well as hundreds of bass, carp, and other fish.

“Flying in V-formation, the squadron reached Miami at about 2:00 PM and dropped its cargo from a height of around 1500 feet.”

A dozen or so traffic accidents were reported, caused by people who had spotted the fleet and gotten out of their cars to gape in disbelief. It was particularly tragic that one of the planes was flying much too low when it dropped its load. The violence of the falling water not only ripped the tiles off many roofs and blinded one aviation fan, it also hit a group of children who had been on their way home and were thrown from their bicycles. Nevertheless, the county stuck with this controversial water supply method, not, according to the spokesman, because they were convinced that it made a sustainable contribution to combatting the water shortage, but because they believed in the soothing effect of the rain that had once been so typical for Miami.

“Since then, as you know, thirty similar machines fly over the city twice daily. Once at 10:00 AM and once at 8:00 PM.”

The local morning TV show host nodded. On the low table between herself and her guest there was a tray with two green coffee mugs, a glass of blackberry marmalade, and croissants. She seemed distracted, as if she were

looking past the spokesman. He continued and said that at some point, the city's greatest worry became neither the lack of water, nor the high unemployment, nor the philistine Congress participants, but the increasing reports of an extensive range of symptoms that may be connected to the ground water. These include, among others, bad posture, a loss of orientation, especially in enclosed spaces, problems recognizing faces, sudden collapse before noon, an inability to deal with defeats and setbacks, road rage, disproportionate fatigue, an active to hallucinatory imagination, attacks of grief while standing in the checkout line, boredom beyond endurance, difficulty managing money, as well as respiratory problems and severe abdominal pain.

“Perhaps that was one of those moments where a lot of people thought ‘not this too’?” the gaunt spokesman said with a friendly expression.

While they were talking, the monitor between spokesman and host showed municipal posters and television ads admonishing residents not to use tap water for drinking or cooking. Instead, they should switch to bottled water or sugar-free soft drinks, a campaign that had been highly successful.

“Scientific research has shown it's still perfectly safe for personal hygiene and household cleaning?”

“Scientific research has shown it's still perfectly safe for personal hygiene and household cleaning. That was confirmed again only last month. We conduct daily and weekly tests. But of course, people should stay alert.”

“Of course.”

“Anyone who has ingested large amounts of tap water in the past, or knows someone who has, should monitor themselves and others for changes.”

Images of water tanks are shown, sent in by viewers from across the city. Some tanks are wrapped in barbed wire, others are on stilts. Sometimes

there's somebody standing in front of the tank waving to the camera or holding a flag and giving a thumbs up.

“What many people don't know is that Miami had always been the city with the lowest number of toilets per capita in the nation. Now we have even fewer toilets, but also fewer people, because those who could afford it have moved north.”

“There's a certain irony to it,” said the host, fanning her cue cards, “that it hit Miami-Dade county, where we used to be afraid of rising sea levels and the city sinking, so that real estate prices exploded in neighborhoods with a higher elevation like Little Haiti, and drove out those who had lived there before.”

“Because people thought, ‘In the future, the beach will be right here’.”

“There was also the increase in floods. In Miami Beach, a little rain and wind and the moon in the wrong phase was all you needed. We already spoke about drainage and pumps. That all seems so far away today. Instead of an archipelago of skyscrapers we have the Carnival Breeze balancing on its keel, unable to get to the safety of the port on time and now rusting away on dry land two miles out.”

“Back to what this all means for Miamians. So that they're not dependent on tap water, many households have bought plastic tanks like the one you see here, which can be filled with bottled water or other liquids.”

“That's right. Most people have them in their yard or on the balcony or the roof. I had a little wooden hut built over mine. You can get financial support from the city for the cost of purchase by the way—for diesel generators, too. The application form is on the website of the Revitalize Miami development fund under www.revitalize-miami.org.”

The morning show host nodded the entire time. She seemed indecisive, like she was waiting for a signal from the director to release her.



Maybe she was thinking that she might be let go, because the broadcaster has been talking about making cutbacks, and that this might be her last show. Maybe she was thinking—while the spokesman went on and on about ways to finance a water tank and the expansion of the water treatment plants—that she won't be able to make her mortgage payments anymore and she'll have to ask her sister to pay back the money she owes and she'll be forced to move back to her home town. Maybe any moment, like Christine Chubbuck, she would pull out a revolver and shoot herself live on TV. Or maybe she was just incredibly exhausted.

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I myself prob. spent almost all of the calm cross-Atlantic flight listening to old Sattler & Lopez recordings to distract myself from my headache, but my eyes didn't want to close & everything was hazy & confused, distorted by my feverish fatigue, so that sometimes, half-asleep, I hadn't been sure whether we were flying there or back, whether the Miami events had already happened or like a prophecy would still take place. I hadn't been worried.

It was only after I took off my headphones & really looked around for the first time that I'd noticed the quiet on board & that everything was diffused in a strange glow, as if the plastic casing & the fabric coverings were optical illusions. I stretched my legs (they were still there) & watched how the crew quietly, w/o exchanging a word w/ the passengers, pushed the metal wagons w/ our dinner (reheated veg. lasagna) down the aisles. No one paid them any attention, not their carefully-studied gestures, not their intimate questioning eyes, not their perfect posture as they moved through the plane, which they had learned in occupational training sessions. Nobody valued their presence & v. few accepted food from them. I imagined them all walking stoically hand-in-hand into a large lake.

Somewhere behind us, I thought I heard the engines, but it was equally poss. that they had broken down ages ago or had been turned off by the pilot—I couldn't tell & my watch was on the wrong time. In general, it seemed to me like we had been in darkness the entire time, as if we had been stuffed into a black ripstop sack. At any rate, I couldn't remember having seen the sun rise or set even once, but always only the reflection of my face in the plastic. I looked aged & was therefore under the impression that I had somehow slept through the plane crash & we had been buried under the infinite waters of the Atlantic for centuries & were—as we used up the warm veg. lasagna from the crew's supplies, the final bulwark between us & the decline into barbarism—still waiting in vain for somebody out there to save us, although we had long since been forgotten; our names would not be looked up in the remaining libraries & archives, & search troops would not be sent out to find us. A vision that in retrospect put a first obscure spin on the Miami events.

The plane was only half-full. Prices for flights from Europe to Miami had plummeted, even though v. few airlines still flew into the city. I don't really understand economics. Even after hours in the air, it still felt like we were waiting for passengers. Simon sat to my left in the window seat playing Counter Strike 1.6 on his laptop. He was wearing his white, stretched-out headband & training his reaction time on aim_map2, making no move to use the armrest that separated us, contenting himself instead w/ the table let down from the seat in front of him. Simon was slender & solid. His skinny arms & his hair, which was always somewhat oily & stuck out above & below his headband, gave the final touches to his schoolboy-like appearance. With his gaze glued to the glowing monitor, he emanated an unworldly calm that reminded me of a meditating or immolating monk. I don't think there's a word for the desire to immolate, but I could be wrong.

In the past—that I remember like yesterday—flight attendants used to ask/tell us to pls not play Counter Strike during the flight, bec. it might scare the other passengers, & they'd kindly point out the movies on offer or

give us an extra pkg of nuts. In the meantime—I realized while watching Simon pop out occasionally from behind the wooden box, making small movements w/ his wrists & shooting the sparring partner bots, programmed for him by Juan, on the other side of the map—the flight attendants simply didn't care anymore. They prob. thought the antiquated graphics of CS 1.6 were more comical than threatening, which had stopped hurting my feelings years ago.

When Simon sat like that, his head leaning slightly forward, I felt responsible for him in a way. He was half as old as the rest of us & had never left Germany before w/o his parents, who put him in our care w/ the words: “Make sure he stands up at least an hour a day; otherwise his back starts hurting.” He reminded me of myself. I too had been skinny & pale at his age & had spent most of my youth playing video games. But prob. my affection stemmed mostly from my admiration for his awesome CS skills. He was the brains of our team. It was his strategic genius, the ease w/ which he analyzed & anticipated any opponent's moves, the intellectualism & theoretical rigor w/ which he prepared for upcoming games, the elegant movements of his youthful arms, joints, & fingers, his ability to aim a hair cross, his feeling for adjusting for the recoil of varying weapons—as if he had been born w/ an instinctual understanding of the Wiesenthal-Cho-12 distribution—that made Simon's game so amazing & beautiful & was why I could watch him play for all eternity w/o feeling a second of remorse about having wasted my life.

To my right sat Hannek, wrapped in the airline's brown blanket & watching non-stop movies all based on the premise that some lucky or unlucky mix-up had gotten the American protagonists into bizarre situations that distressed & challenged them. Occasionally, Hannek suddenly laughed out loud, e.g. bec. someone in the movie spilled sth. We both grew up in the same suburb of Aachen. I myself did not consume any of the airline's large selection of in-flight entertainment. Instead my monitor showed the progress of our journey on an outdated map of the world. The formerly

tongue-shaped Florida landmass still looked like it had when mainland America & the Bahamas had been separated by trillions of liters of saltwater. Hannek's eyes were sometimes wide-open & then half-closed again. I thought I could tell from his body language that he felt bad, or at least nervous. He only said something to me once about the upcoming CS tournament to which we had been invited, mentioning the rumor that fnatic would be sending a team from Sweden to Miami, which I had nothing sensible to say about except he shouldn't get his hopes up that olofmiestR, krimz et al. would be there, even though there were no conflicting CS:GO tournaments & so it couldn't be ruled out completely that such world-class gamers had been talked into coming to Miami for the last big CS 1.6 farewell tournament. I suggested he concentrate on his own game instead & go through all the openings & plays & enjoy the time in the United States of America, no matter what happened.

"The United States of America" he repeated, turned away, & went back to his movies. We didn't talk to one another again for the rest of the flight. The nearest emergency exits were fifteen & twenty steps respectively from our seats. They were marked in florescent neon green.

The two other members of our team, Rafi & Juan, were somewhere in the plane. They'd made their reservations themselves, so that I couldn't be absolutely certain where they were sitting, & actually didn't even know whether they had adjacent seats at all. I hadn't seen them for the entire flight & had asked myself more than once whether it was poss.—in light of the coffin-shaped security hatch & its massive hinges & the crew smiling like gravediggers at the entryway— that they had turned around at the last minute & never actually set foot in this Boeing 747. I also thought maybe they hadn't let Juan onboard bec. he was the way he was. I had kept an eye out for the two of them each time I went to the WC but had been unable to make out their faces among the sleeping passengers. In the bathroom, I tried not to touch anything for fear of a bacterial infection.

I hadn't packed many books for our time in the US. To be precise, just two anthologies of essays & poems by Sattler & Lopez, both published by a small lefty press, read hundreds of times & disfigured by scribbles. Of course I also had my laptop w/ me, which I'd bought before the trip after exhaustive research. Whenever I wanted to buy sth, I was paralyzed by the enormous selection, the reviews, & the manufacturer's promises, so that I spent way too much time evaluating all the different factors. Afterwards, I usually felt wretched. Although I had everything w/ me that I needed to continue working on my post-doc on Poetic State, I wasn't really planning to, even though I was way behind on my timeline. The texts by Lisa Sattler & Yolanda Lopez were meant more as a kind of rip cord to remind me that life would continue after the tournament, that I still had a lot to take care of, that there were more important things to do, that playing Counter Strike hadn't been the focus of my life for years now, & that my office at the Bergische University of Wuppertal would be waiting patiently for me when I returned from Miami. Just like Rafi's face as he was going through security at Frankfurt Airport, which had expressed a Hans Castorp-like confidence that he would return as the same person he had been when he departed & could pick up his life at the exact same place he'd left it. I wanted that too. His wife's name was Heike. I hadn't seen her in ages.

I too nodded off at some point & dreamt of Annemarie Warnkross, a wild animal, a bloody civil war on the de_aztec map, & Poetic State. I only woke up from the ear pressure.

I thought about forest fires.

The sun was behind the control tower as we crossed the tarmac in a huddle bec. the second shuttle bus to the terminal had broken down. The buses weren't serviced regularly, spare parts were scarce & too expensive. I saw the bus driver bent over the open hood shaking his head incredulously & heard him complain into the small walkie-talkie attached to his breast pocket that the day had brought nothing but disaster & that he had his follow-up tomorrow.

Like the other passengers, I quietly followed our guide, a one-armed man who was wearing a green polyester vest w/ the insignia of the Miami International Airport & constantly reminding us to keep up. I heard a woman behind me say how relieved she was to have landed safely despite the strong wind. The humidity was oppressive. It slid into your lungs like a hand into a rubber glove. I started sweating profusely even though I was only wearing a thin shirt. Hannek was wearing a snapback hat from some American team, Billabong shorts, & an orange t-shirt w/ a large quote from the G-Man in *Half Life 2*. He looked like a thirty-three-year-old stuck in the body of a teenager from 2004. He kept taking out his camera & filming & commenting on everything for his not v. successful YouTube channel that aimed to be a kind of gaming vlog but for me was an almost unbearable slice of reality. I had asked him not to call me by my name & to film me as little as poss., even though I didn't really expect anyone from my university to come across his videos.

I could tell which of the passengers were among the few tourists by their colorful clothes &/or the rubber animal masks from *Hotline Miami* hanging either from their carry-on or Janus-like from their neck. The European researchers in contrast could be identified by their staid beige-brown clothing, military backpacks, scrutinizing glances, & shade-providing helmets. Hordes of them were still drawn to this city full of questions, a colleague from the Wuppertal Institute of Sociology & Ethnography had told me shortly before I left. She was looking for third-party funding for a DFG research project; an empirical study of nihilistic youth gangs.

Before we departed, Hannek had said there would prob. be a second German CS team competing in the tournament, but I didn't see any sign of one. At some point I caught a glimpse of Juan & Ralf among the passengers, but they didn't notice us & seemed—strangely—to be deep in conversation & I didn't want to interrupt. Instead I contented myself w/ observing the bustle of the airport up close; the rigs crossing the ramps, the hangers emitting light, a group of men dragging mattresses w/ four heavily-armed

policemen guiding them towards the terminal & cursing at them, bored marshallers signaling the heavy-gauge machines w/ their light beams. That was their job. I thought I saw shadows fleeting across the cement below the airplanes.

So even though in general I have v. detailed memories of our arrival at this place & the trail of people on the tarmac, I can't say for sure whether or not we talked about the upcoming Counter Strike 1.6 tournament on our way to baggage claim or about the unsettling developments in Miami over the past few years or the fact that the airport used to create around a fifth of all jobs here; I think not, but I could be wrong.