

AND WE
CAME
OUTSIDE
*Edited by
Ilan Stavans* AND
SAW THE
STARS
AGAIN

*Writers from Around the World
on the COVID-19 Pandemic*

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Journal of the Kairos

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THE SLEEPING PROBLEMS began on October 8, 2018 at 8:17 a.m. He was drinking his morning coffee. He picked up his phone and tapped his thumb on the icon for the *New York Times*.

"The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has released a report," reads Kajetan Rost. "By 2030 we must reduce emissions of greenhouse gases by 45%, and by 2050 we must eliminate them. If we do not, the climate will fall into a sequence of changes we will not be able to halt. In many places on earth, life will become impossible for billions of people."

Further down, an expert explained: "We will not only lack food, but also the possibility of a dignified burial for victims. All this can happen within the twenty-first century."

Kajetan tosses and turns in bed, only getting to sleep in the middle of the night, and even then he sometimes has terrible nightmares.

His dreams are disaster movies with the characters running through streets he knows.

Being awake isn't much better. Kajetan, sitting in a café over his daily paper, has started catching himself making cynical calculations. Will the Catastrophe strike him and his wife? Their son? Or maybe only their grandchildren? Rost is thirty-seven, he's never thought about grandchildren before; after all, he's just recently become a father. Will his son decide to bring children into the world, already knowing what that world is going through? (Kajetan realizes how self-serving this reflection is—since, after all, it's easier for him to believe he didn't read about any of this until October 8, 2018 over his morning coffee. But that's nonsense, isn't it? It had just taken him that long to open his eyes.)

Sometimes Rost manages to get his mind off things for a moment. But then he'll get hung up on a single sentence, word, or image. Like one

evening when they were getting to bed, and he was reading to his son about the new adventures of Winnie-the-Pooh. There was a section about a drizzly fall. Kajetan's mind thrashed with fear that in ten or twenty years, "drizzly" would be a concept consigned to the past.

"Dad, keep reading," whispered the little boy.

He read to the end. The boy fell asleep. But Kajetan was wide awake.

This awareness of approaching disaster led Rost to decide to change his life.

He stopped eating meat. That was no trouble.

He didn't take planes anymore.

He refused to use plastic bags and disposable coffee cups.

He bought a cotton tote bag, a thermos, and a bottle for tap water.

The next day, he read that the production of cotton tote bags, thermoses, and bottles for tap water was hastening the destruction of the planet. So were avocados.

One day, as Rost was walking past a bookstore, a poster caught his eye: "Chronos, Kairos, Aion—the Greek Understanding of Time." He stepped inside. A bearded philosopher was explaining:

"Kairos is 'this very moment' or 'the proper time,' the right moment to act, created by opportunity and unique, transient circumstances. Kairos therefore designates a critical, decisive moment, the one moment among many, the perfect moment, when, in the blink of an eye, circumstances, fate, and the readiness to act all coincide."

Kairos—Kajetan smiled to himself. That had been his nickname in high school. Except, of course, when because of his skin problems he was just "Crusty."

He bought the book. He read it at home, underlining dozens of quotes. One he marked in red: "Wars break out, the planet warms, species go extinct. Yet this is like many wars in that its extent and which species we manage to save depends on whether we take action. The future is swathed in darkness, the darkness both of the womb and the grave."

Kajetan took out a black notebook and jotted down the quote. Underneath he added:

"For the moment, nothing is happening that I—an affluent resident of a large European city—couldn't cope with. None of these calamities affects me directly. Our household budget will have no trouble standing up to high food prices, and could likely also cope with a hike in the electric bill, for now. Barring a completely out-of-control market collapse, hyperinflation, or similar disturbances in the coming years, my family's existence does not seem to be at risk. We have savings. We live in stability and comfort. . . ."

(As he was writing this, Kajetan Rost did not realize he was starting to compose a journal. A few months later, when the Disaster was picking up speed and strength, Kajetan would add a title to the first page of the notebook: *Journal of the Kairos*.)

"Today, the highest price I am paying for the disaster is only that when I look at my sleeping son, I feel paralyzing fear. I could stop leaning over his bed, turn away, and it would still be there. The evil that lurks in the relentlessly advancing future. Tangible, within arm's reach.

"On a global scale, I am in a very comfortable situation—by only feeling that fear."

2

He started to focus on the little things, he almost completely cut himself off from news services, he bought an old cell phone with no internet access. He got up earlier, learning to enjoy early mornings. Especially this time of year, when the wind rustling the tops of the trees heralded the final end of summer, when he had to get his rain jacket out of the closet, and every trip out to the playground with his son was delayed by a frantic search for the boy's hat, which they always found somewhere different than either had expected.

One such early morning, he was standing by the window with a cup of coffee, with no intention of going anywhere. He simply couldn't sleep anymore. The view of their side street was still shrouded in darkness. The dim gray of predawn was only broken by the rhythmic explosions of hazard

lights on a van delivering bread. Rost could see the driver rushing back and forth with boxes of rolls. In the corner of the man's mouth he could make out the glow of a cigarette. At a certain moment the man stopped his hustling and looked up.

Rost lifted his gaze from the man up to the trees. The tall poplars standing in the street were swaying under the pressure of the wind. He had recently caught himself stopping more and more by them, staring at them. There were times, amid the crush of everyday business, when Rost found himself marveling at their mere existence. They were living smack in the middle of a country that hated trees. Every day his media bubble was bursting with depressing news about more and more trees being cut down. In Kajetan's country, they were resources to be taken advantage of. Most weren't allowed to live to a mature age. When Rost realized this one day—that most of the trees in his country weren't allowed to grow to their full size—he couldn't shake the feeling that it was just like slaughtering dairy calves. After all, their flesh was the most tender. That had made him shudder even when he still ate meat.

This budding inner sensitivity toward trees was a little alarming, since he associated it with those weird people who dressed in linen gowns and hugged birches. He didn't know a single person like that; honestly, he'd never even seen one. Still, he found that sort of behavior extremely pretentious. So Kajetan viewed the transition taking place inside him with caution. But the trees moved him. There was no helping it. It moved him to have them here with him.

In time, he absorbed a few scientific facts.

Plants have lived on Earth for around seven hundred million years.

They make up ninety percent of the biomass on our planet.

Most species can survive damage on a large scale.

In the case of plants, removing parts of their bodies does not lead to death. They can reorganize themselves, divide, grow more, and multiply.

Humans have never mastered any of these arts.

If perpetuating the species and reproductive success was the basic goal for the existence of living beings on this earth, thought Rost, it was hard

to shake the feeling that humans were doing markedly worse in the race than plants—that they were the rulers, not us.

Though humans obviously thought otherwise.

"But what do the trees think?" he wondered as he sipped his coffee, then suddenly realized the absurdity of this reflection. Linen-clad tree-huggers were swiftly encroaching on the horizon of his imagination, sporting triumphant grins. He drove them away.

In asking himself what the trees think, Rost saw the fully manifested danger of the ground slipping away beneath his feet. The foundation on which his world stood. Because individually, maybe trees didn't think anything. But what about a forest? Or a park? Scientists already knew trees could warn one another of danger, sense fear, and share resources—water and microelements. Such exchanges also took place between species.

"Sentience or intelligence isn't a thing, you can't find it in, or analyze it out from, the cells of the brain," read Rost, from a story by his favorite author, Ursula K. Le Guin. Her books, published in the nineties with nightmarishly hideous covers, had sat neglected on his bookshelves. Recently he'd found himself returning to them more and more often. In her story, "Vaster than Empires and More Slow," he was surprised to find his own underlining from years ago. "Now let's just suppose, most improbably," said one of the characters in the story, "that you knew nothing of animal brain-structure. And you were given one axon, or one detached glial cell, to examine. Would you be likely to discover what it was? Would you see that the cell was capable of sentience?"

It was a rhetorical question. Rost smiled to himself. It was liberating, even, to realize the insignificance of his own species. Humans had the power to cut off certain evolutionary paths by wiping out entire ecosystems. They had mastered the technologies to do so. But why should that ability, of all things, indicate some superiority over other species?

Looking at the poplars rustling in the first autumn wind, Rost realized we were one of evolution's dead ends, rather than its most perfect achievement. And the end of the world that he feared so terribly would be only the end of humankind. The world would do better without us.

"Come on, kiddo," he said one day, "we're going on a ride to the river." Though by "we" he mostly meant himself.

The day before he'd gotten on a city bus. The two women sitting in front of him had gone on at length for a few stops about how beautiful the weather was this fall. Kajetan had to get off. He knew by the next stop he'd be transformed into one of those nuts who suddenly, out of nowhere, started berating strangers with incoherent sermons.

It was October; for ten days the temperature hadn't dropped below fifteen degrees Celsius. The sun was shining and there was no rain. This wasn't normal. Kajetan even started leaving for work a bit earlier than usual, to enjoy the cool of the early morning. At 6 a.m. it still felt roughly like fall should: chilly, gray, and damp. Yet he knew doing this was only maintaining his delusion. Because then the sun would come out, and even before he'd had his morning coffee he'd have to toss his warm jacket over his shoulder.

That's why he thought a trip to the riverside would be a good idea. He wanted to go back to where things were still relatively normal. Yes, he realized there was no pure nature anymore. But he still believed he could get close to what was left of it. In the city it was easy to overlook the remnants of it. They would find a pleasant spot, he thought, gather up some kindling, light a little campfire, and roast potatoes. They got together a pocketknife, food supplies, and a garden trowel, and they set off. They wanted to take one of the ferries to the right bank of the river, to give their trip a flavor of adventure, but the ferries hadn't been running for some time. The reason was the low water level and the risk of running aground. Hadn't they themselves one day watched from the boulevards as a small, private riverboat had gotten caught on a sandbank and been unable to break free? The party taking place on its upper deck had kept going as the captain raced from stem to stern and back, trying to get the boat unstuck. He'd had no luck until a police motorboat with strong engines arrived.

Kajetan hadn't been able to shake the feeling that the people partying

on the deck didn't even realize what was going on. Though of course he couldn't be sure—he'd been watching from very far away.

The other side of the river was overgrown. Rost headed for a north-bound path that ran through the trees. He rode his bike fast, only avoiding the deeper potholes so the seat his son was strapped into wouldn't jostle too strongly.

Finally, they found the right spot, a small clearing hidden in the undergrowth not far from one of the bridges and the sandy beach. Rost scraped the turf away with his shoe, then started digging a small firepit with the trowel. Here, the gray gravel and riverside sand was mixed with shards of glass, beer bottle tops, cigarette butts, and bits of plastic. Rost thought he'd just had the bad luck of picking a spot where someone had buried some trash. So they moved a dozen or so meters in another direction, found another break in the undergrowth, and set up another campground. Rost started digging again.

And again he found the same. Gravel, glass, bottle tops, trash, cigarette butts.

Yet again they changed places and with even more passion, he drove the trowel into the ground.

The same.

"Dad? Aren't we gonna have a fire?" He heard the familiar little voice behind him and knew exactly what expression he'd see if he turned his head in that direction.

"We will, kiddo. We're gonna have everything," he said. "Come on, let's find some sticks."

They went into the trees to hunt down some dried branches and twigs. They walked around with their eyes glued to the ground, but only found empty bottles and pieces of machines dumped by the river at some point—washers and televisions. Everywhere he looked, Kajetan could see violently broken-off branches. They were most likely from people who'd run out of patience looking for kindling on the ground. Some of the branches were dangling sadly—their tormentors couldn't defeat them, so they had abandoned their work midway through.

Rost clenched his fists. He wanted to get out of here, but he knew that was out of the question. He couldn't disappoint his son. Finally, they found some brittle, dusty sticks in a dry wall by the river. They arranged them in a miniature pile and set them alight. A strip of gray smoke made its way straight up into the blue sky. It smelled like the smoke of all the campfires Rost had sat beside in his youth, somewhere out in the woods, actually far from civilization.

At moments like that, he occasionally imagined he was the last person on earth who didn't know the world had just ended.

Now he saw that person in his son, who was munching without a care on a roasted potato.

4

The freeze-frame was unclear. He could make out stormy seas, a large border patrol boat and a dinghy attached to its hull, full of people. Their figures were difficult to distinguish, much less their faces. Kajetan Rost peered closer at the monitor. His finger tapped and the picture moved. Rocked by the waves, the boats were knocking against one another, the human figures in the dinghy were wobbling uncertainly and trying to clutch the ropes running along its side. Rost had seen videos like this before. They were recorded on the Mediterranean Sea, where every week coast guard boats were pulling from the water refugees trying to make it to Europe.

But this film was different.

Rost clicked again and saw a man appear on the deck of the large boat—now he could see clearly it belonged to the Greeks—holding a long stick. Yet instead of giving it to the people in the rubber boat he went to the side and started bashing them with it on their heads.

Rost paused the video again. The sea, the boats, the people, the stick hanging in the air.

The people in the raft attempted to defend themselves, raising their hands to shield themselves from the blows. Finally, from somewhere

astern, a round, green object appeared over their heads. They passed it forward until it reached those who were most endangered by blows from the stick. They shielded themselves with it for a good while. Then the boats moved apart. The Greek boat retreated a short distance, only to head toward the refugees a moment later at full speed, passing close by them and causing a broad wave. The cameraman filming the whole incident zoomed out. Now two Greek boats were clearly visible, circling around the dinghy, making aggressive maneuvers, most likely attempting to force it to change course.

But it was that green shape that gave Kajetan no peace.

He rewound the recording a little and once again moved his face closer to the display. What was it? A tarp, a blanket? He clicked the film along frame-by-frame, second-by-second. But it was no use.

The whole situation had taken place a few days earlier on the coast of the Greek island of Lesbos. Rost typed the basic information about it into a search engine box. After a few seconds, the algorithm spat him out the complete results. They included a link to one of the Italian photo agencies. Their photographer must have watched the whole scene unfold from the same boat as the camera operator. His shots were almost exact copies of the recording, only sharper.

They showed Rost, in full detailed precision, terrified women hugging their children and men at the bow of the boat trying to grab the long boat hook the Greek border guard was clutching. In one picture, he saw the men holding over their heads an inflatable ball you would play with at the pool or the shore. It was green and looked like a smiling dragon.

A happy green dragon.

Rost froze. He couldn't take his eyes off the picture. The refugees in the dinghy were probably people fleeing the war in Syria. He knew this was a conflict that experts referred to as a climate war, though for the moment, few people thought of it that way. After all, it was more comfortable to view it as some bloody, localized turmoil with the greatest global powers trying to use the opportunity to win something or other. Yet he knew that year after year, these wars would multiply. They would take place over

access to water and food. Conditions would get increasingly difficult in the regions suffering most from global warming. And they would finally become impossible. Rost wanted to believe that such a scenario wouldn't affect either the country or the region where he and his family lived. And right there, on the threshold of that belief, he plunged into an abyss he had no way of climbing out of.

Because the more wars there were, the more refugees would be storming the gates of Europe. Which meant more border guards, more motorboats, more boat hooks. And ultimately, they would have to ram the boats, shoot at the people.

"And how will we explain this to ourselves? That we need to kill women and children at the gates of our fortress?" he wrote in his journal. "For now we're just telling them to die somewhere else, keeping our hands clean—someone else can pull the trigger. But what does it make us once we decide to start shooting? What will it mean then to publish books, make movies, write, and read poetry? How will we be able to sit down to dinner together and look one another in the eye? Since, after all, we'll have to keep our eyes closed all the time."

5

"Cmd dot exe," the man said with a bitter smile. These words jolted Rost out of his reverie. They'd called for help half an hour before, but the dispatcher had informed them they weren't going to send a helicopter for a simple sprain. "The rescue patrol will come on an ATV," Kajetan heard through the receiver. "Please stay with the injured person."

Rost wasn't going anywhere. They exchanged a few courteous remarks, then they sat in silence amid of the mountain solitude.

"Pardon?" asked Rost.

"Cmd dot exe," repeated the man. "Did you have comp sci in school?"

"With a notebook." Kajetan remembered peering at the screen of the only computer in the classroom while their teacher dictated to them the operations for starting up a text editor.

"I teach in a tech school," explained the man. "Cmd dot exe is a program that opens the text control window. You know, the black screen where you can enter different commands in Windows. The real face of the system, which is usually hidden behind those aesthetic windows and icons. Whenever I show it to students for the first time they're disappointed, some are even frightened."

"Frightened? Of what?" Rost didn't really understand.

"Suddenly it turns out the reality they were living in," replies the man, "is not only virtual, it's nothing but a colorful overlay for something so . . . prosaic."

Rost knew he'd be sitting here a little while yet. He was familiar with this trail. He'd come here for the first time back in childhood, with his father. In the morning he'd left his wife sunning herself in the autumn sun on the terrace of the hostel (they had an agreement: she would never set foot on a mountain trail, nor he on a dance floor). The weather report called for sun all day. In fact, the whole of September had been like this. Kajetan couldn't actually remember the last genuine rain, a solid fall downpour. As a matter of fact, he'd even considered not putting a rain jacket in his backpack.

The first thing that surprised him was the sizeable area of cleared land that began just beyond the outermost structures of the town. Rost was sure that three years before, the last time he'd been there, a forest had stood on this spot. Now trees arranged in even cords were already waiting to be transported out, while the ground had been torn up by the huge harvesters. The cleared land revealed a new panorama, but Kajetan was incapable of enjoying it. He felt something had been taken away from him here. He kept his eyes glued to the ground and walked straight on.

The first climb took an hour. Kajetan took a break every twenty minutes to calm his struggling heart. He knew this was the most difficult section of the trail, and the least picturesque. Once he reached the right elevation, the paved forest path took a sharp turn eastward via a traverse, and the trail led Rost upward into towering spruce trees. In the air he could sense pricks of cold, completely unnoticeable down below. There was no one

around. Rost walked briskly, climbing quickly. He knew he had another two hours of hiking before the nearest shelter. There, he planned to allow himself a one-time dispensation for meat and eat a pork cutlet. Like the ones he'd eaten back in the day with his father. They'd been as large as oars and the staff had to put the potatoes on top of them, not next to them, or else they wouldn't fit on the plates.

At this elevation, he was already encountering clusters of dwarf mountain pines. Now the trail was running along a ragged, stony path framed with crowberries. It occurred to Rost that this was the moment when he was furthest from any human outpost, in a way that could only be possible on that day. And that was when he saw him. The man was lying in the grass, right by a small footbridge meant to stop tourists from trampling a peat bog. He was propped up on his elbows and his face was twisted in a grimace of pain. For a moment they eyed each other uncertainly.

"You all right there?" asked Rost.

The man hoisted himself up on his elbows. He was older than Kajetan, probably by twenty years.

"Afraid not." He glanced at his ankle. "I think this has finished me off for today."

Rost took off his backpack, took out a bottle of water, and offered it to the man.

"Do you have a phone? Mine can't get reception up here."

Kajetan's phone was picking up a Czech signal. They could call.

After three-quarters of an hour, from somewhere in the distance and down below them, they heard the growl of a motor.

They realized this was the volunteer mountain rescuers they had been waiting for.

"Text control window?" asked Rost, because he still didn't understand what the man was talking about.

The man nodded.

"That's right, the delusions evaporate, the masks slip," he said, peering in the direction of the arriving help, "and you and I are here for the sake of relaxation, rest, reset, a few moments for us to breathe. Call it what you

will, anyway. In any event we came here to be enchanted, because someone drummed it into our heads that we live in culture and only occasionally return to nature. And we return on our own terms."

He gently patted his twisted ankle.

"But all it takes is a trifle like this in a wilderness that, after all, I entirely consented to, and I feel panicked anxiety. That no one will find me, that I'll freeze and die. In one moment everything I came here for—these rocks, the trees, the sky, the view of a distant landscape—I started to treat like enemies who wanted to annihilate me. But after all, that's nothing other than life laid bare. Truly sobering, don't you think?"

6

And then the pandemic broke out. After a week stuck at home, Kajetan reached for his journal.

"Kairos is 'this very moment' or 'the proper time,' the right moment to act, created by opportunity and unique, transient circumstances. Kairos therefore designates a critical, decisive moment, the one moment among many, the perfect moment, when, in the blink of an eye, circumstances, fate, and the readiness to act all coincide."

Rost smiled to himself. Then he wrote:

"I'm standing on the balcony and looking at my housing complex. Every window really does have a light shining in it. I don't think it's ever been like that here. It's 7 p.m. and they're all home. We're spending less, we've stopped dreaming of vacations by the warm sea, we're not flying. Empty planes are still flying, but they'll stop soon. We're reining in our needs, economizing. We're doing what we should have done long ago to save ourselves. The virus has forced us to. We would never have done it ourselves."

Day nine:

"The peak of the Matterhorn is lit up with optimistic slogans. They've installed some space technology there, enormous projectors, I have no idea. And they're shining visualizations on the mountainsides.

"Humans won't back off from anything that would prevent us from making constant chit-chat. Human yammering knows no limits. It can taint anything. Right now we're living through a scenario where nature is forcibly reminding us of our own existence and that we are only a small, fragile part of that nature itself. And what do we do? Instead of being in this, instead of accepting this with even a shadow of humility—we jabber. As if it were the silence and quiet that were going to kill us, not the virus."

Day ten:

"So far I have thought that mistrust of one's own country is more like a sign of common sense. I'm sure I've thought so because I didn't especially need this country's government for anything. I've scorned it. But how can you not scorn an administration that in the first week of a crisis was playing political games instead of tackling the problem?"

"Now I can see that, during a crisis, my almost total lack of interest in having anything to do with this government translates into my concrete emotions and actions. Because when the state introduces prohibitions and limits, one after the other, my immediate instinct is not to trust that they're well-intentioned. When it proposes that I download an app that will track my contacts and meetings out of fear of spreading the virus, my first instinct is suspicion of the state. It's never done a good job, why should it do one now? This whole crisis is showing me that as soon as it's possible, I need to do whatever I can to free myself from this government. To move where the state can be more functional because its citizens trust it, because I trust it."

On day twenty of the pandemic, Rost decided to go for a walk. After walking for a quarter of an hour he found himself in an urban sacred spot, a fragment of damp meadow surrounded by housing developments. This area had only lasted so long because the ground was too soft to be profitable for some developer to put something up here. There were nooks and crannies in this place where Rost could feel like he was in the truest untamed wilderness. On this bright, crisp morning a thin layer of

transparent ice sliced across the surface of the marshy ground. Last year's yellowing grass was weighted down with coral beads of hoarfrost. Rost walked along a barely visible path, watching carefully where he stepped. This took him across the whole swampy field and he emerged not far from one of the newer developments on the other side. He was just approaching the car-filled parking lot when something startled in a nearby clump of bushes. In a moment, a pheasant flew out. With vigorous movements of its short wings, it flapped up to a low altitude. Thrilled, Rost followed its flight until the bird's silhouette vanished against the blinding orb of the sun. Then he closed his eyes for a moment and heard a dull thud. When he opened his eyes again there was no trace of the pheasant. Yet a young woman in a nightshirt was standing in the balcony door of an apartment on the second floor of the nearest building. She was staring through the closed glass door at the dead bird lying at her feet.

That day Rost wrote in his journal:

"I feel a little like that pheasant. I'm afraid for myself and my family. I see lines in stores and people quarreling over basic goods at the cash registers. I see an administration that's taking advantage of the opportunity and dismantling democracy even further. And big companies, untouchable in all this, who will soon be able to make all of us even more dependent on them. I see borders closing, the police using excessive force, and cruel looks from people on the streets. I hear about a smartphone app that's supposed to track my every move and contact. All for the sake of my safety.

"I don't see any future, there's none today that I can think about seriously.

"I knew this would all come, I was afraid of it, it wouldn't let me sleep. But I was betting that none of it would arrive until twenty, thirty years from now, because of a different catastrophe. I thought we still had a little time. A little more flying, ungracefully but freely, just above the hard ground."

POLAND
SEPTEMBER 2019