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Bigger Than a House

Translated from Croatian by Mirna Čubranić

Cinnamon Museums

One of my recent diary entries written after a visit to the Faculty of Philosophy where I have studied and to the nearby apartment which I shared with an SF writer for several years, says that I have felt as if I had burst into a festive museum of happiness uncombed and with flip-flops on my feet. I just dropped in after seventeen years for no special reason. A museum of human happiness? It is certainly the most important museum of them all. But is there such a museum? And what would it display? A map of the sky, a TV set, a bunch of flowers, a baby pacifier, a Bible, an overseas plane ticket, an inflatable water mattress, a pair of binoculars, a wedding gown? If the world's greatest museum experts put their heads together, would they be able to reach a unanimous decision on at least the basic exhibits such a museum should contain?

Would it be a museum or an anti-museum?

Like photographs, museums and anti-museums reach into the bowels of the fish of chaos to steal its hidden, precious backbone of order. The ashes that will not return to ashes, the substance that will not disintegrate, rot away and hide itself from the eye. Like cunning cats, collectors and curators pull the red thread out of the gray, tangled ball of the world. Their fight is a hand-to-hand combat with the evanescent, with the hidden. Museums are like an intervention task force for rescuing, conservation and protection of the basic geometry in the waters of time. Too many broken bones stick out of its chaotic, violent rapids; too much blood and too many unhealed bruises still float on its surface. That is why many museums in this rough world deal with violence. War museums are probably among the world's most common museums. Police and firearms museums are not far behind. For some reason, people like visiting museums connected with suffering. Driven by the hormone of Thanatos, hordes of tourists flock to the small, dark museums filled with the dilapidated instruments of torture. And they sigh, wring their hands, bite their lower lip. Love can also be an instrument of torture. That logic and the law of inertia have led to the opening of the first *Museum of Broken Relationships* in the upper town of Zagreb. (Too sterile, if you ask me; it lacks the aura of rupture caused by a heart's thunder.) Then there is the typically American *Tragedy in US History Museum* with its stellar aura of *glamour noir*, Eros and Thanatos. *The Museum of Violence* in Belgrade is harrowing with the exhibits that exorcise the violence against those who are different and weaker. The Roman zoo hosts the subversive *Museum of Crimes Against Environment*, opened with the purpose of raising the public awareness of illegal wildlife trade and the world's endangered species. Its collection includes all kinds of dizzying wonders; raw and worked ivory, jewellery, souvenirs, shells, tortoise carapace, furs of all sorts and colours, corals. The

weirdest of its exhibits are probably the traditional Chinese medicine remedies made from the organs of the animals which are protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. The inventory of that activist museum reminds me happily of all the exotic objects one could find in the old *Wunderkammer* or a Cabinet of Curiosities. That famous, charming precursor to all today's museums was birthed by the rich 16th century Europe and it exhibited not only the wonders of flora and fauna, but also a random collection of sketches and parts of strange contrivances; whitish skeletons of possible and impossible creatures; precious ornamented furniture; rusted daggers, dusty medallions and rare books; secret geographical maps, rare china, feathers, paintings and sculptures. All that irresistibly brings to mind Bruno Schulz's „Cinnamon Shops“, in which one could find *colophony from Malabar, Chinese decals, the eggs of exotic insects, parrots, toucans, indigo, windup toys from Nuremberg, mandrake root, homunculi in flowerpots, rare and unusual books and microscopes.*

The enchanting thing about the *Wunderkammer* is that it attempted to compress infinity. Namely, the aristocratic cabinet of curiosities was a *minimundus*, a microscopic reproduction of the world, a three dimensional stage of history, and it represented the cabinet owner's control of it. The *Wunderkammer* of our time is definitely the Internet. In this day and age we are in the museum of everything. The Internet is a universal museum, the omnipresent one-dimensional *cornucopia* of endless little pictures of the world which are at any given second just a click of the mouse away. However, it cannot replace the human need for movement, for the palpable, for the multidimensional. I am glad that both our bodies and our eyes can pass through the doors of the strangest museums in the world, the museums which were up until not so long ago simply inconceivable. They deal with the small and non-canonical histories and untamed stories in which the exhibits are displayed in a most peculiar way and the themes become more and more bizarre and sometimes charmingly superfluous. But one man's trash is another man's treasure. Unlike most women, men will raise their eyebrows in contempt at the *Museum of Bags and Purses* in Amsterdam and ask who in their right mind needs it with its more than four thousand exhibits from the Middle Ages until today. But those museums of wild imagination, obsessions, trifles and the peripheral are very much needed by that mysterious part of human nature which defies reason. Let me just mention some of them: *The Avanos Hair Museum* in Turkey, with more than sixteen thousand exhibits; *The Paris Sewer Museum* with its intoxicating, unflinching stench; *The Icelandic Phallogical Museum*. *The International Museum of Toilets* in India; *The Circus World Museum* in Wisconsin; *The International Museum of Sweets* in France; *The Barbed Wire Museum* in Texas; the *Washington Banana Museum*; *The Museum of the Holy Souls in Purgatory* in Rome. What about the hell, why doesn't it have its own museum? Then there is *The Museum of Bread Culture* in

Ulm, *The Museum of Letters* in Berlin, *The Butterfly and Insect Museum* in Honduras, *The Museum of Bad Art* in Somerville (and unfortunately not only there). In Philadelphia you can pleasantly lose your mind in the museum of physical abnormalities with as many as two hundred thousand exhibits, in Japan vomit your heart out in the museum of parasites which infect animals and human beings, in Hollywood part with your life in *The Museum of Death*, in Minnesota improve your knowledge in the museum of the most questionable medical devices. If that is not your cup of tea, don't despair. Go for the cheerful *Museum of the History and Culture of Gelato* in Italy, *Freud's Dream Museum* in St Petersburg or *The Museum of Banned Art* in Berlin. It is to small museums like those that the Nobel winning author Orhan Pamuk has dedicated the last chapters, if not his whole novel entitled „The Museum of Innocence“, a story about an unrequited love and the innocence of things. After thirteen years of diligent work on writing the novel and collecting the exhibits, the Turkish writer opened, or rather gave a material form to *The Museum of Innocence* in Istanbul. The museum is a reification of his novel and it displays not only old photographs, packagings, letters, bills, cups, plates, salt shakers, keys and toys from the 1970s Istanbul, but also as many as 4213 butts of cigarettes smoked by his heroine Fusun. *The Museum of Unheard-of Things* in Berlin breathes a different kind of poetry than this obsessive prose: among other rarities, it displays Benjamin's typewriter, the stone on which Petrarca used to sit, the monument to Laika the space dog, Joseph Beuys' waxen rabbits, the fur of the last bonsai deer from the Myken Vhu buddhist monastery.

As a poet and lover of everything related to poetry, I wonder why there are so few museums of poetry in the world. The uninviting museum websites or the musty, secluded birth houses of certain poets and *museological* writings about poetry do not count as museums in my book. Despite all its treasures, H. M. Enzensberger's „Museum of Modern Poetry“ is still not a museum into which one can enter with both mind and body.

I am childishly dreaming about a traditional, three-storey museum as an elite and consecrated space. A real museum of the world poetry through centuries, which would display not only poems and letters, but also the writers' relics; a museum which would, for instance, take great pride in Tsvetaeva's pin cushion, Leopardi's napkin, E. A. Poe's silver flask, Whitman's knife, Ujević's hat, Dragojević's old running shoes. But even if it were finally opened, would it survive more than several months or years in these prosaic times? Shigureden, one of the most astonishing museums of poetry built in Kyoto, closed its doors after only six years since it opened them. Maybe because it was devoted exclusively to the traditional Japanese poetry, or to be more precise, to the classical anthology „Ogura Hyakunin Isshu“ - one hundred poets, one poem each. The closing of that museum came as a surprise because it was a visually stunning miracle of high technology, as is often the case in Japan, built by the eccentric

billionaire owner of Nintendo. But where are other enthusiasts? And what would we think of a museum of Croatian poetry financed by a corporate giant? It seems that the United States is the only other country besides Japan which advocates poetry as a museum subject. Its capital boasts the lively *American Poetry Museum* and *The Museum of Russian Poetry*, dedicated to Tsvetaeva, Pasternak, Akhmatova, Gumilev, Mandelstam. It would probably be interesting to stroll through the interactive museum of poetry with the curious name of *The Rural Oklahoma Museum of Poetry*. However, as far as I know, the list of museums of poetry doesn't go on. Thus many „museums of poetry“ have remained flattened, imprisoned in a non-museum text, built and open to the visitors only in the sentences and poetic titles with which their authors have adorned their prose and novels - the famous novels such as „The Museum of Silence“, „The Museum of Horrors“, „The Museum of Innocence“, „The Museum of Abandoned Secrets“, „The Museum of Unconditional Surrender“, „The Museum of Forgotten Memories“, and anthologies such as the famed „Museum of Modern Poetry“ and its somewhat younger sister entitled „From a Museum of Sounds“.

A monumental museum of world poetry is my heart's desire, but a smaller, marginal one may suffice for a starter. A tiny little place at the corner of the street, one of the *cinnamon museums*: a museum dedicated to the famous books with the word *museum* in their titles.

White Purgatory

As I walk down a long boulevard basking in the reassuring gentle rays of the afternoon sun, the new German time in my wallet, my brand new gray shoes and my body of a stranger is no burden to carry. Entering the luxurious hall of the Home for the Old and Infirm in Ludwigsburg, a stately mansion near the famous royal castle, is like entering another dimension. I quickly take off my civilian clothes in its antiseptic staff dressing room and put on the blue and white caregiver uniform which belongs to my colleague from the other shift and is too big for me. The young and vigorous manager of the nursing home already waits with the list of my duties. He looks like a big angel, or rather an archangel among the old sufferers. My first task is washing and dressing of the inmates. The shift manager points at a box from which white latex gloves hang like intestines. The gloves and the blue and white gown are the modest glamour of an assistant angel. They will protect me from human filth, from open wounds. I am a poet, not a professional nurse, and I know nothing about bedsores, dramatic wounds, cleaning of faeces and urine. But here I am, and I have to learn everything as I go along.

The nursing home is not an ordinary home for the old and decrepit, a beautiful house in a street lined with chestnut trees. It is a secluded, terrifying castle on a cliff surrounded by an invisible sea of unworldly time. A universe without profitable investments, acclamations, *selfies*, scandals, rivalry; an almost holy world. Disoriented flies do not dash against its window panes. There are no smears on the glass; the panes are abstractly clean, empty like the minds and the memory of some of its inhabitants. And the view out the window is invariably immobile. It is winter and the heating is turned up, but their pores are slow to open, as if there were nothing to open to. Pores are apertures, the gateways for little shreds of life. But they have no more storms to ride out and no more rains to dance through.

Cleanliness is the order of the day here; everything is clean and everything is cleaned. Lying on her bed like stranded, Frau Birken smiles as we clean her lower abdomen with wet wipes. Across her, Frau Rabbe opens a bag of candies, waiting for something. This is obviously the end of the line for her. The end of the line? What does it even mean? Terribly slow, heavy and old, she is both time-bound and wheelchair-bound. We ask the two women when they woke up. At six, before six. This place is a monastery with monks and nuns who wake up early not to pray for salvation, but to grasp at yet another straw of life. To breathe a little longer before they dive under the surface. Before they plunge into the lake at the end of the world or fly into the Earth's orbit. This nursing home is a strange anchorage of life and a launch pad into the infinity. I listen to the brief sentences of its inhabitants. What is there to say at farewell? Old people are mostly silent for long periods of time, but their dentures click like castanets.

Before or after lunch they take their walking frames on strange trips around the building, maybe thinking it is a coliseum or a Swabian castle. Does it remind them of their old holidays, their bygone travels? Ibiza, Tunisia. The Croatian coast, Istria.

As I make the beds of the oldsters in room number 5, I try to wheedle something more than just pleasantries out of them. Their faces show that it takes them long to grasp what I'm saying, as long as it takes them to go from one room to another or change their pyjamas. That they actually don't see me. What are these warm-blooded monuments, these living statues, these Carthusians of time thinking about? I bend over a former Daimler executive, and he just trembles and smiles. I lean over these beings as if out of a train window. They have gotten off the train. And we, with our white gloves, travel on. We travel on into our own future bygone days. They have slowly disembarked and now they shuffle their slippered feet towards the exit of the railway station, impervious to the world outside like impenetrable towers of stories and experiences. Getting shorter and shorter, closer to the ground. Like these two elegant old women with curled hair, who are sitting at a table. One of them tells me she is a student. They don't remember the peaches in Provence or the waves in Valencia or the peeling walls of an old, famous church. The last thing they remember are their childhood and school days, the only days that were tailor-made to suit them. Eternity cannot be expelled from the memory of the body; the body seems to remember the time when it was immortal, and that is why childhood remains so firmly fixed in the minds of the demented.

So what can you do? You comb the gray hair of the two sisters and prattle with them about their mother and father, their childhood games. Not about their late husbands. And they are ventriloquists of sorts, conversing with their old selves who lived like the seeds in the apple of their warm, protected universe. Nonexistence attacks with ferocity of a lion, but they are in childhood where it cannot harm them. It roars and kicks about behind the glass of time, ridiculous like a crazed monkey. But in this place the time between lunch and dinner lasts a million years, just like in childhood. The edges are irrelevant, the borders meltable like snowflakes. And there is a lot of falling. Old people topple like skittles, and the caregivers are always on the alert, with interphones in their pockets to raise the alarm when somebody falls.

Cakes and slices of bread remain untouched in their rooms, like something long earned but now unwanted. Instead of for axes, saws, tennis rackets or pincers, these old hands now reach for party games and poorly-made decorations for the walls of the nursing home. Romance novels on bedside cabinets. As we clean her roommate, a famous guitarist whose fingers betrayed her in the old age does a crossword puzzle with a feeble hand. It is her all-day-long pastime, her last crusade. The shabby

dictionary on her left contains the answers. The questions never answered, the wisdom never attained gape like unhealed wounds.

After lunch, I clean the tables in the dining room and wash the slobbery dishes in the kitchen. And I eat cakes. I drink juice. Most of them don't. The only taste in their sore mouths is the taste of the lukewarm silence. They drink coffee after lunch. Their skin is the colour of cold cappuccino and it resembles the old furniture coated with the mildew of long-time morning rituals, of crossword puzzles and *kiffles* dunked in coffee with milk. The radio crackles. A traffic report. A weather forecast.

I wash their lips and hands with a wet wipe. Why? What for? Some hands are washed needlessly. They are already clean. Hands can reach a stage in which it is absurd to wash them. The wrinkles of old women look like the slashes inflicted by the knife of time. With doll-like faces and stiff torsos these women have become half-alive wax dolls. Slowly running their palms over the table and silently moving their lips, they touch the distant surfaces which are out of our reach. But there is no flame on those lips. No sin and no saintliness. That is why the lips of the old are ashen. Why can't I discern which ones were Nazis, and which seductresses, workers, resistance fighters, spinsters? To me they all look like a mound of dust.

The walls of the dining room are peach. The faith in the cheerfulness of the space. In this room death smells of soup, of tangerines, of slippers. A laughter now and then. A barely audible conversation. Dentures click and fall out of their withered mouths. I've heard that Frau Erna's dentures accidentally ended up in garbage when she wrapped them in a napkin after lunch. Old people remove their teeth as if they were no longer human beings but machines that can be taken apart. In the evening, by command, they wash the dentures in their hands.

It is almost the end of my shift when I enter the room of a married couple. The sullenness in the air is palpable, even the grains of dust are frowning. Scarcely furnished with a chair, a wardrobe and a bed, the room seems empty. As if all those pieces of furniture were just drawn there. But there is something else that also hovers on the edge of nonexistence. An old, bitter looking woman. Never before have I seen eyes so ravaged as the eyes of that woman: barely blue, immense and empty like a Russian desert. No doubt she was beautiful once. With the cancer eating at her insides she still has to push her husband's wheelchair. And from what I've heard from the staff, her husband is a tyrant. She is afraid of him. As I clean his bottom, I have the feeling I am betraying her. I quickly leave the room, happy that my shift is over. I take off the gloves, but the inexplicable smell of purgatory remains in my nostrils for hours.

We have been given the bodies too big for such a short existence. Some of us get crippled lives, the others are blessed with winged ones. And in one's old age, those heavy wings drag along the ground like tails, without dignity. Nurses and caregivers have long stopped watching their step. And sometimes they tread on them with their soft, retreating clogs.

Zagreb Bittercake Shops

You and me. After a brief consultation, we head to a pastry shop for a piece of cake. Or rather, for two pieces of cake. On our way there we skirt all institutions which serious people consider important: courts, town halls, ministries, museums, stations and libraries. We are two old and bitter children who need a shot of something very sweet. Somebody once said that in times of utter melancholy and utter happiness the only sense we have is that of taste. But that is not quite true; I, for instance, stubbornly use my green eyes and I watch. I stare, I observe, I inspect.

The city is fragrant today and it invites to be breathed in and seen, but I doggedly turn my head away and stare at something one-dimensional and monochrome. At the facade of a man's back. I just gape at your back, which is big, long and hard like the Great Wall of China. It somehow always seems to be going away from me, rocking gently from side to side. One in front of the other, we walk in silence down Vlaška Street with the dodecaphonic rumble of trams as the musical accompaniment to the distance between us. And I pretend I don't care about the pregnant women and the workers sitting in their blue bellies, oblivious of their desert-coloured skin and the spider tattoos on their arms. Strange, but the sun has covered the dusty tarmac with a too shiny icing that just waits to be cut through, and the low bushes in Ribnjak Park rattle like rattlesnakes. I plug my ears and think about the escapist meaning of a cake, about the narcotic meaning of a cake shop.

I've loved cake shops since I was a little girl. They are full of softness, of universal goodness; nobody throws stones, eggs or Molotov cocktails at them. This bitter world offers to its agonized children all kinds of dazzling, adrenaline-fuelled excitements, carousels, noisy fairs and glittering ecstasies, although there is something poisonous and heavy buried in the ground beneath us. A black chest of theft, disease, war. Just think about it, there are thousands, millions of bright cake shops around the world! And I have the feeling that you have taken me to a million of them this spring, because Zagreb has recently become full of bitter fruits, bitter words, garish fairs and too expensive cake shops, or rather – *bittercake shops*. That is the right word for Zagreb. A *bittercake shop*.

The only ones that have remained innocent and sweet are the old-fashioned, shabby, socialist pastry shops at the city outskirts. They are cheerful and they feel like an endless birthday party of an old, permed aunt who has just devoured a *baklava* and now removes her dentures in front of everyone and wipes them with a tissue. In places like that, the munching customers with stupid, sugar-rush induced smiles on their faces are euphoric without alcohol or weed.

One day someone will say that the door of such a cake shop is wide and that only a few walk out of it. It is true: you flutter out of it into a buttery, fluffy white sky of sugar shock. But in Zagreb that sky is washed away with the first rain.

Why are those good, warm cake shops always at the city outskirts? The tiny one just off Kvaternikov Square is a perfect place for strong sensations, for getting together and saying goodbye. As you enter it sweaty and lovelorn, you are welcomed by at least several empty, plain tables and chairs, big mirrors and a display counter full of plump cakes. Of course, most of those cakes are wonderfully dangerous for health and they inspire the artistic urge for self-destruction. The world's fragility and evanescence shimmer in layers of bright colours under the artificial lights, and you have the feeling you can live with the intensity of a comet forever, and that the invisible pastry chefs behind the door are sugar angels gifted with beauty, goodness and the eternity of a short film. Such cake shops are a perfect venue for a wonderfully clumsy *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy*. Or a nice requiem played by a big orchestra. Or a cream cake throwing tournament.

When you lean your elbows on the table waiting for the listless waitress to bring your order and a glass of lukewarm water, you can play a slow tune on a little harp in your head. And as you rhythmically stab at your cake with a little fork, there are all kinds of things you can do while eating – you can discreetly stare at other customer, or you can play with the creaky door of perception and bring nostalgia into your mind by looking at the old photographs of Zagreb on the walls. Here the happy memories of childhood glitter like a cherry on whipped cream, the memories of the barely passed exams, of modest weddings. Bygone faces of your loved ones are compressed into a point of infinite density, into the tiny abdomen of a fly on the ice-cream display counter. And at that moment, everything you have in life can fit on a small plate in front you, as the gray roughness and sharp flat surfaces turn into warm chocolate circles and beaded spirals of a sugar flower.

Yes, there are days when everything in the city, including that bitter, black thing under the earth, is blue and pink. You and I, two cakes. Both freelance artists, for many days now we have been celebrating an unusual holiday – the holiday of the Day Off. The day which is loud like a shot from a firearm and whose empty, vast freedom lasts for several lazy months. The time when one can only wander, dream and love (this last thing only if you are the black pepper of the earth and the pink light of the world).

You, a failed knight, slowly push on your old bike like an overridden horse, and you don't give a damn about the seven children we will never have running towards us. There are not many mothers, fathers and passers-by to celebrate the Day Off with us; only an old Gypsy woman sitting on the pavement on a piece of cardboard, smoking and begging, not knowing herself what she is begging for. In her absent-minded delirium of cigarette smoke, does she see that, if we want, everything around is in bright confectionery colours? Only the clouds are still white as they dash across the sky like the balls of spun sugar soaked in a bitter fuel.

When we get there, the little cake shop is warm and psychedelic. The walls and tiles melt in the Picasso-like pink and blue. Everything is safe like a womb, the faces, the teeth; custard slices shiver, sugar bounces off the walls singing *this is home, this is home*. In my imagination the owner of the shop has locked the door and ordered us to eat fifty cakes out of happiness. Although my cake is on a small plate in front of me, I slowly stab my fork into your tall meringue, and my mascara runs down my cheeks together with the *tears of sugarjoy*. I feel like singing a snivelling ballad at the top of my voice. The furrows on my face are like the trails of a black snail in love. But there is no chivalrous knight to take me behind the curtain and wipe them off my face with a ball of vanilla ice-cream, to remove these stains which look like the soot of a chimney sweep that doesn't bring luck. By the way, they say that when two people fall in love in a cake shop, ice-cream balls soar up into the sky like balloons, like birds' souls, and when they fall out of love, the ice-cream turns into an insipid, poisonous pool. Who knows if that's true or not?

I watch your wrinkled face; it has shrivelled from your love for too much sugar. Munch-munch, the time in the cake shop crystallizes into our sugar history. When everything is over, our two hands on the table should be one on top of the other like the top of a profiterole on the cream filled bottom, and in a better world they could become a big marzipan hand which symbolizes the ecstatic serenity of a married couple.

As you bite into your huge meringue, you remind me of an accordion stretching its red mouth. Suddenly hungry for your love, I offer you my cheek for a kiss, and you wince and pull away for the first time since I've known you. The idle lady behind the counter knows that everything in my head revolves around you and for you, like a sad, dying galaxy. I'm losing my mind. I read your restraining gestures upside down, from the left to the right. I'm losing my mind. The cake shop becomes the burned Alexandrian library of you, and my cake crumbles because of you. Our mini-cathedral of sugar is falling apart, and when we are gone, only the small bird footprints will remain in the powdered sugar. You ask me something in the unintelligible mother tongue of an indifferent man. Suddenly, the only thing I hear from your mouth is the clatter of a mechanical trap. Your false, very expensive porcelain teeth hammer consonants. The little tin drummers in your mouth have started to drum a dead march. The eardrums of the sensitive customers around us burst like buttons. What's wrong? I was just joking. Joking. A joker smeared with sugar.

Translated to the language of a lonely woman, you are actually telling me: Girl, you and I are finished, count to ten, have your fingernails and your hair done, lose weight. Wipe that lipstick off your lips, it's ugly.

Silence. I hear only the giggling of the women at a nearby table. I'll call the police, the fire brigade, for something must urgently happen before I grow old alone and unloved in this cake shop! And definitely before your tongue becomes lined with the bitterness coated with boredom, and this cake shop at the end of the world decides to invest in redecoration and become just a *bittercake shop*. A dice of a plain marble cake which reads „Bitter Moon“.

I will wish for something terrible to happen. For example, I will wish for a tornado to hit Zagreb and pull this cake shop out like a molar, to lift it high into the sky and then drop it in the distant land of Oz. So we can fly to an aged, gouty Dorothy who can still imbue adventure and passion into what is dead. So I can shove the biggest meringue into your face and hold it there like an airtight pillow. And watch you fighting for breath and thrashing about.

Without looking at my silent grimace, you order another piece of cake. And now you read a creased newspaper, you read it absent-mindedly and four hours. I hate it. As you munch the titles on the last page, you too become the last page. You are almost finished with your last cake. And with me.

Bitter sirens wail from somewhere in the city.

Whatever happens now at this cake shop at the end of the world is no longer up to me. I leave it to chance.

