

Love Letter to the MFO Park

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The French call the emptiness after an orgasm *la petite mort*, the small death. Literary critic Roland Barthes claimed this feeling was the very point of reading great literature. As for me, the writer of these lines, I am moving away from Zürich after many years and my days have been filled with all kinds of *petites morts* lately: joy for what has been, cuffed to a sadness for what will no longer be accessible. To me anyway. It is an emptying, waiting to be refilled somewhere else.

Right now, nothing makes this small death hum quite as much as the MFO Park in Zürich Oerlikon. And yet so many Zürich locals don't know it. The enormous vertical garden is what I see from my apartment window. Seven times, I've watched the seasons tumble through it, while I do that writerly thing writers do: write. I'm looking at it now. And anyone who writes seriously knows just how much staring out the window goes on when you write. (For good reason, the famous literary magazine *The Paris Review* ran a series for a few years on "what writers from around the world see from their windows." They know what's what.)

The MFO Park is just a few paces from the busy train station that feeds what used to be Zurich's industrial quarter and is now modern housing. The garden went up in 2002 at about the same time as those badly needed apartment buildings in a city known for resisting change. The award-winning design (Burckhardt+Partners and Raderschall) has the same footprint and volume as the old *Maschinen Fabrik Oerlikon* it now replaces. Much like a cathedral, the hollow structure, framed by 20-meter walls of dense foliage, pulls your gaze high to the concealed walkways, to jutting balconies and dramatic, green towers. A quiet fountain lies in a sunken pool of smooth glass pebbles, peaceful as a semi-colon. Despite its

urban anchoring, the whole thing gives you a sense of space not unlike the nearby Alps. The concealed passageways inject you with that childhood delight of the treehouse or the maze and, of course, the park is both of these.

But the Summer wall of roses is gone now, the last of it washed away by last week's heavy rain and with it our annual cue to re-read Alice Melvin's picture book *The High Street*. Past too are the drapes of wisteria that come with the first Spring heat and find a pale version of themselves endlessly mirrored on Instagram. July has tipped the park's lime green of fresh leafy flesh into a deeper shade. I will not be here in the Fall to see the jungle thickness turn striped in deciduous reds and yellows, will not be here when all of it flutters to the ground. A harvest for the careful gardeners. Naked fingers of vine will be left clinging to the bare steel. Only when Winter pulls the structure bare can I see people on the walkways from my apartment. But they can see me in my living room all year and, if they are writers, will peer and try to understand our lives from the things on our balconies (mine with drying laundry, designer chairs, a chest full of half-deflated footballs and – during Zurich's brief pandemic lockdown – a marble run made out of tubes of toilet paper).

On the benches of the MFO Park, I have edited and penned out first drafts. When he sees me, my quiet neighbour walks by not wanting to interrupt my concentration with even the briefest hello. Over time, I have gone from vertigo to ambling across the walkways with a book in hand and will forever remember certain passages by the particular stretch of latticework that buoyed both my pages and my steps. Books with this kind of mileage on them include Joyce's *Ulysses* and Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. The park's bordering streets bear their names, although Mann refers to the much more amusing Erika and not her father Thomas. (I took these literary street names as a good omen when I walked across the park for the first time in 2017, still an unpublished writer.) And on the park's ceiling terrace, I read aloud work to my female art collective, while a group of 12-year old boys puffed away ineptly at cigarettes and were very polite. Once, in the throes of insomnia, I swear I saw a fox walk across the park's sandy courtyard lit by a full moon. I never saw him again, but still give the window a 3 a.m. glance when I'm up.

In her book *How to do Nothing – Resisting the Attention Economy*, Jenny Odell describes a garden near her home as a piece of “attention-holding architecture”, a “contemplative space against the pressures of habit, familiarity and distraction that constantly threaten to close it.” A garden is a place that invites us to convert ourselves to its time scale, which is of course the time scale of seasons. I am firmly convinced this is the time scale within which a literary writer should work. The writer should remember that the plant will grow because you have made space for it and it is time, not because you have ordered it to. The writer should abandon the language of determination and understand that good creative work can be invited and courted, but not programmed, certainly not coerced. Meaningful artistic work feeds on our time and attention and is not impressed by self-righteous grit. We have all been sucked into an obsession with productivity, guilty out of rest and deluded by superficial busyness. But nothing artistically relevant comes from measuring out creativity as if it were a commodity. The garden instructs us in an altogether different language of patience and humility. It sinks us into a deeper form of being. To sit in the MFO Park is a re-education.

When I am out and about in Zürich, I am always surprised by how many people have never been to my park. I will have to leave it, but it will remain for the early morning business people who always cross it along the same path, for the late night teenagers with their high emotions. And it will remain for the anarchist coffee seller, the ping pong club, the families, small time drug dealers, day care toddlers in their vests, each according to their unofficial shift. It will remain for people that gather for professional photo shoots, proud gardeners, corporate types at the event hall across the road, acrobats that hang their ropes from the balconies. The MFO Park will remain for the writers, other writers. It will remain for you. Enjoy it. It is a gift, just like these words.

Twenty signed copies of this letter will be spread around the MFO Park on 12 July 2024. If you find one, keep it. It is yours.