

Clemens Setz

## The centrepiece of the collection

A poet can easily imagine his own death.

All he needs to do is add two plus two.

Of course, if the result turns out to be FOUR, then he must have done something wrong.

Ernst Mauser, *Diary 1997-1999*

For whatever we lose (like a you or a me)

It's always ourselves we find in the sea.

e. e. Cummings

“And finally there at the back we have his late work,” said the young man, pointing at a long shelf full of dark books, some of which were falling apart. The whole of late period Setz. The *Queue* cycle, *Grandchildren* and *Asteroids*. Everything from his Post-Sea period. From the Pre-Sea period we only have the novels, most of the other things from that time have been lost. However, we do have some rare copies of his children's book, now long out of print, *Miao, the Little Death Knell*.

“Ah, I see, knell.”

The woman who was following him spoke very slowly and without modulating her voice, as if she were having difficulty pronouncing her words. Out of keeping with her leather jacket she was wearing a short skirt and trainers that looked like puffed up animals. In her hand she held a white ball-point pen, and now and then she would twirl it around with her fingers. As they walked past a large metal

cupboard, she placed the pen on top of it and from then on ignored it.

“And here we have the holy of holies,” said the young man and made as if he were spitting into his hands like some kind of workman. “Voilà, the card catalogue.”

“What did you call it?” asked the woman.

“No, I just said Voilà. It’s like saying, Here you are, or There you go. A weaker of version of dadada-DA!”

The woman gave an uncertain laugh, like a child who hasn’t understood an adult joke. She looked down to the ground, where her brightly-coloured, chunky trainers stood. She positioned them as if she were wedge skiing and bobbed up and down.

“Oh, I see, I thought you’d perhaps given the cupboard a name,” she said, and looked at him with a rather sheepish expression on her face.

The young man wondered – for the third time that afternoon – whether she might be drunk or at least under the influence of some substance or other.

He wiped the sweat from his cheek with his sleeve – the guided tour through the archive had already lasted half an hour – and made a sign to the woman to follow him into the next room, where there was a table with a big coffee machine. A few unground coffee beans lay scattered across the floor.

“Since you are probably the last visitor today,” he said, and corrected himself immediately, “the last lady visitor, perhaps I could offer you a cup of coffee, what do you think?”

“I’d love one,” said the woman. “So the decision to break up the collection is... irreversible.”

“Umm... well, it’s definitive, I’d say. It was a crackpot idea from the outset, but at least now I’ve received confirmation from lots of people that I did my work as well as I could. That’s a bit of a consolation.”

“So where are all the things going now?”

“Well, thank goodness, it’s not as if everything’s going to be burnt –“

This word made the woman flinch, and as she did so she inadvertently crushed her empty coffee cup. The young man gently removed it from her hand, threw it away and gave her a new one.

“Of course, everything’s going to stay as it is,” he said. “just in a different place and without me as the caretaker, but as part of a larger library, a private collection.”

“Whose?” asked the woman.

“I... don’t know whether I’m allowed to say, I mean... Obviously, it’s no secret or anything, but...”

“That’s all right,” she said.

“A private collector. More than that I can’t say.”

“OK.”

The young man opened a white coffee filter with his finger tips, made a nice wide beak out of it and put it into the sewing machine-like top of the coffee machine.

Then he poured in some water out of a bottle and put some powdered coffee in.

“And are you disappointed about that now?” asked the woman.

“Oh, well...”

The man turned on the current. The coffee machine awoke from its slumber with a snort and a snarl; judging by the layer of dust, it must have been asleep for some time. Out of its metal trunk came a single brown drop which splashed on the shiny table-top. A feverish glow filled the switch, the engraved word POWER flickered and twinkled erratically. Then suddenly everything went dark.

“Not again,” said the young man and tapped the dead switch with his index finger.

He twiddled with it. Nothing happened.

"I'm sorry," he said to the machine.

"It's all right," said the woman. "Perfect timing, isn't it?"

The man took a deep breath and turned to face her.

"Timing is somehow always perfect," he murmured, "don't you agree?"

"How do you mean?"

"Ah, it doesn't matter. Anyway, this coffee machine has never worked properly," he said, shaking his head. "Right, let's go back..."

He went ahead. She followed him. His shoes made squelching noises as he walked, while hers made no sound at all.

Back in the so-called reception room (so named for the simple reason that it was the first room a visitor entered), the young man sat down briefly behind his desk (known as the reception desk for similar reasons) and rummaged around inside a large drawer. He had almost forgotten what he had to do. He looked at his watch. It really was that late. The woman watched him at work, but then got bored and started looking out of the window.

"Has that high-rise building been there long?" she asked.

The man finished rustling around and then looked up. His hand still inside the drawer, he said:

"No, it's only recent. That wretched block of concrete..."

The woman stepped closer to the window and steadied herself by pressing her hands against the dusty window sill.

The fabric of her skirt stretched across her bottom. A single horizontal fold remained, like a shut eyelid. The young man bit on his lip with his incisors and breathed in and out.

"I like high-rise buildings," said the woman. "You always have the feeling there could be anything behind them. Deserts. Seas. Mounted armies. Things that come closer while your attention is focused on the house."

“More than anything else it eats up the light,” said the young man. “There are days when the sun stands the whole afternoon behind that ugly monolith. Er... monolith... or monol...”

He turned his head to the side and blinked thoughtfully. How do you spell it? But the more often he whispered the word to himself, the more meaningless it became. He looked again at the woman, who in the meantime had put her hand up to the window pane in a gesture reminiscent of longing.

At last he found what he had been looking for in the drawer. A door handle, white golden and heavy, lay beneath a pile of writing paper. He always kept it here, but every time he had to look for it again because when the drawer was closed it would slide around of its own accord and get hidden behind all kinds of unimportant things. He took it out and put it in his pocket.

When he stood up, the woman turned round to face him again. He expected her to take her leave now. The archive had, with the best will in the world, nothing more to offer. The sunlight lay across the room, cut up into fan-like strips.

“Thank you for the guided tour,” said the woman.

The young man nodded, relieved.

“Now I really have the feeling I know my way around,” she continued. “Thank you. I’ll manage on my own.”

She walked past him into the next room, where a pile of old newspapers and a couple of musty old first editions were stored, and stood between the metal bookcases; she held both hands pressed against her hips, as if she were awaiting an indication as to which direction to take next.

The young man followed her. In his head he was preparing some extremely polite way of pointing out to the woman that the closing time had already passed several minutes earlier.

As he came closer, he noticed the play of muscles in her back. She was wearing very tight clothes; this had struck him when they had said hello to each other. Somewhat confused, he stared at her shoulder blades.

"I...", he began.

She ignored him. She picked up one of the books and began to leaf through it. The cover showed a man with glasses and a three-day beard who was reading an excerpt from his latest book to an old-fashioned library reading lamp. And although it was a black-and-white photo, one could see that the book was exactly the same one the woman was holding in her hand. A strange infinite loop, like some dizzying spiral of self-referring images.

Laughing, the woman put the book back.

"And this is all your own accomplishment," she said.

She uttered the last word so slowly that at first the young man didn't even realise she was talking to him.

"Oh, no," he said. "Of course not. It's impossible to do it on your own. You need people who can make rooms available and who'll allow to look through the masses of paper this man has filled with his writing, and then you have to read through them systematically and...".

He stopped, because the woman was by now engrossed in another book.

From the movement of her lips he could see that she was reading.

"But at least I am the person who is always here," he said, "or was here, as the case may be. You know..."

He made a big gesture of raising his forearm to look at his watch, in the hope that the woman would notice. But of course she was unperturbed.

Her lips spelt out the sentence to the end. Her face contorted into a childish smile.

"Hey ho," she said. "*All that is transient is but a symbol.* Did he write that?"

"I'm afraid not," said the young man, and bent down to see which book the woman had taken.

"But it goes on," she said. Haltingly and with her index finger following the line of print, she read out slowly: *All that is transient is but a symbol. But what for? For more transience?* Ha ha.

Her voice had become softer. She can't even read properly, thought the young man, and felt himself getting much hotter. To calm himself down he put his hand into his trouser pocket and clasped the door handle. The cool metal in his hand gave him a little courage and he said:

"Yes. Well... I'm afraid we're about to close, I'm really sorry..."

The woman looked up at him. The index finger she was using to read stopped.

"It's a shame you didn't come round sooner," he said. I mean, it's a shame because today's going to be the last day... But I imagine that all the notebooks and papers will soon be on public display. In fact, I'm sure they will. As I said, the private collector has..."

The woman folded her arms in front of her chest, but with her finger still stuck inside the book. The young man looked apologetically at the ceiling and shrugged his shoulders.

"I've shown you everything," he said, "but unfortunately..."

He pointed around in a circle vaguely, as if he wanted to say: it's the circumstances, adverse circumstances. The woman took her finger out of the book, the wound to the white pages healed immediately and she put it back in the bookcase. Since there was no other book next to it, it fell over immediately.

"Of course not," she said.

“What?”

“Of course not,” she repeated. “Not everything.”

The young man looked at her with as much puzzlement as he could muster, but he couldn't withstand her gaze. Her gaze dissolved his facial features and he began to cry.

“I, I...,” he sobbed, and held his hand in front of his face; it smelt pleasantly of the metal of the door handle. “It's just... for his own...”

The woman had come quite close to him. She took his trembling chin between two fingers. He tried to nod, but he couldn't; she held him tightly.

He crumpled up the damp handkerchief and put it in his pocket. He thought of the many days he had spent here alone, killing time with paper planes made out of illegible slips of paper and lonesome yoga exercises on the reception desk.

The woman and he now walked through the room that housed the vegetating coffee machine. There were some tools hanging on the wall: screw drivers, hammers, wire reels and saw blades of varying sizes, like some weird set of cutlery from an extraterrestrial civilisation. At the back of the room there was a high, unmarked door which looked as if it could have been painted on the wall. The man took the door handle out his pocket and screwed it on to a small, rectangular piece of metal protruding from a hole in the door. Carefully he pressed down the handle, there was a clicking sound like the breaking of a wishbone, and a dark room opened up before him. The smell of all kinds of humanity came to meet him and he breathed through his mouth.

“Herr Setz?” he called softly.

In the half-dark a figure lying in a large, yellow metal bedstead began to stir. The bed stood under a circular window covered over with white tiles. In one

corner of the room, where usually a cross would hang, was a small Chinese lantern, which wore a laughing face and was filled with melancholic light coming from a weak light bulb. Otherwise the room was choc-a-block with largely damaged or twisted umbrellas. In one corner a small indoor water feature splish-splashed; it was shaped like a stretch of beach with small changing cubicles and an even smaller sunset on the finger-wide horizon.

“Herr Setz,” repeated the young man. “I just wanted to tell you that we’re about to close.”

A grunt could be heard, and in the bed a hand holding a fountain pen rose up but then fell back immediately on to the soft, bouncy mattress.

“Maah, said the figure softly.

It was the voice of an old man. The bed creaked. The young man felt his heart beating.

“I’d better turn off the sea as well, Herr Setz,” he said with a slight tremor in his voice, and took a careful step into the room in the direction of the indoor water feature.

“No, leave him the sea,” said the woman, “leave it on.”

And from behind she placed her hand on his shoulder.

“Maah,” confirmed the old man.

Once the door had been closed, the sweaty handle extracted and the neck of the key turned twice, they went back. The woman floated along in her trainers, making no sound at all. The man had to think constantly of the widowed old man’s gaze that had met him in the darkness. The private collector will, he said to himself over and over again. The private collector will. The unfinished sentence calmed him down a little.

“Did he say anything?” asked the woman.

The man cleared his throat fully, although there was nothing to clear.

“Well,” he said, “he sat up briefly, I think, and reached for his glasses. He will have thought I was the postman.”

“The postman?”

“And he smiled,” said the young man somewhat wistfully. “Over his whole face. You have to understand, he loves receiving letters.”

They walked silently side by side as far as the reception desk, on top of which lay a small packing case. A half-open appointment calendar protruded from a waste-paper basket. The broadly grinning drawer continued to display its contents. When they reached the front door, the woman turned round, left him standing and went back to the entrance to the second room. She took off her leather jacket and put it over her arm. She was wearing a light-coloured T-shirt which bore the image of a couple of palm trees on a quiet beach.

“He’ll probably soon notice,” said the young man, “that the post has stopped coming. He’s not stupid when it comes to things like that.”

“Lock everything up well,” said the woman. “I’ll see to everything else.”

Her fine-boned hand wandered towards one of the switches and hovered there until the young man had opened the door, left the archive and closed it from the outside. A soft plastic clicking sound was to be heard; then the three rooms, the surroundings and the enormous monolithic office building at the other end of the street stood in complete darkness.