

Ludovic Hadjeras

360 degrees

Ludovic Hadjeras

360 degrees

Extended version of the thesis written in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of Master in Fine Arts and Design
under supervision of Catherine Somzé, Dirty Art Department.

2022

*To Pine Sphinxes,
dead, sleeping and alive.*

“The purpose of the watcher post is to recognize and locate wildfires as early and as accurately as possible. The purpose of the alert is to trigger the intervention of means of fighting. These two actions are not necessarily coupled: the one who gives the alert is not always a « watcher »; it can be the accidental spectator of a fire starting (motorist, farmer, walker). The proportion of fires thus reported is not negligible. But the frequency of fire risks at certain times leads to the need of setting up a coupled watching and alerting system, intended to identify as many fires as possible and to give the alert in the most efficient and rapid way possible. [...] The effectiveness of the lookout is undeniable; the lookout is the essential element in the fight against forest fires, wherever the risks are high.”

Gabriel-Henri Leblanc, Les Rubans de feu varois

*“Then come the long daydreams of what I’ll do when
I get out of there, that mountaintop trap.”*

Jack Kerouac, Desolation Angels

Foreword

The werewolf is a creature who accompanies my practice since quite a while now. *I am learning to become a werewolf*. This is how I use to present myself while talking about my work. This is a transformation in process: I am not a werewolf yet – is this metamorphosis meant to be achieved? I consider my work and research as steps and traces of an inner quest to reach a werewolf identity¹.

I borrow the werewolf figure to Baptiste Morizot², who invites to see this creature as a diplomatic entity making the link between wolves and humans, as a mediator able to pacify tensions between the two species. Since wolves came back on the French territory³, conflicts between them and humans, in particular sheep breeders, broke out. These conflicts materialize the acme of a more global uneasy cohabitation between biodiversity and human economic interests. To find ways to coexist peacefully with beings we are not, to avoid potential conflicts, to defuse and to heal pre-existent tensions with other than us, are part of the narratives I try to implement in my work. For this reason, I associate the werewolf

1. About the first steps of the quest, see *Le Loup et le Figuier*, Art master degree thesis, tutored by Anne Bertrand, HEAR, Strasbourg, France, 2020, http://www.ludovichadgeras.fr/Le_loup_et_le_figuier.pdf.

2. Baptiste Morizot is a French philosopher agrégé and Doctor of Philosophy from the École Normale Supérieure in Lyon. He teaches at the university of Aix-Marseille (France).

3. Wolves naturally returned to the French territory in 1992, crossing Fench/Italian national borders. They had been eradicated of France in the 19th century.

to the figure of the *métis*⁴, dealing with a French Algerian heritage, seeking to mend relationships that colonization⁵ has torn apart.

The lycanthrope⁶ and the *métis* are both sharing a double identity. As two beings *in-between*, their role can be to defuse the conflicts between the two sides from which they come: “We need diplomats. We need hybrids, *métis*, werewolves, able to temper, appease, heal contemporary crises. “Diplomacy’ comes from the ancient Greek term [diploma], meaning ‘folded in two’. The *bent in two* is the one who is at the border, contorted in such a way as to have a part on each side, and who, in doing so, makes possible a communication by the sharing of a hybrid code [...].”⁷ The werewolf and *métis*, play a pivotal role in the relations between two camps: between humans and non-humans, between North and South, between heirs to a colonized country and heirs to a colonizing one.”⁸ The development of untroubled relations between humans and non-humans leads to peaceful inter-human relations, and vice versa. In his book *Is Racism*

4. Instead of using “crossbreed” or “halfbreed”, which can be perceived as pejorative terms, I chose to use the French word “*métis*”, from which Édouard Glissant developed his concept of *métissage* as a positive way to deal with heritages made of cross-cultural identities, meant to be alternatives of narrative constructions of a homogenous legacy nourishing national myths.

5. Algeria was colonized by the French between 1830 and 1962.

6. Synonym of werewolf, from Greek [lycos] ‘wolf’ and [anthropos] ‘man’.

*an Environmental Threat*⁹, Ghassan Hage draws a link between xenophobia and fear of the wolf, and calls to merge the anti-racist and the ecological fights together. The werewolf becomes a concept to develop affinities with other-than-us, opened to other *weres* beings, lupines or not, humans or not. The werewolf embodies a *becoming something else*. It is a character to move towards a “were” identity to reach a new kind of relation to the world and its inhabitants.

One of the ways to become “were” passes through the practice of observation. In her book *To Learn to See: the Point of View of the Living*, Estelle Zhong Mengual¹⁰ takes the ability of seeing as a starting point to develop our sensibility to the living, to engage a more inclusive relation to non-humans: “Not having a culture of the living contributes to keeping it out of the field not only of attention, but also of importance, out of the reign of entities that exist strongly in our world, out of our common world. Working to enrich our culture of the living [...] is therefore also a political gesture, at a time when we finally understand the

7. Baptiste Morizot, *Les Diplomates : cohabiter avec les loups sur une autre carte du vivant*, coll. Domaine sauvage, Wildproject, Marseilles, France, 2016, p. 30.

8. Ludovic Hadjeras, *Le Loup et le Figuier*, *ibid.*, p. 119.

9. Ghassan Hage, *Is Racism an Environmental Threat*, Debating Race collection, Polity Press, Oxford, United Kingdom, 2017.

10. Estelle Zhong Mengual, is a French art historian, Normalian and holder of a doctorate from Sciences Po Paris. She teaches in the Master of Experimentation in Art and Politics (SPEAP), created by Bruno Latour, at Sciences Po Paris.

profound toxicity of relating to the living as simple decorations of our lives.”¹¹ The relation to an environment is made, in part, through looking. The gaze we developed as humans is mainly anthropocentric. One of the ways to decenter the relation we have upon biodiversity is to learn to develop a non-human gaze, to share the point of view of the living as an answer to coexist and to shape ecorelations with other beings in a common world. To track animals – to learn to see and understand traces of their presence – is an application of the decentering from the human gaze. The art of tracking is borrowed from the field of hunting: it is a technique developed to approach the prey by adopting its perspective. It is however possible to subtract the hunting dimension, by considering the change of perspective as an end in itself, and not as the mean to achieve the death of the other. Observation is a tool to walk in the pawprints of non-human beings, leading to a projection of the self into a different form of life. It is a practice of infra-metamorphosis, allowing to borrow, for the time of a track, a new body envelope,

new perspectives. Becoming someone else through the gaze brings to develop a sharp attention, to be on alert to details seeming insignificant, to look for discreet traces. To follow the trails of another being, to analyze it, to decrypt and to describe it, to interpret and to make hypothesis, merges physical and psychological behaviors into another state of both human and more-than-human realities. The experience to the world becomes something hyper-pragmatic with a touch of magic. Considering the environment with near-scientific precision mingled with the ability to virtualize something external to oneself – to project somewhere else – opens doors to liminal existences: states of in-between, as humans at the threshold of an alternate reality.

Next pages carry the story of two months spent in a watchtower. During July and August 2021, I was working as a firewatcher. I took this job as an opportunity to experience an unusual link to a special space: habiting in a tower on the top of a mountain in the middle of a forest massif. This building was my workplace, my living space, my research

11. Estelle Zhong Mengual, *Apprendre à voir : le point de vue du vivant*, coll. Mondes Sauvages, Actes Sud, Arles, France, 2021, p. 12.

ground. Seven days a week, almost twenty-four hours a day, I was there, with the sole role of watching over the forests, so they do not catch fire. Vigilance and observation are the specificities of firewatching. This situation was a total new way to experience the practice of the gaze, far from the one developed in animal tracking. Whereas tracking non-humans brings on the field, at the ground level, that tracks invite to follow animals in a perpetual motion, the position of the firewatcher is still, fixed and raised. There, I am not following the elements to observe, it is the elements themselves that enter the lookout – traces come into motion whereas the tracker remains at the same place. The firewatcher becomes the witness, the receiver of different events, and then a translator of the reality into another form: here, writing. The text that follows bears the traces of the experience I was living, reporting events as faithfully as possible. More than a diary, this writing testifies to a methodology: observation as a mean of immersing into the environment, an empiric way of experiencing space and relations to the surroundings physically and mentally.

12. We could also insist on the point that even if forest fires are natural disasters, the ones I had to avoid are mainly human made, directly triggered by them (voluntary or accidentally) or indirectly through global warming.

13. In his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Michel Foucault describes the Panopticon as a building of power made to survey and to exercise control on a specific population enclosed

The position I have, as a watcher, overlooking the environment on the top of a glass tower, can be seen as an ultra-anthropocentric posture, reinforcing the idea of humans as super-protectors detached from the ecosystem¹². The reality of the situation I live is not as a raised outsider, but in a total relationship to the space and its inhabitants. The place I live in is more an area to share the space with other beings than a building made to wield power. From this opened lookout designed as a panopticon, I move from the role of the guard to a habitant of the territory, thus escaping the repressive role of Michel Foucault's overseer¹³. To live in the space we have to observe develops a special link to it, not as a décor detached from the self, but as a space to experience. "In the form of a diary (*nature diary*), the reverend [Gilbert White] describes day after day the living beings he observes in his garden and the countryside of his parish. This way of entering into a relationship with the living, woven into daily life, in the place where we live, allows the naturalist practice to go beyond the mere practice of identification: it becomes possible to observe the living

all around the tower: "[The Panopticon] is versatile in its applications; it serves to amend prisoners, but also to care for the ill, to instruct the scholars, to guard crazy people, to watch over the workmen, to make beggars and idlers work. It is a type of installation of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals relation to others, hierarchical organization, arrangement of centers and channels of power, definition of its instruments and modes of intervention, which can be implemented in hospitals, workshops, schools, jails. Each time we are dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom we will have to impose a task or a behavior, the panoptic diagram can be used. It is — subject to changes — applicable "to all establishments

around you as possessing mores and habits, because you follow them season after season. This very simple material device, observing the living in the place where one lives [...] thus has a very great force of philosophical subversion: it makes it possible to discreetly extract the modern style of nature observation. *Homebased* attention allows living beings to no longer be just the decor of our existence, but ways of existing and cohabiting. Even more, it becomes possible to enter into a relationship with them, as they share with us a common time and territory – a common life.”¹⁴

The process of writing consists in extracting pieces of what I see and I live through almost down to earth descriptions, itemizing the experiences and uniting them into a global spacetime frame - a paper one. Then imagination can emerge from depicted details, giving a place to *other-than-human* manifestations. Entering into details with a stranger gaze blurs the borders of realism: close observation, as a moment of intense focusing, can lead to almost hallucinatory scenes. It allows a projection into a parallel

world, a liminal space, the same we are living in, but in another form because seen from another perspective. By virtualizing reality, new narratives are possible, including the surrounding. According to Michel Foucault, the power of the panopticon is due to the assimilation of the overseer’s viewpoint by of the one observed. The observed projects their gaze into the watchtower, mentalizing a stranger perspective into their own space – assimilating the possibility of being surveyed at any time. During the two months as a firewatcher, curiosity and empathy bring me to a reversed situation. While being the overseer, I start to assimilate a stranger gaze into my own mental space, made of non-human perspectives. The reality I am living is amalgamated when I get lost in moments of other beings’ lives. “Naturalist practice becomes the art of investigating body to body and life to life. To learn to see is to make another body enriched by the body-perspectives of other living beings.”¹⁵

The tower I live in exists as an envelope allowing different experiences of the environment. The windows of the watchtower

where, within the limits of a space which is not too extended, it is necessary to keep under surveillance a certain number of people.” (J. Bentham, *Panopticon versus New South Wales. Works*, Bowring Editions, 1843, p. 177.)” Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Gallimard, Paris, France, 1975, p. 207.

14. Estelle Zhong Mengual, *Apprendre à voir le point de vue du vivant*, op. cit., p. 68.

15. Estelle Zhong Mengual, *Apprendre à voir le point de vue du vivant*, op. cit., p. 133.

are as many openings on the outside world to observe its tangible elements, as screens on which virtuality materializes to develop an augmented reality. I observe and I project, I describe and I speculate, I live and I imagine. The watchtower becomes a metaphor of an observation post, lookout with two-way windows reflecting its own space, while being turned towards the surrounding. Gradually, the building becomes my mental space and the outside world enters me through the six opened windows shaping the observatory.

Logbook



June

29. With Leon, we are heading to Marseilles in our car. Tomorrow morning, we have our firewatch training. A friend, six months earlier, told me about this job. I immediately projected myself into the imagination that this role suggests, certainly romanticizing the setting: living in a tower for two full months, at the top of a mountain, with the sole role of ensuring that the forests do not catch fire. Our watchtower is located on the Etoile massif, to the North of Marseilles. Our watchtower is called *The Etoile*¹, without more frills. We are sleeping at the Etoile tonight.



July

2. Firewatching training is not much more thrilling than a calling day²: all day in an amphitheatre watching slideshows, minus the free breakfast. The vocabulary of firefighters is close to military vocabulary. Fire represents the feared and respected enemy, proudly awaited, without whom the role of fire soldiers would be meaningless. The machine deployed against this enemy is also close to the army – these two bodies evolved side by side: sprawling hierarchy, advanced weapons, aestheticization of the enemy. The fusion of these two institutions is embodied by a former military reconnaissance aircraft used by firefighters, whose thermal camera is used for monitoring not the movements of human enemies, but the evolution of flames on the ground.

The firefighters' training centre is full of spectacular training modules: carcasses of charred cars, smoking cabins that look like bad funfair attractions, where the extreme conditions of a house fire are reproduced, or even buildings from which dark furrows escape through the windows, traces of the licking of the flames on the concrete. The

← *Connection*, two phones (first one in the Etoile lookout, second one in the room) communicating by light morse code, binoculars , tripod, 16 km, 2021

2. Calling days are, in France, what replaces military service.

most impressive district is a forest made up of gigantic metal trees bristled with valves from which huge flames escape. I spend all my breaks in front of this artificial forest fire, in which young recruits are busy under the orders of their trainers.

4. I took advantage of my only weekend of two consecutive days of the next two months to join Zoe in Toulouse. Tomorrow will be the very beginning of the watch.

6. Second day of watch, first full day, from 11 am to 7 pm. We have been in the lookout area from 10 am until now, midnight, when I write these lines in my notebook on the orientation table. I write on Aix-en-Provence while Leon, in front of me, draws on Marseilles, an arm in the Mediterranean. The lookout offers comfort that is spartan, to say the least. Before arriving there, we took the car along a rough track with 600 meters of vertical drop. We were trying to follow the 4x4 of the firefighter who took us

there. The path winds as much as a mountain road and it is only at the last turns that the lookout appears. It is a 6 meters high tower, on three floors: the first ones are the living spaces, with a unique tiny window. The last floor is a glass hexagon offering a 360° view: the lookout area. The interior of the living areas resembles a military base set prepared for a horror film. The concrete walls and stairs, the floor covered with cream tiling, are lit by a single neon in the centre of the ceiling. No drinkable water, our running water is stocked in a tank, a firefighter truck will refuel it during the season. All day and all night, the wind blows nonstop, howling in every gap it can find. I did not expect a palace: it is not. In contrast, a luxury hotel could not have dreamed of a better location. Perched above Marseilles, our gaze meets no obstacle except for the rare peaks higher than ours. From where we are, Marseilles seems reduced to the scale of a scintillating anthill lost in the dark. On a clear day, the peaks of the Ecrins appear to the North, while to the South the sea spreads its horizon over nearly 180°. The lookout area is surrounded by a

walkway. In the centre of the glazed hexagon, a 25:1000 map is on a round table of 120 cm in diameter, which means 40 km in the real world. This is the area we have to watch. Summer is going to be hot. Firefighters fear dry weather and fiery fires. For the moment, the massif is still green, green as I never imagined the Marseilles hinterland so green. The Black pines and Scots pines that surround us have been abundantly watered by the rains of the year. It should not last. The fire chief in charge of the firewatchers told us that the Etoile watchtower is the one he is most afraid of. If the massif were to burn, the firewatchers (us) would be cooked. It makes me curious. I almost want to see what it is like, being on the burning mountain, watching from the top of the tower the fire approaching.

Last night in the kitchen, after our first day in the lookout, I was surprised by a huge Pine Sphinx, resting on the wall. The next morning, when I wake up, the moth is on the windowpane, very close to my head. It measures approximately 8 cm. It stayed there all day long. Once night has fallen, as I go to

take a picture of it, I realize that it has just released a long wet reddish-brown streak onto the tile, slowly flowing over the glass. As I flash the Sphinx to see it better, it spreads its wings and makes them vibrate, then flies off. The light of my flash attracts it. Its flight is chaotic. It bumps into wherever it can bump. Thanks to the flashlight, its eyes reflect, it seems to stare at me with its purple gaze as it flies towards me. When I turn off my flash, it moves seamlessly to the neon light in the downstairs kitchen. Its size and flight make it more look like a bat than a moth. Helped by Leon, it takes the exit to regain fresh air. It is unsettling to imagine that this Sphinx watched over our sleep after our first day on the lookout. This moth which bears the name of the mythological guardians, watched over our sleep the night we ourselves began to watch over the surrounding pines, signalling each fire, each suspicious smoke to the checkpoint nicknamed Pinus³.

7. We have been awakened by a cyclist who called out to us. He volunteers at the

3. The checkpoint of the forest fire fighting service, with which we are in direct contact to report the outbreak of fires, is nicknamed Pinus II, in tribute to the trees mainly present in the forests of the region – and which are highly combustible.

Septemes lookout and seems to know the massifs very well. “Have you seen wild boars? - No. - Ah. There is “the” wolf here. Beware.” I went into the grove down the lookout to track a bit, there is many traces, a few scratches, a few feces in the path (certainly a marten). I will go set the trail camera tomorrow.

The day in the lookout was long and not very interesting. At sunset, in the orange shades of the sky, a colony of swifts chases the future ant queens already condemned who escape by hundreds from their fortress. Swifts – Alpine and Black – as numerous as their preys. I send a video to Zoe.

8. Working as firewatcher is a long process. You have to know how to last all day, doing nothing if not wait. Of my previous summer jobs, it is surely the one that requires the most patience, in front of a guard at the *Musee du Temps*⁴, and a bartender at the *Cour du Corbeau*⁵, although they have some similarities: behind my empty bar, I

would sometimes wait a whole day, standing, waiting for a possible gunshot that might not happen.

Here, in the watchtower, my eyes adapt to the landscape and its transfer to the map. The visual cues that we have placed on the map are helping us to determine increasingly quickly and precisely the areas from which the smoke is rising.

Whether outside or in the building, we feel that it has not been inhabited by humans for a while. This is the kingdom of the centipedes, accompanied by many spiders who have had time to weave large webs. Butterflies, wasps, ants, beetles, moths enter and leave the building. In the sky, our binoculars meet a few crows, a couple of kestrels, blackbirds, redtails and a pair of Bonelli’s eagles who share the sky with hordes of swifts. We have not yet seen mammals other than humans.

Yesterday while walking in the small forest at the bottom of the lookout, I came across several burnt pines with trunks made of charcoal, under which the trees continued

4. Crow’s Garden.

5. Time Museum.

to grow. I examined it with perplexity, I first thought about failed attempts to start voluntary fires, I almost expected to find matches or a lighter nearby. But these charred pieces were too numerous and too far from each other's to be a criminal act. After some research, these charred barks are traces of the 1997 Etoile massif fire.

10. Nothing to say about yesterday. It was an uninspiring break day. Today was in two stages: the first part was quite calm, I did not care much about the surroundings. I was able to write and read easily. During the morning, Leon, worked in the lookout, although it was his day off. In the afternoon, after Leon was gone, I could not concentrate on the fires or anything else. Covering 360° alone is not an easy thing.

11. The only window in the bedroom was open at night to allow air to circulate. Around 6 am, the wind picked up and the air rushing into the room through the tiny

window frame made the flapper come and go with a steady squeak. In my half-sleep, the repetitive sound transported me to a rocking boat. I remembered the night spent aboard the *Tariq Ibn Ziyad*, between Marseilles and Algiers, in a cabin in which floated a strong odor of kerosene that the small porthole could not evacuate. It was through this window that I first saw the Algerian land slowly appearing over the horizon.

This morning, while watching the sea, my gaze landed on a blue and white ship, floating on the calm surface of the Mediterranean: it is one of the boats of the Algeria-Ferries' fleet, cousin of the *Tariq Ibn Ziyad* – maybe himself but my binoculars are not powerful enough to discern the painted name on the hull.

13. Last night while we were eating in the dark kitchen, a Pine Sphinx circling the neon light in the kitchen came, in a chaotic and panicked flight, on the web of a tegenarian hanging from a windowpane. In less than two seconds, the spider landed on

the moth, the chelicerae – its fangs – planted in what we would call the neck for humans. The Sphinx – a female – was struggling as best as she could, but the effect of the paralyzing venom and the web quickly got the better of her. During the ten minutes of her last battle, her whole body was agitated by violent spasms that shook her abdomen, from which protruded a long yellowish and wet proboscis: her reproductive system. I must have brought the flash of my phone a little too close to the spider, which let go of its prey as I approached. The Sphinx, freed from the spider's grip, with a last desperate movement, released from her sticky trunk a ball composed of around twenty eggs. Her eyes, lit by the light from my headlamp, appeared to me shining with a dark purplish glow. No more movement stirred her. The spider, having regained confidence, gradually approached its paralyzed but still alive prey. Again, its chelicerae were planted in the body of the butterfly, at the level of the thorax. I let it sip its meal. After half an hour, the volume of the moth body had already decreased. Next morning, the spider had put

its prey away in its pantry. The eggs, in a cluster, laid in the centre of the web.

This morning a TV team came to do a report. As they filmed me pretending to look through binoculars, Leon detected a burst of fire, away from my overplayed field of vision. The fire, 10 km from the lookout, in the wood of *La Salette* in Allauch, survived for a good half hour, without evolving in one direction or another. The time to look away for 10 minutes, the smoke turned black. From that moment, things accelerated: the plume of smoke reached impressive heights, even when viewed from our distance. Every now and then, flames would emerge from the smoke, rising above treetops that hid the base of the fire from us. Two helicopters and two Canadairs flew back and forth between sea and fire, tiny flies drawn into an endless ballet. The fire, big, stabilized in its threat. Twenty minutes later, firefighters had brought the blaze under control and the smoke cleared. The Canadairs merry-go-round continued for a long hour, until the smoke was no more than a veil covering the forest. The smoke gauze remained over the trees until late afternoon.

At the end of the watching day, we take the road to the burnt forest to see the damage of our first forest fire. We only know the location from our raised point of view and on the virtual projection the map offers us. Once there, the task becomes more complicated. We can smell a strong odor of burnt wood and wet forest. We pass a few fire engines. The odor that guided us to a minimum has vanished and we are therefore looking for the fire “blindly”. The first two paths we take lead us to dead ends. The third path looks more promising: *chemin de la Salette*. We still do not smell it, but we seem to see an area of very black woods in the background, a dark stain among the dark green of pines. We leave the car and continue by foot towards the burnt woods. The smell is only felt once we are there. A characteristic scent of a coniferous fire, slightly acrid. The burnt area is extremely well demarcated. There is an inside and an outside. In the burnt wood, the earth is covered with ashes. The trees are either partially charred or reduced to a dark powder. Here, a piece of burnt trunk stands, like a last fragile stele erected where

the tree stood. The centre of the area is like a glade plunged into a winter's night. The few trees that still stand there are covered with a dark trunk bare of branches. If they are tall enough, they cover thin twigs with browned needles, more and more numerous as they gain altitude. This is what the fire has not have eaten at the top of the blaze. The Scots pines spared from total consumption bear bright red scars on the scales of their bark with deep wakes. The oil given off by the heat gives a shiny varnish to those oozing wounds. A few fumaroles are still awake at the foot of the dismal trunks. From time to time, the wind picks up grey sails from the tops of the ash hills. We walk for a moment in the middle of this mournful landscape muffled by a heavy silence. The pipe which connects a fire engine still stationed upstream of the massif to the basin below is the only element of color, red snake covered with soot undulating between the corpses of pines. It is still daylight. The sky is blue behind the peaks, but the incendiary black absorbs all light and plunges the wood into a sepulchral atmosphere. We leave the forest.

Half-charred trees form the border of the devastated area.

15. I begin to see the way firefighters think the forest. When, in the European imagination, the woods are both the sanctuary of serenity and an obscure unknown, in which the threat lurks to observe us through the leaves, firefighters apprehend it as the element to be protected. A fire professional does not look at the forest like a hiker, a hunter, a lumberjack, a mushroom picker, a survivalist, a deer, a wolf, a caterpillar, a boar, an ant, a tick. In the forest, firefighter is in their *umwelt*⁶, reacting to stimuli to which they has learned to be receptive. They will see how such dead tree, such dry grass will fuel the fire. They will project themselves into the blaze to assess its virulence. Can they imagine the tree without the flame?

I wonder how my father saw his last forest, how he understood his tree, how he chose it. Why this tree, why this branch to hang his rope? In this forest, a few hundred kilometres from the one I have to watch over, stands the

oak tree which supported the weight of my father's body. There, in the North, flames do not devour forests, yet. Slowly drought is gaining ground – *summer is coming*. Perhaps one day this tree will, like its peers in the South, be placed under the watchful eye of a firewatcher.

16. At the end of the day, we went to the groceries by car. On the road, we stopped to try to retrieve a pine trunk that we had spotted. While trying to lift its massive weight, we seriously injured a gecko, a Mauritanian tarente hiding underneath. There was a slit on its soft, white belly that revealed a slimy appendage, perhaps its intestine, or whatever organ. We stood staring at it for a while, dazed by our shame. The lizard, motionless, continued to breathe. After a long hesitation, we made the decision to finish it (we who have the power to empathize enough with certain species to decide whether their pain is bearable). I placed the tip of my knife on the back of its neck, and with a snap, looking away from my gesture, I rammed the blade into its cold

6. Concept developed by Jakob von Uexküll, according to which each individual, each species, each form of existence, has a characteristic perception of its environment, its "own world".

body. It seems to me that the lizard has had a last jolt. We resumed our journey, in a heavy silence, full of guilt.

“We just caught a lizard, a wonderful elusive creature that got trapped in Ludovic’s and I’s jar. Love and discover nature my little boy, may its riches be the leaven of your love for life.” In my notebook I had transcribed this note left by my father in the first pages of a book. It is funny how we can read the coincidences.

17. The Mistral⁷ has finally calmed down. It got up four days ago and blew nonstop. It arrived one night, full of passion, rushing through the window in the bedroom, heckling with the doors and their gaps. The metal of the armored doors slammed against the metal of the guardrails. It did not just whistle around the building, it made it vibrate with a low, incessant growl. Every little hole, every gap in the concrete is a pretext to make its complaint resound. The entire tower was under its invisible assaults.

We never get used to the wind. Since we have been at the Etoile watchtower, it has been blowing all the time. When the surrounding watchtowers announce a zero wind, our wind turbine is always driven by a more or less strong breath. When we descend to the foot of the massif, the air suddenly becomes heavy and flat, while on the peeled summit we are never safe from the slightest breeze. These four days are different. I met the Mistral. A Mistral at the top. Watchtowers equipped with weather stations announced gusts of 90, 100, 110 km/h. We take it all in the face. I had never been hit by the wind. The Mistral was strongest on the second day. Numerous fires broke out. *Broufounié de mistrau*⁸.

The lookout area is very poorly insulated, with openwork on all sides. When closing the windows as best we can, violent drafts turn the pages of our notebooks and force us to wear sweaters and pants. The windows shake and the whistling, sometimes deep, sometimes shrill, sometimes turns into a threatening vociferation. As we walk around on the balcony, depending on the

7. Mistral is a strong wind well known in South of France.

8. Means a strong Mistral storm in Provençal.

angle we take, the wind blocks our way or throws us against the guardrails. Squalls swirl through the metal tubes of the railing, causing a roar that haunts the entire tower. The tin roof also trembles under the weight of the air threatening to tear it off. The sound volume is so high in the cabin that the naturally crackling voices of the radio become imperceptible. Outside, the cicadas are silent, or their song is too quickly blown away by the wind to reach our ears, which only hope for silence.

A fire broke out in Martigues at the end of the afternoon. Quickly, the smoke grows and turns grey. VSIs⁹ call for many reinforcements because the situation is more and more threatening. On the radio, Pinus announces the arrival of aviation with a first Milan¹⁰. I connect to Channel 24, the one for communication between the checkpoint and aviation. A Pelican¹¹ announces itself. It is on its way to the blaze, along with three other planes. I point my binoculars at the thick smoke that tends towards brown, so as not to miss the ever-spectacular arrival

of the air fleet. To the naked eye, they are undetectable, the 32 km that separate us only lets me see the plume of smoke coming out of the mountain ridge. In the circle of my increased field of vision, the silhouette of the four Pelicans is tiny in front of the cloud of smoke. They manoeuvre over the fire so they can attack it from the best angle. Then, slowly, they lose altitude. They attack fire against the direction of the wind. From my perspective, they seem to enter the incendiary cloud one by one, slowly disappearing as the smoke thickens around the cabin. The angle they take suggests a dangerous approach to the ground. Then, one after another, they break out of the thick fog. Still following each other, they make a wide U-turn to reach the Etang de Berre to bail. The surface of the water reflects sunlight, and the rosary planes stand out from a mass tinged with golden blue. Slowly, they approach the water to graze the surface, for a long ten seconds. Then they return to the fire. The merry-go-round starts again three times: plunging into the smoke, flying over the water. With each series of drops, the fire loses intensity, and the

9. VSIs are patrollers in pickups who intervene first on a fire.

10. Milan (Red Kite in English) is the nickname for Dash aircrafts, firefighting airplanes.

11. Pelican is the nickname for Canadair aircrafts.

smoke turns from grey to white. They take one final bail and position themselves above the fire, waiting for a possible start that will not come. The four Pelicans perform endless rounds, like vultures, who, calmly, describe wide ghoulish circles in the sky, awaiting the imminent death of a future carrion. Vultures and Canadairs, in addition to their circular flight and broad wings, have this in common that they both await the death of something, a sheep or a flame, except that one will land on dry land and the other will leave at the end of the wait.

Other planes are crossing my sight line, airliners preparing to land on the tarmac at Marignane airport. Their flight is less sophisticated than the Canadairs': they are content to land as flat as possible. The dance of the Pelicans continues behind the airstrip. A krestrel that lives in the area comes to position itself just in the circle of my binoculars. It takes the headwind, makes very light movements to keep its balance. Its eyes are focused on the ground, watching for any movement of a prey. When my eyes return to the smoke of Martigues, Pelicans are gone.

22. When the thickness of the air is clear enough, I gaze at the white peaks of the Ecrins which appear behind the Luberon massif. This is where they are. This is where I spend time by foot, on skis, waiting hidden or in perpetual stir, with or without binoculars, looking to see them, them or traces of their presence. This is where I learn to track them, to smell them, to know them. There, latest investigations are bearing fruit. I am just starting, four years after my first research, to know where and how to look for them. Slowly, imperceptibly, the metamorphosis takes place. Approaching wolves takes time, investment and above all, to be there. But for now I have to come out of my dreams, leave these mountains hidden by other mountains and return to the fires, resume my role of firewatcher - another form of watching.

23. Today again, the clear atmosphere allows to see the Ecrins. Again, I project myself there. I tried to progress in my lycanthrope quest in Amsterdam, I broke my teeth (fangs?) against the flatness of the land. Becoming a werewolf. I use the term

less than I used to use it before, but the idea is still around, lurking in a corner of my head, sometimes coming out of its lair to place its footprints on the white of paper.

It took me a year to understand that werewolfing is not necessarily attached to wolves. It is when I am looking for them in the Alps, because of a wealth of data, giving a sense to the wolf figure in these mountains, the ones I see through my binoculars: relation to borders, to the winter, to the mountain environment. There, the metamorphosis takes on its full meaning. On the top of a southern mountain or in a Northern rainy city, the werewolf becomes itself a *were-something else*, made of sheep's, fox's, moth's, etc. perspectives. The werewolf then slowly slides into a *wherewolf*, as a site-specific entity.

24. We see white gleams scratching the night sky. We have to listen carefully to hear the clouds colliding. Before I get to this tower, I expected to experience there a storm from the interior, to be in the heart of it. Seeing the sky darkens, looking the overwhelmed clouds approaching. Going

out on the balcony to feel the air loading, the rising wind, carrying an increasingly violent rain. Taking shelter in the window area. Being caught in the electric haze, not seeing anything anymore. For the first time, hearing and seeing lightning strike at the exact same time. When I was a kid, with my father, we went up to the top floor of the house to watch the storm coming. Since then, I am dreaming of a glass tower from where I could watch the show. Tonight, from the top of the lookout, I hope the wind will carry the cumulonimbus to us.

25. The time is long. It is rare to experience it this way. Rarely have I felt the minutes go by so slowly. Today nothing has happened. Strictly nothing. Not a smoke on the horizon, not a call from Pinus to ask for confirmation. Between our entry on the network at 11 am and our exit at 7 pm, we did not touch the radio, and the voices behind it remained silent. It was a sleepless day in which we experienced the minutes. When we wait and watch for something that does

not come, in this case a fire, the gaze becomes impatient. During these long day of nothing, everything is conducive to becoming smoke. An alignment of white buildings, a winding path, a road with blurred outlines, a reflection on the asphalt, are all elements that disturb our patience and trigger the eyes-to binoculars movement. We quickly realize our mistake and say to ourselves that we will not be caught again, but we do. Everyone is waiting: firewatchers, patrollers, checkpoint and firefighters, so much so that a kind of giant hide-and-seek takes shape between the fire and these protagonists. A lookout announces a suspicious smoke on approximate coordinates, a VSI is dispatched on the spot on order of Pinus, who, from its office, sees nothing. It is, in the firefighting machine, a blind cell, which has only the radio to contemplate fires that start outside itself. Lookouts are Pinus' eyes, who virtualizes the outside world from its office while generating decisions with concrete actions, thanks to VSIs and firefighters who are its armed arms. VSI does not find any smoke in the indicated sector, coordinates are specified by other

lookouts which confirm the start of fire, patrollers patrol, turn around the indicated data, commanded by a blind Pinus, but their position on the ground does not allow them to detect the smoke. Watchers continue to describe smoke that they perceive well. Radio guidance, using the map that everyone has in common, does not help to better locate the fire that cannot be found.

While reading, I came across this paragraph which matched surprisingly well with my experience of the day: "The hours of guard are long, even endless sometimes, and you tell yourself it is a strange job. There is so little to do when the sheep are calm that we can quickly get bored; but as we always have to be attentive, we cannot either purely and simply let go. There is always a minimum of attendance required. The shepherd is never totally active, but neither is he totally idle. This job is kind of the art of being there. This may sound simple, but sometimes it requires incredible efforts of concentration and self-sacrifice."¹²

12. Pierre Madelin, *Carnets d'estives : des Alpes aux Chiapas*, coll. Poche, Wild Project, Marseilles, 2016, p. 98 translation from French by Ludovic Hadjeras.

27. Before here, the most intense wind experiences I have had were in *The Long Dark*¹³. I remember being caught in terrible snowstorms, the ones that knock your fingers down and freeze your nose and ears. Once in the shelter of a cabin or, hopefully, an abandoned house, the touch of the wind on your skin did not stop. I remember nights in May when, from cosy my bedroom, headphones screwed on to my ears, I shivered in cold, patiently waiting for the storm of the virtual exterior to end and let me out. The noises of the wind at the top of the lookout remind me of those heard over there, in the Canadian Far North generated by a studio, less the cold. This wind which rushes into the smallest gap in an improperly closed window, this wind which constantly hoots and which inevitably throws your hair into your own face. Here or there, this wind plays with my nerves and infuriates me.

Never let your guard down. Previous days were so calm that I got used to doing other things (reading, writing, filming, observing insects who visit us) without looking up regularly. One day, two days like that and we

let ourselves be taken in. Attention gets used to not being stimulated. I passed a big fire in Cabries, literally under the lookout. I should not have missed it, but I noticed it the moment another lookout told Pinus.

Lookouts announce fires on the radio, addressing the checkpoint named Pinus. By name, Pinus becomes an entity through which CODIS13¹⁴ speaks. Lookouts address to Pinus as an entity, and it responds to them as such: the identities of humans who speak on the radio are erased in favor of the identity of the place from which they express. It is the Etoile who talks to Pinus on familiar terms, a Pinus who can change its voice between two conversations depending on who is behind the radio.

28. I spend the day alone. Leon has left for his day off. I take the resolution not to let anything pass, I do not take my eyes off the panorama. One ear with an earpiece, the other attentive to radio announcements, like a dolphin sleeping with only half of its brain asleep. Sentinel on a swivel chair all day,

13. Raphaël van Lierop & Alan Lawrance, *The Long Dark*, 2014, Hinterland Studio, Vancouver.

14. Firefighting coordinating unit.

I circle in circles, covering all 360° of my field of vision. When a fire alarm is given in an area too far away for me, my gaze undoubtedly stretches towards the announced town, without me being able to see any smoke. Information about the fire is communicated to us live through the radio: 300 m² in flames, need for reinforcements, dwellings on site, etc. As the fire progresses, voices of those on the spot change and exchanges between Pinus and its minions tense. We can identify in these radio voices the stress or the excitement of those who went to the front.



August

1. A colony of swifts passes over the lookout. They are several hundreds. They are Black swifts, their bodies resemble crescent moons barred from a line. It is a cloud of black moons that split the silent sky. Some fly about ten centimeters from my head, others fly so high that they look more like insects than birds. They do not trill at all. It is a black, mute cloud. When one of them breaks away from the group and approaches the balcony from which I observe them, I hear the sound of their flight cutting through the air, like the sound of a stick being waved by a kid to make it whistle. I suppose this sound is their reality: they know what the air is made of. The colony arrives in waves. They must make a big turn as they come back since for the fifth time from the East. Is it a moment of games? Of hunting? Or just a peaceful cruise, like some sort of sleepy promenade?

3. Last night, going up to the lookout area in the dark, I see a piece of bark on the stairs that was not there before. I walk over to pick it up, and the piece of bark starts to

move. With the red light from my headlamp, I realize that what I thought was wood is actually a swift, curled up against the railing of the stairs. It looks distraught but cannot fly away. I approach the bird quietly but it get scared when it sees my monstrous hands approaching it to grab it, and in a panic, it walks through the stairs and fall a floor below. I rush over to see if it is okay: it looks a little dazed. I take it in my hands as gently as possible, it remains calm. I can feel the warmth of its body and its heart resonating against my palms. The beards of its feathers are so thin that it seems to vibrate in its entirety. A thin, very thin white border is cut out at the edge of the feathers. Its black aquiline eyes does not seem to support the powerful light of my headlamp and the phone flash aimed at it. It seems to frown, which made it look unhappy. It is paralyzed and does not leave the cavity formed by my hands. With Leon's help, we put it in a cardboard box while thinking about a solution. The LPO¹⁵ does not answer the phone. Readings on the Internet advise us to hold out our hands with the bird inside,

in front of an open ground so that the bird can take off serenely. In the box, it begins to fidget. The box does not have the desired calming effect at all. I take it again in my hands, I feel its claws gripping my hands. Once again it becomes calm in the palm of my hands. I carry it to the less exposed terrain at the cliffs, lit by a much weaker light than first time. No sooner do I have time to open my hands when the bird has already flown away, a black silhouette against the dark night that quickly absorbs it.

4. I would have liked to tell my father about the encounter with the swift. In a way, maybe he has something to do with it? It is funny how we tend to project the existence of dead humans into living birds. At least, it is often these feathered creatures that many people associate my father with, and I am part of this movement. As if any species of bird could, in part, become my father, a reincarnated ghost for the duration of a gaze, an exchange, an encounter.

6. We spent the day in the fog. The horizon, which was clear before 9 am slowly got charged of a bar of clouds which, starting from the Mediterranean, moved towards us visibly, engulfing in its passage first the lookout of Septemes, the TV antenna, then our tower. Quickly, we were surrounded by thick and heavy air, moist and sticky, almost dripping. We could not see anything more than a meter away. We announced our entry on the network at Pinus by specifying our zero visibility, like many watchtowers around, apparently in the same situation. Anyway, given the humidity in the air, the risk of fire is close to zero. We had already experienced maritime entrances¹⁶ on several occasions, but they lasted two hours at most, before dissipating. Here, five hours later, the fog we are in has not changed at all: it is still the same pea soup. On the glass, droplets have formed and the pages of our books are starting to wave under the effect of moisture. We went to get the seats of the car to read more comfortably. It is impossible to work in these conditions, thus deprived of vision. Apart from a few jokers playing on the

radio, it is dead calm on the airwaves. At the end of the day, the watchers leave the network one by one, empty-handed. The fog is still present when I write these lines. The atmosphere in which we are immersed is closer to one emanating from a cabin on a boat than from a tower supposed to fight against forest fires in an arid environment. Above our heads, the fake oil lamp faintly illuminates us with a clean white LED glow. Its reflection, multiplied by six in the lookout windows, meets no other source of light outside. Outside is as dark as if it never existed.

9. Zoe left this morning. We slept in the tent in order to find the privacy that the room shared with Leon does not offer us. Yesterday morning, we were awakened by cyclists outraged that the lookout was not armed at 9 am and who, unhappy, pretended to throw stones at the tent to wake up the unconscious watchers that we were. I did not go out, in boxer shorts and tousled (I should have). Following night, while we were sleeping, the

16. Meteorological phenomena causing significant cloud formation from the sea.

wind that had picked up threatened to blow the tent away. The canvas wall was stuck to my face, cold and wet. We were heckled, ruffled by the powerful wind. We decided to move the tent out of the gusts, in the middle of the night, in complete darkness. While carrying the mattress against the wind, I almost got carried away by a squall that would have thrown me a few meters below the cliff. The wind was still pushing me when I imagined myself still, bones smashed against white rocks reddened with my blood. My heart beat hard for a long time as I fell asleep, happy to feel the softness of the mattress.

11. On the radio, on Instagram, in the newspapers, I hear and see Kabylia burn. Instinctively, I look to the South, hoping that my vision can pierce the 700 Mediterranean kilometers which separate me from the incandescent hearths. If my gaze was sharp enough, I could see them, these fires, from my post as a firewatcher. I checked which azimuth to point my binoculars to. Obviously,

they are not powerful enough, it is absurd to want to look over there. It is absurd and my role as an announcer would be useless. These fires do not have to be announced any more, it is too late, they are already devouring these lands that I do not yet know. I think about my grandparents, what do they think of this disaster, what do they feel when watching the incendiary images on TV, on the other side of the bank? Are the abandoned fig fields threatened? (Do these fig fields exist outside of my imagination?)

12. Two French Canadairs are dispatched in the direction of Kabylia. As I write they must be flying over the Mediterranean. Perhaps they are among those I can see training on the *La Mourre* area¹⁷ and who regularly pass a few dozen meters from the tower, vibrating the windows. It would have been enough for me to hitchhike.

13. My sister told me it hurt my grandmother that during my trip to Algeria,

17. Training area for forest firefighting aircrafts, near the Etoile watchtower. It is nicknamed "Red Rock" or "The Sacrifice" because of its bloody color due to numerous unloadings of a red liquid composed of water, clay and iron oxide.

I did not go to Kabylia, I did not visit the family¹⁸. It was not that I did not want to, it was even planned, and things turned out differently. Obviously, we don't have the same relationship to the country, to this country: it is yours, it is there that they are, your brothers and your sisters, your parents under the earth, under the land, their land, your land. It is not mine, or not yet, or very vaguely. Yet I love it, this land we are talking about right now in the news, burning. When I called you, you told me the fire did not hit the family. Kabylia is large. Now you cannot go anymore, you are too old to make the trip. In your eyes, in your heart, this land burns forever, since you left it, and certainly the flames went higher since you know that you will never again see this land, today untouched. I will go for you, if not to extinguish it, at least to quell the blaze caused by the war.

14. Since we have been in the watchtower – and even long before, as I could understand – a slab is missing on the East corner of the

lookout, revealing a gaping hole in which dust and waste accumulates. I took the measurements of this missing slab to make a new one, with cement and red sand taken from nearby. In this slab, which is now hardening, I have encrusted a larch casket containing the parched corpse of the Sphinx eaten by the spider (see July 13).

16. The new slab fits perfectly into the empty space. It is fairly discreet, a pale pink triangle on the dirty white floor, the undisclosed larch cabinet facing the floor. You could think of a simple slab that came to fill the space left by a missing slab. I do not think the next watchers will lift the ground to find out what is in this mortuary slab. It exists in its sober difference among others, secretly charged with the spirit of a Sphinx. *Who watches over the watchers?*

18. It was my day off today. I spent the day and part of the evening in Marseilles. After the dark came, lightning streaked across the

18. My family from my father's side comes from Algeria. They are what we call "harkis", Algerian indigenous who fought alongside the French army during the Algerian Independence War (1954 – 1962). This situation brought them to the border of national identities, French of an Algerian people having lost their country of origin before it became a nation.

sky. Seeing the storm point to the North and approach the Etoile massif, I hurried back so as not to miss the only storm on the lookout of the season. The closer I get, the more rain intensifies and hits the windshield. When I got to the bottom of the track that climbs up to the lookout, a violent downpour hits the vehicle. The clouds are low and the summit is pretty sure caught in the electric fog. I try to call Leon, who does not answer. He replies with a text that it is better I wait for the storm to pass before starting the climb: indeed he is in the clouds and I will not see much going up the unlit road, with the rain and the wind. He is confined to the lower part of the tower, the storm has not yet hit our lightning rod directly but it is not far from it. Sheltered in the car's cabin washed by torrential rain, I grow impatient. The lightnings are long and powerful, the thunder is heavy and vibrates the metal carcass of the vehicle and mine. It is really above me, hugging the mountain. As soon as it starts to dissipate, I drive off and go up the hill to the lookout. There are a few bits of fog left, ghostly presences that bear witness to the recent fog. I have to manoeuvre

to avoid few amphibians that have come out to take advantage of humidity. At the top, the storm is already far away. In the distance, increasingly distant flashes of light continue to partially illuminate the sky. I missed the only thunderstorm that has come this close, so far.

19. Leon is not here today. A fire broke out at the *Logis Neufs* at 3:11 pm, which I announced as soon as the fumarole rose. In a panic, I do not give the exact coordinates, and have to take it twice before the alert is correct. The Grand Puech lookout quickly followed suit and confirmed the last coordinates. The smoke grows very quickly and despite my repeated announcements, supported by the Grand Puech, firefighters are not deployed. Alone in my tower, I feel the rush of adrenaline flowing through each of my limbs. The fire, in the middle of the massif, now gives off a thick black smoke. It is not very large but takes quickly and risks to turn into disaster in no time. I am jostled between Pinus on the radio and the Grand

Puech on the phone. "What do you see? How does fire evolve? Do you see any firefighters there? Are homes threatened?" Panic on board. Luckily, a Dash, which had not been dispatched but was passing by, plunges into the blaze and releases its red charge. A time of respite which leaves the opportunity for firefighters on the ground, now on spot, to take over and take care of the flooding. My heart is pounding long after the smoke is gone. There is something joyful about these times of intense stress: all my senses are occupied and focused on a precious and intoxicating task. A tiny taste of what firefighters can feel on the field.

21. Last days have been stormy. A heavy moist air that carries thick clouds and with them the discreet presence of autumn. Yesterday a storm approached to the foot of the massif at the end of the afternoon. A big cloud first stretched its gray sheet over the now uniform sky, dropping its first spears behind the Etang de Berre. Sky darkened a little more with each beat of drums leading a mournful, wet horde in

our direction. Landscape has disappeared behind a thickening *sfumato* under the expanding curtain of rain. At the threshold of the mountain, thunder deployed heavy artillery, a threatening demonstration of force which died in front our eyes. Sky became a battlefield of torn clouds through which the sun's bronze trenches pierced. We were bathed in a golden light and in front of us was an underwater spectacle. Notion of altitude has lost all its meaning and time has stood still on the vaporous tops of the pines. Earth has come to a standstill. The sea on the horizon, usually so reliable, has lost itself in a vaporous embrace with the sky, spray against mist, water against water without distinction. To the East, in the newly cleared sky, gigantic padded cumulonimbus clouds rose fearlessly, white topped with a dewy base. The Mediterranean has become a black hole betrayed by the halo of its coast absorbing gold from the sun's rays. Burst clouds vanished, blown by a hurrying wind to clear the night sky.

Tonight, the storm knocking against the door has passed the summit of the Etoile

since long. It announced itself once night fell in silent flashes emitted from its high spheres. Appeared the first blue flashes launched horizontally, root systems crossing tens of kilometers to disappear immediately. I watched it grow from the lookout area with all lights off. Its fire grew heavier and heavier over Marseilles, and it was close before we could the Bonne Mère¹⁹ crowned with a mortal finger. Clouds approached the watchtower, pushed by a wind to unhook blades of our wind turbine. Slowly the city faded and the electric fog invaded the surface of the South pane. First drops on the sheet metal of the roof announced my retreat to the lower floor – if lightning strikes the lightning rod, chances of being crossed are high, it seems. Frustrating.

I light myself with candles in the concrete space, my gaze hanging on the meager window of the door. The wind thrashes with its invisible tentacles against all that opposes it in an abyssal din. Torrents of rain flow horizontally. We are in the belly of the furious whale. Flashes no longer take shape, they are swallowed up by the fog, reverberated by

the mist. They are no more than greenish or purplish flashes. When the electrical activity is at its highest, railings and metal structures resonate with a haunting roar. The tower goes into a trance. Me too, I'm just waiting for the lightning on our head. Lightning falls so close, its cry stings the air when it brings down its spur on some point around. But the storm wears away along with my excitement and soon leaves me, having only brushed past me, leaving behind only shreds of mist in which an unfathomable light signal is still reflected.

22. Days are long and always the same. Fires are quickly brought under control and do not reach much larger proportions than how they are announced: medium-sized white smoke that turns grey. No more visible smoke. I am bored and writing is not the same refuge I used to rush to fill my days by writing them down on paper. The way of making them exist in writing allowed, until then, to detach myself from them and to come back to them in a better way, to load them

19. Iconic basilica on the top of Marseilles.

with almost insignificant moments that give a tint to the time that has just passed.

The setting sun floods a grenadine sky, tangerine globe swollen by the compact atmosphere, sinking behind distant clouds, crushing its face against the horizon before disappearing under the earth's surface. The western sky still bears the fluorescent traces of the passage of the Star when to the East first stars pierce a navy blue fabric. Behind the *Garlaban* peacefully emerges from the crest a cyclopean and bloodthirsty full moon, red-hot and more silver disc, turning to incandescent white in its course until overhanging the Etoile with its pockmarked face, cut with a scalpel in the nocturnal epidermis, silent 'O' diluting its milky veil in the cabalistic depth of the night.

24. Hugo came to sleep last night. We slept outside, on Marseilles' rooftop. In my opinion, it is impossible to sleep elsewhere with such a beautiful view of the city which, at night, is adorned with a gold glittery

sheet. We wake up in the early morning with the glowing sun and set off for the *La Mourre* area. It is very warm very early. On the way, in scattered places, charred trunks are still standing since the fire of the Etoile massif. For a long time, we do not see the large red rock that we are looking for, until a detour of a turn where its bright red walls can be glimpsed between the green branches of trees. The closer we get to it, the more the color of the rock intensifies. *The Sacrifice* appears to be an anomaly in the environment, a block of rock standing out from the earth, both by its cliffs and by its color. Once on the plateau, on the threshing floor, we are on another planet. Everything here has been colored red by the retardant with which Canadairs and Dashes are loaded. Pieces of wood, stone, grass, plants, dead insects: all are covered with the same layer with bloodthirsty nuances. More than on Mars, we have the impression of walking on the plateau of a previous massacre as the colors are carnivorous. We descend and walk around it and then head back to l'Etoile. The walls that we follow bear traces of dripping

red liquid, overflowing the plateau with each new release, adding a layer of blood on the previous ones, now dried and fixed to the rock by the sun.

27. The Mistral rose in the night, rushing as usual through the open window, forcing me to get up to prevent it from entering the room, more for the noise than for the cold it brings. The fire risk today is “exceptional”, Pinus told us last night before the end of the watch. I spend my day on the lookout, not taking my eyes off the panorama. Anyway, impossible to concentrate on the least line of my book with this detestable wind. And despite the accumulated weariness of days watching for an enemy who does not come, I try to complete the task of the last days as flawlessly as possible. Again, day goes by without a fire breaking out. The month of August will not have been as fierce as our leaders feared. The “exceptional” risk that we thought we would experience as a challenge of endurance and speed in giving the alert turns out to be one meteorological data

calculated among others, which has little influence on the reality of things. From the “very high” risk level, the entire firefighting system is on the alert: Pinus is inhabited by the highest-ranking officers, Canadairs and Dashes make incessant rounds, ready to dive nose at the slightest opportunity, forests are riddled with tanker trucks of forest fires, patrollers in their VSI almost have the gift of ubiquity, watchers’ days off are canceled. All the pawns of the fire-fighting machine experience an expectation never satisfied. The threat is omnipresent, latent, and the prospect of fire that would mobilize troops and liven up the day often gives way to disappointment once the day ends, again, without nothing.

31. Last day. Tomorrow we are packing up. We occupied the day by cutting it in half, taking turns cleaning up while the other watched. I am attached to this place and to its inhabitants, to this environment where the sky occupies half of the space, to the horizon always spread out, to these

days made up of a thousand imperceptible events, despite the apparent inactivity, despite the provocative Mistral. I write in the lookout area devoid of all our belongings: the orientation table, the silent radio and the reflection of the fragile city lights. On the window, poorly camouflaged among the flickering darkness outside, a Pine Sphinx pauses, before resuming its flight.



September

The end of summer is felt despite the radiant sun. The sky has been emptied from its swifts, watchers are gradually leaving their post. On the trunk of a Black pine, a twig barely thinner than the needles of the tree undulates in the brown furrows of the bark. This Pine Sphinx caterpillar has covered its penultimate moult and is beginning its descent to the ground. Its new life begins with its own funeral. Buried under the needles of the tree on which it spent its first life, it is about to become something else. Sheltered from the light, it adorns itself with a last magical robe inside which it secretes digestive juices melting it. In its chrysalis, a fine membrane protecting it from contact with the ground, it becomes liquid. This stage of metamorphosis is the ultimate state of in-between, the *sine qua non* condition for “becoming other“. The liquid form the Sphinx imprints during its metamorphosis allows it to pass from one state to another, while remaining itself. Its self-digestion is necessary to transition into its new form, absorbing its own existence within to be reborn otherwise. In the dark

envelope of its skin, the only solid element of the insect, the porridge of flesh beats, moves, amalgamates to gradually form new organs, new limbs, a new shape. In a few months, the pupation will end, the potion will freeze, the caterpillar will be no more, although perhaps still buried somewhere in the memories of the moth. When the first spring rays will have warmed the atmosphere long enough to wake it up, it will split its moult to extricate itself from the narrow case, rise to the surface of the earth, swell its still atrophied wings to finally unfold them and fly away, again sharing with firewatchers and other Pine Sphinxes the role of watching over the eponymous trees.



*August 2022 * update*

This writing is a logbook kept during the summer 2021. This year, I am in the same watchtower, with the same panorama in front of me, the same voices on the radio, to the point that I doubt that time elapsed between the moment I left the lookout in September 2021 and the time I write these lines. However, if neither the tower nor the surroundings have changed, the state of mind in which I find myself is very different from last year. Since last May, an intense drought has affected Europe and as I write we are experiencing the third wave of heat of the summer. Since June, medias have been broadcasting images of forest fires with a frequency never seen before. Already several blazes have devoured the forests we are likely to walk in on a daily basis: not distant Australian or Californian forests. I took up the post of lookout with more apprehension than last year, with a greater sense of responsibility, linked to a fear fueled by a common incendiary imagination, and with a fear mixed with the excitement of seeing for the first time a megafire glow from my own eyes and not through a screen. Since June – almost a month ahead of schedule – the fires have been more numerous, more virulent and more tenacious. The firefighter in charge of the department's lookouts warned us: this season is not like the others. But the fear that following ones will be like this one is real and well founded.

← *Camp*, used sarcophagus sleeping bag, mattress, sheet, 230 x 80 x 5,5 cm, 2021

Connection (variant), two phones, light morse code, 40 m, 2021

Red line, LEDs, gelatin, 42 m, 2021

Nightlight, star nightlight, 9 x 9 cm, 2021

Bibliography and resources

Gabriel-Henri Blanc, *Les Rubans de feu varois*, Gabriel-Henri Blanc, Toulon, France, 1988

Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir : la naissance de la prison*, Gallimard, Paris, France, 1975

Ghassan Hage, *Is Racism an Environmental Threat*, Debating Race collection, Polity Press, Oxford, United-Kingdom, 2017

Jack Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New-York, USA, 1965

Aldo Léopold, *A Sand Country Almanac*, Oxford University Press, Londres, United-Kingdom, 1949

Pierre Madelin, *Carnets d'estives : des Alpes aux Chiapas*, coll. Poche, Wild Project, Marseilles, France, 2016

Estelle Zhong Mengual, *Apprendre à voir : le point de vue du vivant*, coll. Mondes Sauvages, Actes Sud, Arles, France, 2021

Baptiste Morizot, *Les Diplomates : cohabiter avec les loups sur une autre carte du vivant*, coll. Domaine sauvage, Wildproject, Marseilles, France, 2016

Conversation between Lydia Ourahmane and Céline Kopp, *The Impossibility of Return* : http://trianglefrance.org/en/files/barzakh_bookletweb1.pdf, consulted on 01/02/2022

Robert Eggers, *The Lighthouse*, 2019, 109 minutes, black and white, sound, A24 Films, New Regency, RT Features, USA, Canada

Images are from the show "Antipolaris", paying homage to Pine Sphinxes encountered during the summer 2021 in the Etoile lookout.

Show and residence carried by voyons voir - art contemporain et territoire, Ukkluk and Yes we camp, from October 16 to November 6 at Buropolis, Marseilles, France.

Thanks to

Guillaume Béranger, Hugo Bonnifait Léon
Binetruy, Ondine Duché, Manon Galvier,
Juliette Hadjeras, Aude Halbert, Inès Hosni,
Catherine Somzé, Zoé Vincent.

