

## Without sky

There was no sky over our village. That's why we went to the city to watch the moon and birds, on the other side of the river. The people in the city were not thrilled to have us, but they did not try to stop us. On one of the hills, where the brick church stood, they even built an observation platform. Since for some reason they considered us drinkers, in addition to benches and a pay telescope, they built a small tavern by the observation deck, and a police post.

I could understand the city people. They had suffered greatly from the rage and envy of newcomers. And though it was insulting that they considered us - their closest neighbors, almost city people ourselves - intruders, still, we could understand them. And after all, they understood us. They didn't drive us away. No matter what they wrote on their websites, they didn't drive us away.

Everyone understood, if they were honest, that it was not our fault we were left with no sky. On the contrary, it was a great honor for us, in a way. The marshals of the four coalitions chose our sky for their decisive battle because the sky over our village was the best in the world: calm and cloudless. The sun flowed through our sky like a wide, peaceful river. I remember them well, the sun and the sky. The marshals found this place ideal for the final battle. It's not surprising. This was when all armies were airborne, and here there were no clouds, no turbulence. It was perfect.

This was the first non-linear war. In the primitive wars of the nineteenth, twentieth, and other middle centuries, the fight was usually between two sides: two nations or two temporary alliances. But now, four coalitions collided, and it wasn't two against two, or three against one. It was all against all.

And what coalitions they were! Not like the earlier ones. It was a rare state that entered the coalition intact. What happened was some provinces took one side, some took the other, and some individual city, or generation, or sex, or professional society of the same state - took a third side. And then they could switch places, cross into any camp you like, sometimes during battle.

The goals of those in conflict were quite varied. Each had his own, so to speak: the seizing of disputed pieces of territory; the forced establishment of a new religion; higher ratings or rates; the testing of new military rays and airships; the final ban on separating people into male and female, since sexual differentiation undermines the unity of the nation; and so forth.

The simple-hearted commanders of the past strove for victory. Now they did not act so stupidly. That is, some, of course, still clung to the old habits and tried to exhume from the archives old slogans of the type: victory will be ours. It worked in some places, but basically, war was now understood as a process, more exactly, part of a process, its acute phase, but maybe not the most important.

Some peoples joined the war specifically to be defeated. They were inspired by the flowering of Germany and France after being routed in the second World War. It turned out that to achieve such a defeat was no simpler than achieving victory. Determination, sacrifice, and the extraordinary exertion of all forces were required, and, in addition, flexibility, cold-bloodedness, and the ability to profitably administer one's own cowardice and dullness.

But all of this was realized and analyzed later by historians and economists. Then, it was just war, World War V, and rather horrifying. I was six. We were all six or younger, all who today enter the Society, who are thirty years old now. We remember how, from the four corners of our sky, the four great armadas swooped down. These were not roaring, screeching and howling airborne apparatus of the old kind, as we had become used to seeing in the video-archives. For the first time, the newest, absolutely silent technology was employed, with some kind of invisible systems of complete noise reduction.

Hundreds of thousands of airplanes, helicopters, and rockets destroyed each other throughout a day in the silence of the tomb. Even falling, they were silent. Sometimes dying pilots screamed out, but rarely, because almost all of the machines were pilotless.

At that time, automatic machinery was being hurriedly brought into general use, and not only in the field of transportation. They introduced hotels without staff, stores without sales people, homes without masters, financial and industrial firms without directors. Even a couple of “pilotless” governments were organized as a result of democratic revolutions, so airplanes were nothing to speak of.

As a result, there was no one to scream while crashing onto roofs, bridges and monuments. The only sound was the cracking and crackling of our homes as they were destroyed beneath the rain of falling debris. And it wasn't loud. The systems of sound reduction were effective across almost the complete depth of the battlefield.

Our parents tried to shelter us in the city. Above the city, the sky was clear, but the city people closed the city. Our parents cried for help from our side of the river. They begged them to at least take the children, at least those younger than ten, or seven, or three. Or younger than one year old. Or only the girls. And so forth. The city people did not open the city, and we children could understand them. We understood our parents, too, of course, including my own.

My father said: they won't let us in. We have to dig down. We burrowed into the riverbank sand, in a minute's time, it seemed. Everyone did, even the fattest and oldest of us. People don't know themselves well. It might seem strange, but we are, in fact, much more nimble and intelligent than worms. One detail: it was winter. Freezing. The sand was hard.

Mama and Papa burrowed in together with me. They were warm and soft. Papa, a brave and clever man, brought some of my favorite candy from the house with him, a full pocket. And Mama bought my handheld game player. With it, I was happy and not bored in our burrow, so my time passed splendidly. The tail of an airplane fell on us, towards evening.

The fighter aircraft of the Northern Coalition were super-light, made of almost weightless materials. Even if an entire one of these fighters fell on us, the whole airplane, it would not have caused us serious harm. And Papa had dug us in pretty deep.

The place where we were hidden attracted the tail of another airplane. Unfortunately, it was an attack aircraft of the Southeastern League, an older plane, relatively silent, but heavy. Our burrow was deep, but not as deep as the tail of the attack fighter was heavy. The sand above us was frozen solid, but all the same, it was sand, not concrete, not steel, not the shawl of Our Lady: sand. And sand is not steel. I learned this well then, once and for all. And to this day, wake me up in the middle of the night and ask me: Is sand steel or not? I will answer: No! On the run, not pausing for a minute to think, not doubting. No.

I lay between Mama and Papa and didn't hear the blow. It's possible that Papa made some funny quacking sound when the excessive weight crushed him, or he swore coarsely. One time he had yelled out something of the sort in front of me and frightened me.

It's possible that my mother also let out some kind of sound, but not necessarily. I'm not sure she even had time for a guilty smile, like the one she always had when something unpleasant happened to Papa or me. I hope it wasn't painful.

They were killed. I wasn't. Death wound round their bodies but didn't reach mine. My brain was just touched by its black and stifling presence. Something boiled out of my brain and evaporated: the third dimension, height.

When they dug me out in the morning, chilled to the bone because my parents had quickly grown cold and become like the sand, I saw a two-dimensional world, endless in length and width, but without height. Without sky. Where is it, I asked? It's right there, they answered. I don't see it, don't see it! I became frightened.

They gave me treatment, but didn't cure me. This kind of contusion, severe, can't be cured. The tail of the attack fighter crushed my consciousness into a pancake. It became flat and simple. What do I see in place of the sky above our village? Nothing. What does it look like? What does it resemble? It looks like nothing, resembles nothing. It's not that this is incommunicable, inexpressible. There's nothing of that. There's just nothing.

After the war there were about fifty other cripples like me. All of us, the two-dimensionals, turned out to be the same age. Why? No one knew. The city scientists dug around in our consciousness for a while. They wrote a few treatises. They dragged us around to symposiums and talk-shows. Several foundations were organized on our behalf. Laughing at us was forbidden by a special law. They built an observation platform for us and a charitable institution. Then we went out of fashion and they forgot all about us.

If it was only that we didn't see the sky above our village, that would be nothing, but our very thoughts lost the concept of height. We became two-dimensional. We understood only "yes" and "no," only "black" and "white." There was no ambiguity, no half-tones, no saving graces. We did not know how to lie.

We understood everything literally, and that meant we were absolutely unsuited for life, helpless. We required constant care, but they abandoned us. They wouldn't let us work. They wouldn't pay us a disability pension. Many of us deteriorated, fell and perished. The rest of us organized ourselves to stay afloat, to save ourselves together or perish together.

We founded the Society and prepared a revolt of the simple, two-dimensionals against the complex and sly, against those who do not answer "yes" or "no," who do not say "white" or "black," who know some third word, many, many third words, empty, deceptive, confusing the way, obscuring the truth. In these shadows and spider webs, in these false complexities, hide and multiply all the villainies of the world. They are the House of Satan. That's where they make bombs and money, saying: "Here's money for the good of the honest; here are bombs for the defense of love."

We will come tomorrow. We will conquer or perish. There is no third way.

Natan Dubovitsky

Simon Davenport

*Noumenal Menagerie*

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With additional works from: Peter Coffin, Cerith Wyn Evans, Robert Filby, Salome Ghazanfari, Lawrence Leaman, Joseph Murray, Berry Patten, Emily Shinada, Hayley Silverman & Tristan Stevens.