

THE CHESTNUT, OR REGENERATING RELATIONS

A short story of caring relations, queer ecologies, the interconnectedness of injustices and the struggles we thrive on.

** trigger warning: mentions of gender-based & colonial violence **

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It's been four years since we woke up one morning, burned-out from a job that had sucked all living energy from us, leaving us disconnected from our body, needs and desires. As we make our way to the ground floor of the house we now live in, we remember how scary it felt to move away from our city apartment and into a shared house on the outskirts of Vienna. Opening the back door leading to the garden, we step outside. Our feet touch the grass, still wet from dew. Like

every morning, we take a moment to visit the old birch living there. Sprinkles already lays curled up on the tree's large knotty roots. The cat appeared one day and never left, thus becoming an official member of our family. Facing the sun, we align our spine with the robust trunk, rest the back of our head on it and inhale deeply. How life altering it has been! Now we live with 7 beings. Three of them are parents who embraced Donna Haraway's invitation to "make kin, not babies" adopting a 1-year old child together. They said they did not feel comfortable bringing new life onto this depleted planet but wanted to find ways to care for those already here. Adoption had been a nightmare as they did not conform to what a traditional family should look like. It took them a few years,

but now they can experience the joy of sleepless nights and late sleep-ins. We sigh, feeling a strong need for human contact this morning – a hug or a word of encouragement. The other two inhabitants of the house are also unavailable: they left a few days ago to join a protest camp, occupying a nearby land currently under threat by the construction of yet another highway. How can it be that amid global crises and despite growing political awareness, capitalist economies still can deliriously extract, build, throw away and start again? Luckily, the birch has got our back. The routine makes us feel connected with the world we inhabit and grounds us even further in our political activism: to fully embody what we fight for. As we exhale, our weight sinks into the moist soil. A few moments suspended in time: "have a good day, my dear". It's a fond salute, as always accompanied by a gentle caress on the aged bark.

We're running late for the morning meeting. A few months ago, we started working in a collective space with fellow eco-activists. Every day we start with a

round of sharing to check-in on each other's well-being and daily tasks. We all juggle between paid work that covers rent and unpaid activism that fuels the soul. When we're lucky we get funding to bring to life projects which nurture us and feed our wallets. Eventually we understood solidarity as a strategy to minimise precarity by redistributing the effects of material inequalities among us. It is a much humbler life, but we support each other. As we enter the room, breathing hard and feeling a trickle of sweat running down our beard, the rest of the group is already setting up the table and making tea for everyone. When our turn comes, we share that our period is just about to start: time to harvest, compost and rest. Ever since we decided to stop working for a system that asks us to perform in a linear, rushed, pseudo-efficient way, and began coordinating our work with our own cycles, we've been feeling a lot more in-tune with our energies. We could not be as politically engaged without these newly found resources.

Now that the meeting is over we wait for our laptop to power up, meanwhile glancing at the library stacks behind our working area. So many of these books have shaped and changed our life. Our activism used to feel so fragmented: going to the environmental rally on Friday and cringing at the "Save Mother Earth" signs or hitting up the feminist cafe and getting annoyed by the plastic

straws in their drinks. Ecofeminism made us realise how much the exploitation of Womxn and Nature are systematically connected, even used to justify each other: one abused physically, mentally and instrumentalized to provide unpaid care work, the other taken for granted for unlimited extraction with no regard to collective consequences. That was a healing piece of the puzzle: the struggles are united. Yet, something still didn't feel quite right... many of the older works were operating with notions of gender that made us shudder. Ideas of reinforcing so-called feminine natural qualities and highlighting the closeness between women and nature felt short-sighted. Once we put our hands on the book "Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire" by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands we found another missing piece: the queer perspective. We still remember the pain of realising how much Nature had been used to police and abuse queer beings: their gender being "against nature", their sexuality unnaturally oriented towards the "wrong bodies". After that, we decided to dig deeper into the naturalisation of multiple forms of oppressions: we learned about the implications of Nature with Racism. How white people had made use of the very same Nature they abused for capitalist expansion to claim superiority and a right to conquer land and people, eradicating cultures, spiritualities, and

imposing Western notions of gender and sexuality. Everything was somehow interconnected. That's when we understood that no political cause could stand on its own without awareness and accountability for the complexity of injustices. Being a political activist meant being an ally too - the two could not be separated to achieve change.

It's mid-afternoon when we decide to head home to rest before joining our activist care group for ecological grief. It's a space where we collectively face the psychic response to the loss of biodiversity and land degradation our generation is witnessing: despair, anger, sadness, and apathy we sometimes feel for the state of the world. There, we negotiate and fulfil the needs of care, touch, and mutual support arising from these emotions, together. On our walk, a slight movement catches our eye: a squirrel studying a shiny chestnut. As they sprint off, we pick up the chestnut and put it in our pocket. Once home we'll place it close to the window in our bedroom. When spring comes, we'll bring it outside again: a small ritual that a friend taught us, to celebrate the passing of time and regeneration. Resuming our walk, we start quietly singing a chant we wrote for tonight's meeting:

"WE: a person in a web, far and near,
more-than-human inside-out;
beings grateful to be here,
to those who are around,
and to those who came before;
collective care is what we are about,
our struggles are connected at the core.
..."

– Beginning

Reading tips: Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, "Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire" (2010) // Donna Haraway, "Staying with the trouble. Making kin in the Chthulucene" (2016) // Val Plumwood, "Feminism and the mastery of Nature" (1993)

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