

What We Are Made Of

Audio book

WHAT WE ARE MADE OF

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Het Nieuwe
Instituut

The Hoodie

When I was in my late teens I sat in a bar with a friend. My friend, who was politically active in the local Labour Party, asked: “What would you like to change in education?” I answered that I would like us to read more poetry in school. He laughed. I had just discovered theatre. What I was trying to say back then was that access to culture wasn’t a given, but imagination was.

they came with sugar not of sugarcane

sweetness not of cotton but of air

they came with cakes not funneled down to grease

with layers like clouds

they came every day like it was their birthday

or yours

one or both

that was when they first came

This is an excerpt from *M Archive: After the End of the World* by Alexis Pauline Gumbs.

1

Aida stood on land and watched her father pull in the thin, but strong for its purpose, polyester rope. A few times, back and forth. The skill of his pulling—a good combination of strength, flexibility, and speed would start the motor of the small white plastic boat. Aida could do it too, at least she used to when she was younger. But not anymore. Her father Edel had taught her, he had shown her when they travelled out on the lake in the early mornings together. This was before she went to school, she must have been six or may-be seven—they used to be her favorite mornings. After she finished high school, Aida got a university scholarship and left Nukus for London as soon as she possibly could. Her choice of London, the capital of the United Kingdom, was a decision based on history and monarchy rather than on the industrial progress in,

2

let's say, Liverpool, Manchester, or Leeds—cities situated across the Atlantic from the Americas with, during industrialization, British-occupied Ireland in between.

Nukus, the sixth-largest city in Uzbekistan with 300.000 inhabitants, is also the capital of the autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan. To the west of Nukus, the Amu Darya river passes, slowly recovering after being drained of water during Soviet times. Then there is desert and then you reach the city. Nukus is considered isolated, which has always been its strength and weakness. For many years it was a test center for chemical weapons—this polluted the ground, water, and air. Nukus is also the home of Igor Savitsky's art collection, the one Stalin never found out about. This brought some healthily profitable art tourism, but of course the government wanted to move the museum to Tashkent, Uzbekistan's capital. This was how the town of Nukus wrote its history. Could her muscle memory remember how to do the rope? She wasn't sure. Could she still do it? Start the motor? She hadn't been on a boat for years, except on some fucking ridiculous tourist traps on the Thames in London during her early years of study, when she'd had visitors from her hometown. Her sisters Aminah and Anora had, of course, visited. But never her parents, Ona and Edel. It was kind of obligatory to float along the river with visitors even if it made her feel dirty at times. She felt disgusted and confused about the idea of trying to connect with these two places at the same time. Which one did she call home? London had been rough, and kind, to her. All the royals and the class system that was so over-aware of itself that it became blind—it made her want to scream. But what could she do? At least by dressing soberly and taking care of her hair she avoided being taken for a nineties hooker escaping the Soviet Bloc in search for fun, freedom, or life. She didn't go for a sober business look, instead she wore casual jeans and a linen shirt combined with a steady brown leather boot with silver details. She was aiming for the air of someone who could afford expensive handbags. The fashion district wasn't too far away from the British Museum, nor from Buckingham Palace. Aida didn't leave Nukus for London until her early twenties.

In addition to her Uzbek mother tongue she, of course, knew Russian from school and now, since fifteen years, also English. Accents are hard to get rid of—the fuzzy BBC reception on her television in Nukus hadn't taught her that. Maybe she was finished with learning? She'd learned that accents develop up until the late teenage years. It was like her life choices were a combination of escaping but constantly remaining connected. She and her sisters all had university degrees, but only Aida's was from the rich north-western part of Europe. Education had been important to her and her parents' generation, to provide a stability beyond farming. It had held a promise that you would have more and happier choices over when and how to work, as well as over what labor you would be able to do, but she wasn't sure. It also came with the inflexibility of having to be on call for the next opportunity as a speaker, teacher, or writer. Now that she finally was in charge of her own research,

almost finished with her PhD, what would she do to pay her rent? Get a job teaching high school biology and write grant applications at night? Or apply for a job at the UN? She certainly couldn't tell her parents this, she didn't have the courage to share with them the emotions that come along with a precarious and so-called intellectual life. Why couldn't she get rid of this shame? But she needed to dare to try something different, and needed to succeed. She couldn't move back home, couldn't ask her parents for money...maybe her sisters. And there was no way she could afford therapy. The university counselor only handed out breathing exercises as a quick fix; she didn't have time to address deeper or structural concerns.

Aida's father Edel had put food on the table for her, her two sisters, and her mother with his work as a fisherman. Her mum Ona took care of the farm as much as she could, or as much as the cotton harvest season allowed her to; melons and milk from the camels to sell, and vegetables for their own household. Ona enjoyed planning where to plant vegetables next to herbs and flowers as a soft and gentle way of feeding and protecting her three daughters. She even used to send packages to London. But Aida didn't really know how to use them, and she couldn't trust them either. She didn't know how to connect with the powerful healing traditions her grandma was so well known for. Aida remembered her being able to put her hands on your stomach and make the cramps disappear. Her grandma had always dressed in the traditional costume of the Karakalpak women, full of powerful patterns and colors, like the cobalt blue dyed cotton that had Turkish origins. The famous Silk Road had once gone through Nukus. The costume consisted partly of strong cotton fabrics similar to the ones Americans had made trousers out of that they'd then called jeans. Jeans were introduced as workwear much earlier than the hoodie. Aida wondered if all garments lost their political potential when they entered the circuit of fast fashion, when their functions were no longer necessary but continued to circulate based on aesthetics. She thought so. Most people didn't even know that T-shirts were sewn by people and not machines. Hoodies were made out of cotton, the raw material referred to as "white gold" during the colonial era. The Uzbek cotton was picked by hand because there were still no machines that could do the job as well. Imagine the small hands of a child, to not miss a golden glimpse you needed eyes and your mama with you too. To think it had all started in Manchester.

Ona was the only one in the family who was still forced to work during the cotton harvest. It was easier to convince people from their village than in the cities. Ona didn't talk much about it but dried a lot of the herbs for the colder season to come, preparing teas and medicines—this was something Aida would like to learn. She was slightly embarrassed of the packages from her mum in her cupboard that never got opened. Nowadays it was just London traffic buzzing through her ears and fogging her throat. Even though she knew how polluted the ground was in Nukus, it felt calmer to be here, healthier, and more fresh than London. This was just a short visit. She missed her family. Her parents had

started to get old, 72, 75. How many more times would this trip still be possible? Would they sell the farm, the house, the land? Or could she do it out of guilt and shame, take it over? Otherwise, why would she drive hour after hour through the desert? She started to count on her fingers, but stopped after three, and put her hands back in her jeans pockets watching Papa disappear into a black little dot on the water. His aging was visible in his forward hunching back, a little crochet C. Mama's hands were heavily damaged. Cotton plants are sticky, they behave a little bit like rose bushes, painful to touch and they rip up your skin, especially without thick protective gloves. But the thicker the gloves the harder to pick, Ona used to say. It was April and six months were left before the annual cotton harvest. The sun could still be strong in the middle of October and sometimes even in November. Most of the harvesters had dramatically aged skin from from taking care of their own farm throughout the summer months when the temperature could be up to 40 degrees Celsius. They didn't have sun protecting creams and sunglasses were only occasionally used. Strong light wrinkled the eye area. Aida had no idea if the rates of skin cancer were higher in this region than in the UK, or if they had decreased after the collapse of the Soviet Union. She wrote it down in her phone as something to check later. Her mum was 72 with skin full of pigmented wrinkles, but no signs of cancer. They stood close to each other, silent, next to the shore, Aida with her hands in her pockets. Her gaze wandered back to her father bobbing up and down on the sea in his little boat. Ona was holding a bag with their lunch: pumpkin and toasts.

2

The Aral Sea was located a two to three hour ride north, mostly through desert. It was standard to always have two twenty liter containers of water with you in the back seat because you were vulnerable like a baby if the storm hit the road. A shipwreck here and there. The drive required a high wheeled Land Rover or a pickup to get to the sea. There were no proper roads here, it was bumpy. Aida was seated in the back next to the drink-ing water, looking out of the window hearing the radio buzzing in and out of signal. The hard dry soil was cracked into a mosaic pattern. Even if it was over half a decade ago since it was wet here, this was still considered to be the bottom of the sea, and the hope for the water's return hadn't gone away. They normally used the car for driving milk and melons to the shops, export companies, and local customers, but today it was Sunday and they had the boat with them. For Edel it was a weekend activity to hook the boat up to the car and drive over to the southern parts of the sea. He was happy Aida and Ona were with him today. Edel kept track of the growth of the fish. His eye measurement was used to estimating quantity and lengths. Were they still there? Ready to stay, maybe for good? He hoped so but couldn't trust it, Aida could see it in his eyes. For the last twenty years, he had been involved in restoring the sea, which made the Sunday drives even more important. It was his day

off from the farm, but he was still working. It was in the north that the dam had been built. It had collapsed in 1992 and then again in 1998, but had been restored in 2005 with funds from the World Bank. The dike called Kokaral was named after an island that had existed in the sea up until the 1960s. Edel had followed all of this; in particular, he had been working with a team who were organizing to reintroduce fish into the sea. Fish stocks were enough now in some parts of the lake for people to make a living from fishing again, and even to export some to Ukraine. But he was too old to take it back up and he no longer had a boat suitable for the job, nor could he afford that sort of investment. The Sunday trips were therefore not only leisure, they were Edel's way of keeping an eye on the lake, to spot if strangers were around, like the stupid desert hikers and dead town tourists who tried to take a swim sometimes. It was April and the season's crops had just been planted so on the family's small farm the workload was not too intense, it involved patience and hoping for some rains. The recovering sea helped to bring clouds back to the sky and make rain fall. The farm could therefore easily take care of itself for a day or two, and the camels had their food stock.

From the 1960s on, the food economy of the region had transitioned from water based industries like fishing to land based agriculture and livestock raising; it had still been going on when Aida was born in 1979. This was because of the ecological disaster, the disappearance of the sea due to intensive monocultural cotton farming. It was mostly a waste land now but once it had been the fourth largest body of fresh water in the world. To take water and put it somewhere else was violent. To grow enough cotton to make a few pairs of jeans requires the same amount of water as one person drinks in a lifetime. Monocultures are extremely violent. Monocultures are thirsty. This dried earth monocultural homogeneity was still dangerous for the local inhabitants. Lots of people had been forced to emigrate, and they could no longer trust or know the land even if they knew it by heart before. Aida thought for a second how hilarious it was that the camel, the animal that could keep water inside its own body for such a long period of time, had also provided food on so many family tables during the hungry times that were a consequence of the brutal agricultural policies forced on Uzbekistan's citizens by the Soviet Union. What a group of survivors, these animals! In a couple of months her dissertation on access to fresh water in desert regions would be finished. It was a sort of global history overview with local case studies and interviews with people who been forced to emigrate from the Aral Sea area for lack of job opportunities and water. The title was Drops in the Sea. Nowadays, some of the boys from her primary school drew American tourists up to the north, to Kantubek close to the border with Kazakstan, to visit the ship graveyards and ghost towns. It was a way of making money, similar to how people in Belarus now took tourists in protective suits to visit Chernobyl and its closest town Pripjat for 48 hour trips. She wondered if they wore smartphone gloves? The dogs of Chernobyl were doing fine, except in the winter, it was cold there.

Aida gave a monthly donation to an NGO called Dogs of Chernobyl. Her

mum had never retired and still today lived with the hardcore realities of the annual cotton harvest. Aida had read the 2016 report from the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights. It was called They said we wouldn't have to pick and now they send us to the fields. It was a quote from her mum, who went to the cotton harvest because if she didn't the government could punish her by embargoing the family farm's goods, which would cut off their income. Aida cried when reading it for the first time. Her sister was also interviewed: "I like working as a nurse. I always dream that every day I will be allowed to do my job. Because in total I only work as a nurse for three to five months a year. Two years ago, I started to keep track of the days I worked as a nurse. It has turned out to be 109 days per year. The rest of the time I have worked in the fields, carried out public maintenance, and street cleaning. True, nurses who are a little older may do their jobs five to six months a year, but not at my age." Anora was 38. To fulfill all orders from the top, officials send out people like her and Aminah to work. If they need more work done, then they also send out the older nurses and teachers as replacement cotton pickers. Even though the state had started to officially announce that it wouldn't do this anymore, and a conversation about the forced work was becoming possible, in practice it was still modern slavery. More than anything, people hated working in the fields, weeding and picking cotton. It was especially hard for elderly people like her mum who never been able to escape the state oppression of the communist regime and its aftermath. Her father was luckier and had better contacts. He didn't dare to ask permission for Ona and his daughters to also be spared. They were all too afraid of losing this small privilege the family had. He could neither press further, nor pass on these contacts. It was a family agreement.

Both Anora and Aminah lived in the center of Tashkent, Uzbekistan's capital. For Aminah, working as a primary school teacher was better than being a nurse. When the cotton harvest was coming up, they never knew if someone would knock on their door or a letter would come calling them in. Of course there was always the possibility to go voluntarily and earn some extra cash. But the forced labor was for the country's state employees, or for when the town hall officials went round the poor areas just for the sake of it...Aida assumed this was a way for the government to keep people anxious and keep them quiet, to stress people out even more so they wouldn't speak up for fear losing their jobs because you never knew what might happen. Precariousness as they would say in London. Ona always tried to voluntarily go early on in the cotton harvesting season. It increased her chances of not having to stay for the whole time and came with more cash than the later part of the harvest, but maybe more cancer in return. The conventional growing of cotton uses about 16% of the world's insecticides. Bees, one of the world's most important animals, are suffering. Humans get cancer. Ona's breath was like a chain smoker's. 7% of worldwide pesticide use is connected to cotton growing. Don't let the fungi occupy the white gold!

Cassandra stood in her bathroom, cleaning off the night's makeup. She did so with brilliant white disposable cotton pads from Primark. No matter the brand, they came in a soft plastic tube with a thin cotton drawstring to open and close. The string was also made out of bleached white cotton. It had its place on a hook just next to the mirror. The bathroom was white and small but she had installed strong LED lighting for these sorts of procedures. She made vlogs—makeup tutorials—and when trying out a cleanser from a new brand she always uploaded another video speaking about her experiences of the product. It was in her diary to do another one pretty soon but right now it was four in the morning and she had just finished another two day long party vlogging weekend with her besties in Vienna. It was gonna get views for sure. The DJ hadn't been that good though—no mood manager, haha! So many new job descriptions popping up to make administration sound sexy. What about her? Influencer? YouTuber? Both! Who did she have an impact on? Children. Young teens. The DJ had been a bit too slow at reading the dance floor but his sexual energy was flawless, as always. The two had hooked up a few times before but it was nothing too serious, just sex. It took Cassandra around five or six cotton pads damped in jelly blue artificial makeup remover to clean away the top surface layers of concealer and foundation, and she hadn't even started on the mascara. She wet a fresh pad with eye makeup remover to tackle the soggy combination of sleepy crusts and mascara in the corners of both eyes. She didn't wear extra lashes, she went for monthly extensions instead. The pads never got down to the pores. This she had learned from collaborating with FOREO and from other YouTubers. Her lavender vibrating cleanser from FOREO was for sensitive skin and was programmed on a full two minute program via her app. No time tonight for either the anti-aging program or a hydro bomb refreshing face mask. She was on a try out month with Paula's Choice for her cleansing routine and day creams. It seemed to be working out well, the combination of SPF and acids. Glow! Video coming up soon! No damage and it foamed well and made her skin feel so soft. Her pores were super clean after yesterday's face treatment at her regular salon. Tomorrow Cassandra had an interview and two collaborations on her Insta stories to do. Her to-do list was on her phone when her assistant wasn't around. She set the alarm for seven to have time for coffee and makeup. She fell asleep with her bra on.

In the morning Cassandra dressed in a tight white top and pale grey suit-style pants with a beige trench coat on top. She went by bike. Her interview was taking place at the Park Hyatt Hotel in the city center of Vienna, which was just a ten minute ride from her turn of the twentieth century apartment with original stucco walls, high ceilings, and window benches to sit on. The sober but highly excessive glam interior of the hotel fitted Cassandra perfectly. The chandelier combined with the daylight was perfect. At least that was what the interviewer wanted it to look like. Her name was Maria Davis. Cassandra loved the touch of the smooth beige couch. Was it real leather? Its monochrome color faded

beautifully into the shimmery light grey curtains which were only semi-transparent and therefore created a shadow on the white wall-to-wall carpet. Were they made of silk? The hotel provided Princetown's GUCCI® patterned canvas slippers, the ones with the in-credible soft fur inside decorated with the classic golden branch on top. A few models of the slick horse bites leather series from GUCCI® were also available for a €350 deposit down in the reception. Maria had taken off her shoes and sat on a chair with her socks floating down into the carpet texture. Cassandra sat down on the end of the bed. The bed linen was crème white and super soft, a cotton silk blend. The windows faced onto the Kirche am Hof with its cobble stones in formations and a classic statue in the middle. Cassandra had no idea who the guy was but he was riding on a horse. Spring was arriving. The bars and cafe had just opened their outdoor terraces. These still required blankets and infrared heating after sunset, but were mostly reserved for the tourists anyway. Cassandra rarely went out if it wasn't for work or exclusive closed events with other me-dia entrepreneurs—these were always a time for networking and potential collaborations. Maria mounted a small camera and a microphone onto her tripod. She was from New York and was writing a series of articles in The Wall Street Journal where she portrayed influencers and tried to figure out how they had been changing the fashion and beauty industry.

Here in Austria they had picked Cassandra, mainly because her channels existed in three languages, English, French, and German. She was for sure the first one doing that. Because of it she reached multiple audiences, not through subtitles as other influencers did, but through making each video three times, and running three Instagram accounts each featuring the same content but in her own translations. Her father was a diplomat and had put her into private school early on with the hope of her becoming a lawyer. Never. Cassandra was the only one in the market doing what she was doing and her father had slowly started to accept it and believe in it when he'd seen her running her own business, acquiring an office, buying an apartment, and now, soon, launching her own product line. It was of course a lot of work to run the company, do the communication, and be its face to the world at 23 years old. It required a manager, an intern, and an as-sistant to schedule it all in. The journalist Maria sat down on a chair next to the camera, there was an additional microphone on top. The interview would go online by the begin-ning of next week but Maria had assured Cassandra that she'd for sure have a say on the edit before it went up. Cassandra had slowly and steadily built up her brand since 2007 when, at the age of fourteen, she'd started a blog. Of course, at that time, she didn't really know what she was doing. She had just loved fashion, and Vienna in springtime became a gorgeous backdrop breathing luxury and timelessness into her photos.

After she started uploading her videos to YouTube, they quickly went viral and companies started to contact her with clothing and makeup samples. Could you review this? It was kind of all history, and now a way of living. At that time, YouTube had mainly been a community of people worldwide

who shared their tips, stories, and experiences about mental health, and had brought the private hand-written teenage journal into the medium of public moving images. Now her crew of online friends, or inventors of these new professions as the older generation preferred to call them, were all kinds of millionaires—they met up once or twice a year. Soon, her first body lotion would go on sale. She often promoted sustain-able living and was an advocate for a sort of veganism that included boiled eggs for breakfast as its only exception—she called it 80% vegan. She had around a million monthly views and frequently travelled to France, Germany, and the UK for TV appear-ances and meet and greets for her crowds of fans. But this was an exception, a journalist in town from America.

— Could you start by telling us a little bit about how it all started? What’s your background?

— I grew up in Vienna, went to private school as a kid, and had a private tutor when traveling. I lived with my parents until I was twenty and had no idea what to do with my life. I was lying on the couch watching TV. I was tired of school, as most of us were at the age. The internet was just this heaven where I could be anyone I wanted—I felt supported and seen. My father worked as a diplomat so it was always hard for me to have a so-called normal life, to have friends, because we travelled a lot as a family. I was constantly away from my friends and my laptop became my BFF. At the beginning, my parents really didn’t take it seriously and thought I was depressed, which I maybe was, or I mean, I was just trying to figure out some space. They thought it was all spam calls when I first got contacted by fashion and beauty companies who wanted me to use and review their products. Now I just let them stay out of it. It has been a learning curve, and today I have a great team working with me. I can’t say how thankful I am for Vanessa, my manager!

— Who else is involved in your team?

— There’s me, I’m the creative director, then there is Vanessa, and then Zara my assistant, and when there is time in the schedule we take on one or two dedicated young women for internships.

— How would you describe yourself as a leader?

— Ehm, as a friend?

— A lot of people criticize the lack of transparency within the negotiation processes you as influencers do with brands, and question how promoting beauty and skincare products will effect such a young audience. Do you have any thoughts on that?

— I’m aware of it for sure. I think it’s mainly coming from older men who can’t get a grip on this genre of marketing. We don’t do stock you know—haha!—we don’t do storage because it’s not friendly to the environment,

so it's more like a print on demand sort of business. I guess some people just don't get the logic because starting multiple companies after you've already reached an audience is the other way around. It starts from relationships with fans rather than products, and research into what is missing, and finding a team who can help create the product I dream of using in my everyday life. And just because we happen to be an extremely confident and supportive young female crowd running these types of businesses, we get criticized for a lack of transparency—I think it's unfair. I mean, which oil company do you have access to? What forests are they burning? How does your coffee get into your cup? I mean tampons! Where do they come from? I know my clients and I try to have a close relationship to the places I work with. How they make their money, pay their employers, track their supply chains, and how they close their deals. I mean, I love my fans, I feel so connected to them and they really understand me. I don't try to sell them anything. Of course it's amazing to connect over a new concealer, but it's not the main point. It has to be built on trust. It feels like they know me and who I am. I'm liberal and believe people can think for themselves and make their own choices. I'm brutally honest. If there are products that are not on top of their game, my fans will know, and sales will go down.

— Do you have any examples of this?

— I mean, all the cosmetics I use are vegan. I don't know any influencer who would ever use anything tested on animals. I've been campaigning for No Makeup in the Sink. Glitter and some eyeshadows are made out of, you know, etched aluminum bonded to polyethylene terephthalate (PET)—that's a form of micro plastic that's ending up in our oceans. Terrible! I don't want that to get stuck in birds and whales.

— So you think a twelve year old can grasp that sort of equation. Could you do that at that age?

— No, but the world has changed a lot. Just look at Greta Thunberg! She is sixteen! We've been forced to grow up so fucking fast, it's incredible! Youth doesn't exist anymore, we're all adults!

— Are you a snowflake or a millennial?

— A millennial for sure, I'm aware and I don't know much life before the internet but I still remember the old chat rooms and dial-up connection. I'm a nineties bitch for sure. Write it down!

—It's recorded!

— Ah! I forgot about that!

— And feminism? Do you care about that?

— Mmmm not really. It feels too old. What would it mean?

-- Would you say that your type of profession has capitalized on the legacy of feminism?

-- I mean, I need to know who my customers are and what they would like to see on my channels. It's very sensitive in that way. If that is related to #MeToo or the latest BALENCIAGA® sneakers, I don't mind. It can't be too far away from my own interests of course, because it has to be relatable, and I would never sell through sexualized appearances for example. Isn't that feminism? I don't do bikinis or un-derwear shots.

Maria gave a smile to Cassandra, looked down at her notepad, and continued. Cassandra glanced at Maria's silver painted nails. They had an incredibly cool rough texture. Cassandra's were milky soft. She kept them short. Light pink.

-- Are your nails painted with some sort of extra textured layer?

-- Yeah, the topcoat includes micro gel balls that absorb the color and make it shift and have shadows.

-- Cool!

-- It creates a nice quality and less of a flat surface.

-- Amazing.

Maria grabbed something from a brown paper bag next to the chair. It made a crunchy noise.

-- I also brought this along, because I know you're really interested in sustainable fashion. Could you tell us a bit more about that?

-- Well, I told you about the No Makeup in the Sink campaign. I got their logo as a tattoo by the way, it was part of the deal, to make it real.

Maria asked Cassandra if she could show her the tattoo. Cassandra pulled up her sleeve. Just above her right elbow sat a drawing of a sink with two X X crosses on each side.

-- I mean, we're all into what's new, what's fresh, aren't we? And we're kind of realizing that it doesn't work but we can't stop ourselves. I mean, what does it say about us...are we addicted? I don't know. What I do know is that I don't do any fast fashion collaborations. But...sometimes I still walk into Zara and can't resist buying something, even if I know it will only survive three or four washes because it'll immediately get fluffy in the armpits, or a seam'll break, or the material is too thin and will get holes. I use Sellpy to sell and donate clothes though.

-- Sellpy, what's that?

-- Is an app for secondhand clothing. You pack it in their bags, they come and pick it up, and the people who work for the app take photos and put it out there for you.

-- So your old clothes gets a second life?

-- Yes.

-- Do you think some of your followers buy the items just because you've been wearing them?

-- Yes, for sure. It happens a lot and they send me a DM with a selfie of them wearing it.

Maria held up a sweater.

-- What does this symbolize for you?

-- Not so much to be honest. It's a plain beige and white sweater that says Cassandra on it. It looks expensive, wants to breathe this minimal aura. I think the customer they have in mind is older than me and has a more steady lifestyle than I do, like a woman in her mid thirties working in an office who wants to have a cool sweater for when she's driving home from her workout. The cotton doesn't look bleached though, but it can be a trick to make it look wannabe natural, but it's still highly toxic for the skin and liver anyway. But it's kinda cool. Where's it from?

-- Acne Studios. It is part of their upcoming autumn collection. It's made out of re-cycled polyester. Retail at €300.

-- Oh, I couldn't tell, the label is sort of pressed in and invisible. That's really awesome actually and relates to the plastic. Acne's a Scandinavian brand, right? Like Filippa K? They are really minimal. I don't know anyone in Vienna who would buy it. It'd blend in too much with the already existing architecture! Haha!

-- Do you know why it's called a sweatshirt?

-- I've no idea, you tell me! I mean, a lot of things, as far as I know, got their name from some sort of industrial function or use. Maybe from some traditional knitting machines? Knitting has the quality of creating a sort of loop on the back of the fabric—compared to some woven textiles it doesn't have an obvious front and back. I mean, knitted fabric can also absorb sweat and keep people warm, it's kind of breathable, like wool and flax. Polyester is much less breathable, it doesn't keep you warm when you want but makes you sweat when you don't!

-- A lot of our clothes get their shapes from military uniforms or, in this case, from 1930s workwear worn in cold New York warehouses.

-- I wouldn't spend €300 on a sweater. Is this how they market it, together with this story?

-- I think so, yes.

Cassandra couldn't really tell what the interviewer was looking for by bringing this into the conversation. It went too much away from her interests. Why didn't Maria ask about her new semi-organic body lotion with camel milk?

-- Maybe you don't have much need for sweating?

Maria spoke with a glimpse in her eye. Was this a joke?

-- What do you mean?

-- The loops on the back create air and space for the garment to absorb sweat! Originally sweatshirts were workwear. What do you guys learn in school nowa-days? I was just trying to be funny. Sorry. A lot of today's fashion started out as workwear. Jeans too!

-- Ah! I had no idea. Thanks for telling me.

Cassandra remained polite while hiding some frustration. Her pulse was up. Maria gest-iculated with her hand to make Cassandra not feel as worried and anxious as she looked, and to indicate this might have been a mistake from her side while wrapping it up.

-- I think we have it Cassandra! Really great! Thanks a lot for coming. I really appreciate it.

-- Me too, for sure. Amazing! When will this go online?

-- Thursday.

-- I'm launching a body lotion next weekend. It's my first beauty product under my own name and line.

-- Oh wow, good luck with that! I'm sure you are excited?

-- Yes! It includes just a tiny bit of camel milk from Uzbekistan, but other than that it's 98% vegan, makes your skin super soft! I'll make sure my assistant sends you and your editorial team some samples.

-- Amazing, thank you.

Cassandra smiled, and they shook hands and studied each other's nails in closeup before she left the hotel room. Maria stayed a little bit to pack up the gear before her cab to Flughafen Wien. Her flight back to New

York John F Kennedy Airport was delayed to 16:35. Cassandra walked down the corridor in her deposit secured GUCCI® canvas slippers and took the elevator down to the lobby. The encounter had sent Cassandra running down her anxiety road so she stopped into the first bathroom she saw. Why did this always happen to her? What did she mean with this sweater? Old people! She picked up a matte Sephora lipstick and painted her lips in dark turquoise. It made her feel calm and in control. I mean, she was kinda impressed, but WTF, she was a pro-vegan and sustainable consumer promoter on her channels! The interview would be published within three days and Cassandra was promised a look over the copy before it went online. Cassandra left with her Prada bag on her shoulder, walking and texting Vanessa and Zara at the same time. It was good promotion for her Camel Toe ;)™ lotion for sure. Thanks for organizing!

4

Aida and her mum walked back to the car. They had agreed to pick up Edel in a few hours. It was Sunday and tomorrow Aida would drive the same car to meet up with one of the activists from the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights. Edel turned off the motor in the boat, took a snack from his rucksack, and watched the rising and falling of the wa-er. The sea was cold, no swimmers today. He saw a bus driving along the shore creating a big dusty cloud of sand. How come coffee always tasted so good from a thermos? He noted the air and water temperatures into his calendar. Some bubbles on top of the surface. Could it be a pike perch? It would make him so happy. He crumbled some of his sandwich into the cold water, and there it was. He didn't use a scientific method for this, more a sort of voluntary animal welfare service to investigate the sea restoration devel-opments. When the big fish tanks had arrived a few years ago after the World Bank's final funding of the dam in the north, he had helped out with the maintenance and transportation of the fish. They had placed all the fish in a protected enclosure in the middle of the sea to protect them during their breeding time and later, in the autumn of 2011, they'd opened it up so the fish could repopulate the whole sea over time.

Later that night Aida sat and prepared questions while re-reading the report They said we wouldn't have to pick and now they send us to the fields. She googled the skin cancer statistics but couldn't find anything on them—better to call the local hospital tomorrow. The BBC was on the radio in the background, a documentary about contemporary eco-logical textiles. It pissed Aida off that the fashion industry was more into these lab-made exotic mushroom garments than actually trying to grow flax—the strongest and least water consuming textile fiber there was. She went to bed with a cup of ginger tea, grown from the garden.

Nowadays it was impossible for someone like Mike to live in the Venice Beach area. They really enjoyed supporting the kids making music everyday. Plus, it paid their rent. As a community organizer in downtown L.A., it had been hard to afford living costs since the early 2000s. For the usual reasons like skyrocketing rents, but maybe also because Mike had other needs and dreams. Soon they would have enough savings to do their top surgery. They'd changed pronoun a few years ago and had been on a public health waiting list for years, but it was just too long and they were too impatient, well that was what the doctor had called Mike. Their insurance wouldn't cover it, but one positive side effect of this was that it made them less medicalized—they were finding their own way through their transition. They were happy in the east of the city, nothing to complain about. Single life. It was where they had their friends. They enjoyed taking the metro down to Venice Beach on the days when their car couldn't cope. Time-wise, they weren't sure there was such a difference actually. Their car was a white 1992 Citroen, nothing too fancy because it could easily get stolen anyway. Mike listened to an interview with Tove Lo, a musician wearing suits a la David Byrne's 1980s style. David Byrne who'd once said, in interview in Jonathan Demme's film *Stop Making Sense*, "I like symmetry and geometric shapes. I wanted to appear smaller and the easiest way to do that was to make my body bigger." It took Mike years to understand that Byrne had interviewed himself in the film and had therefore crossdressed. They must have used early green screen tricks like the ones the kids had thought were embarrassing when Mike had showed them that time. As a counterargument, the kids had just downloaded an app that could do the job for them. But when this film was made Mike was just a youngster. "Music is very physical and often the body understands it before the head," David Byrne had said. Mike thought about their age difference to their younger self. You know those time marker moments when rising stars suddenly start wearing stuff from your own childhood? Was that the first sign of ag-ing and the generational shift? Mike wasn't sure. Adidas snap button track pants had once been existential...at least those Fila sneakers hadn't yet been spotted on an Anne Imhof performer. Mike loved art. But performers sponsored by BALENCIAGA®? They weren't sure about that.

Mike had recently found out about the body positive company Rebirth Garments based in Chicago, and had bought a checkerboard print half crop top with pink details. It hadn't arrived yet. Most of their stuff seemed to be made out of neon colored polyester which wasn't too bad from an environmental point of view, and they promoted using a wide variety of able bodies. Today Mike was wearing a yellow skirt, a casual no label black hoodie, some pop purple lipstick, white Nike tube socks, and a pair of plain comfy sneakers that were secondhand. In their earbuds Tove Lo was telling the podcaster she lived in Venice Beach. "It's a bit sketchy," she said, "my speakers got sto-len and once in a while you see someone

having a nap or a full night's sleep in the garden, but I'm down with that. I love to be able to walk to the beach and see sunset." Mike wondered if she knew that the L.A. light was toxic and that the vivid colors were because of all the pollution. The metro these days had its own kind of life going on—people selling fruits, playing music, and talking to each other. No harassment so far, although hairy legs and lipstick could easily be a target, especially as a combo with a gender non-conforming body. At work the kids were cool with it though. Mike was surprised how little shame they seemed to hold onto these days, but sometimes they also felt sad at how fast the kids were being forced to grow up. Or maybe they weren't more grown up, they just had to perform like they were. There was just no space or time to figure things out. Mike tried to provide some of that for them at the community space, to have those conversations while they were making music. It was like their brother's two year old already had the gaze of a grownup. But thinking you had something to offer the kids was probably the first sign of failure, right? Looking out the window each block was like its own gated community. Was it the car based urban planning that had separated the city like this?

The metro line down to the beach didn't run underground for almost the whole of the line—the earth was too fragile and shaky for that. From the last stop it was just a little walk down to the park. The Lime E-Bikes couldn't speed up there so people were pedaling. It was April, sunny, a soft wind in Mike's face. Mike had been skating since the early nineties, but never as a trend, it was really just social. When the kids asked about it nowadays it made Mike a little bit shy as if they had to justify something, and they always protected themselves by coming back with a comparison to parkour that never quite slam dunked. Mike enjoyed going down to the pier, smoking a joint, and sliding up and down in the concrete pond without really doing so many tricks. A few flips here and there. Their pace was too gentle for sweating, and their back too sore and sketchy after hours seated in the music studio. Would it be possible to combine these visits with the outdoor gym? Maybe later in the season. A colleague of theirs had come down to the pier for a drink and they finally had some time for a non work-related chat. Why was it so difficult nowadays to see your friends? She'd just been on vacation and said that this particular pub she had visited was as close to New York as you can get in Scandinavia. She'd been visiting her boyfriend's parents who lived on the coast of Denmark. The only difference between this local pub compared to her New York experience from last year was, of course, the small town geography that the bodies inhabited in Århus. The noise, the breath, the walks, the pines. The red brown and shiny wooden interior had made the space feel close, but it was hard to tell if its atmosphere provided intimacy or established a sort of drunk-on-beer basement depression. She had been there with her boyfriend and his dad who was active in the local Labour Party. For a moment she wondered how Heineken picked this tone of green as theirs. Was there a relationship between beer and the color green? Brand, Grolsch, Tubørg. The question swam out in the air and Mike ordered an Uber home. They could still pay with cash in the bar. Their friend had invested in Bitcoin and had

recently bought a house near the beach. Would she quit her job too?

6

It wasn't so much the hoodie as it was the white bleached cotton, and of course the label itself: Jan Lindberg. At the time it cost about €80. Cassandra's younger sister argued for months and months to get this fucking sweater until their father finally had bought it after reaching complete exhaustion with his lectures about economy. "Save, save, save!" he said. It was the early days of online shopping. Cassandra kept it like a souvenir or a collection item these days. When she sometimes used it as a backdrop in her YouTube videos, her followers always asked where they could buy it. Sometimes she wondered whether to reply, "Yeah, well, I'm a bit older than you so I got this one back at the time when it was in production, say around 2003." Lol. No. She just said, "Girls, just check eBay or Sellpy."

7

Mike was on their way home. No air conditioning on in the Uber. They took off their sweater, studied the seams, and thought how the hoodie was originally made to keep workers in cold New York warehouses warm during the winter—it had never been needed in California. Was the hood made for keeping dust away from the workers or keeping the heat in, like a little exotic felted wool sauna hat? The way the cotton fabric is knitted with the loops on the inside helps to absorb sweat. It makes it breathable. Mike had plenty of hoodies. They thought about the use of yellow neon vests in the French gilets jaunes movement and how the neon sneaker trend seem to be over as they fell asleep in the car.

8

Aida woke up at seven, prepared a coffee, and washed her face while boiling two eggs. She poured in some milk. Ona could hear her moving around and trying to close the door softly without any tumult or sound, but the wooden frame was still a bit swollen from the winter so it made a noise. Edel was already outside, he waved Aida off. Ona went outside in rubber boots and pajamas with her coat on top, let out the chickens and camels, and watched the small ones look for food on the ground. Edel had already started to prepare for the milking and Ona went inside to collect the eggs. She put them in boxes of six so that later in the week they could be sold in the closest market with their sticker on top. She went inside and made herself and Edel some porridge before she dressed and started with her daily routines in the middle vegetable

garden. Corn, potatoes, salad, carrots, and herbs would soon start to show their leaves. The tomatoes too. They didn't require much water on the farm though. It rained enough, and for many years they'd collected rainwater via the waterspouts on the four corners of their house as well as those of the barn. It was necessary. Clean fresh water was too expensive to buy in those quantities, mainly because of the transport it required. Ona had memories from the river rerouting projects. They were fun to play in as a child, jumping in briny pools and dusty polluted desert. Little did she know at the time how the Aral Sea, starved of incoming water, would begin to evaporate and disappear. What did her body carry? Zinc, magnesium, iron, but also formaldehyde and all the pesticide components. But to what degree? What if Edel or the girls got sick? Could she heal them? Did she still have that power?

One kilo of cotton requires the same amount of water a human being would drink in a lifetime, and that's just for the growing and the first washing process, before you actually make it into white gold through spinning and weaving. The cotton industry is responsible for 20% of the world's waste water and seems to have no interest in cleaning what it uses. Activist groups in Indonesia close pipes with concrete to save their families from polluted runoff. There are no filters. Only around 1% of all textiles are recycled. The most common fabrics we use are cotton and polyester. In your bed, in your bathroom, in your kitchen, in your living room, in your storage, in your wardrobe, in your shoes, in your money, in your paper, in your mouth: pesticides, fertilizers. Depending on the size, two or three pairs of jeans are one kilo of cotton. Ona had once started to grow flax but the climate was a little bit too dry and it just became too much work. The earth did the work itself, but the rain didn't fall. And the other care it took—to soften the long and strong fibers, comb them, spin them, weave them, sew them, wear them. Dry your body, wash your body, blow your nose, clean your ears, wash your face, dry your hands, pay with cash, and dry your ass. Ona no longer had the muscle strength to sit at the loom and push the beater. Sometimes she still spun yarn in front of the television. But her hand grip was weak after putting so many warps into the loom. It was a power test. Tapestries were more calming and meditative to make. But it was the most dirty industry after oil and coal. Last year she had been interviewed for the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights annual report, an attitude change had been taking place among the authorities, but it really didn't change anything of her material reality.

-- Edel, breakfast is ready!

-- Coming!

After breakfast Ona went out to gather the camel hair. It was the their molting season. She had prepared a little combing and washing station for the fibers inside the barn.

Aida had once had the chance to meet Umida Niyazova who founded the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights and was forced to flee the country in 2009. Umida spent four months in prison for telling the truth about the human rights situation in Uzbekistan. Today it is possible to have a conversation about it with representatives from the Uzbek government, something that was impossible just a few years ago. It makes sense to boy-cott Uzbek cotton but it doesn't help the people in the fields. Umida lives in Berlin now. Aida had met her three years ago at a conference in Manchester. It had been impossible for Aida to not recognize Umida's accent while she gave her keynote. The Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights main activity was to monitor the cotton harvest. They criticized the fact that state employees were sent to the fields, and that the government gave aid and tax breaks to support it, something that has still not been officially acknowledged. The name Umida means hope in Arabic. Aida had walked up to her afterwards and introduced herself in Uzbek and Umida had burst into a smile and kissed her on her cheek. They'd had dinner that same evening and afterwards they'd kept in touch, mainly about each other's work but also for the conversation about having a home it was impossible to return to. The reasons for their exile were of course different, but they shared history. Aida had told her family about the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights's work, and last year Ona and Aminah had participated with their stories and voices in the report. Aida was driving to the city center of Nukus to meet up with Adam, one of the activists who regularly monitored the harvest. Because of his dual American-Uzbek citizenship he was safe and the police let him be. Aida guessed he also was some sort of wealthy brat, but it really didn't matter, someone was out in the fields witnessing the harvest.

Adam was wearing light brown jeans and a white shirt. They sat down in a small cafe, ordered a pot of tea and biscuits.

-- Thanks for meeting up with me.

-- No problem, I'm happy someone is showing an interest in our work. There's not really media coverage on this type of subject even if it is such a big part of people's everyday life. Imagine not knowing whether the blankets you sleep in have been made possible through forced labor?

-- I know...and child labor in other parts of the industry.

-- Yes, heavy start. What brings you here?

-- I'm visiting my parents. They have a farm just outside the city.

-- So how often do you come here?

-- Maybe once or twice a year. I'm worried about them. They're starting to get old, and my mum is still sent out to the fields. I can't really take it anymore. It's too painful.

-- I can imagine. None of my relatives live here. I have a few cousins in Turkey, the rest emigrated to the USA in the late nineties.

-- What made you come back?

-- I worked for different NGOs. It's mainly been water related, building wells and dykes, and now I've been here monitoring the cotton harvest for the last three years. I'm learning the languages in order to be able to conduct interviews, but yeah, sometimes it also helps just to be a white international person out in the fields, even if it doesn't reach the press. I'm mainly involved in site visits to the public sector.

-- My mum and sister were interviewed last year.

-- It must be hard.

-- They said we wouldn't have to pick and now they send us to the fields is a quote from Ona. How does the monitor training work? I'm finishing my dissertation in June. My mum doesn't shower for a month if she's placed too far away from home and has to stay overnight.

-- Yes, the poor working and living conditions are rough. Often there's no insulation so people can't sleep because of the cold, and it's overcrowded. Sexual harassment is common. The training takes a couple of months. It is of course a plus that you speak Uzbek. Russian too?

-- Yes, unfortunately I do.

Adam giggled.

-- Yeah, it's all the aftermath of oppression, so better to use it.

Aida finished her tea. They exchanged email addresses. Adam wished her good luck and safe travels, and Aida promised to come back by the end of June.

EPILOGUE

In *Flights*, Olga Tokarczuk writes: "The ruler who sets up taxes has his sway over what his subjects will eat, what they shall sleep on, and whether they'll wear linen or silk." The realities lived through religion, nation states, identities, communities, families, friends, clubs, work places, sports teams, farms, industries, consumption, leisure time,

politics, and administration. Yes, we wear clothes, and textiles help a place to become a home. What would it mean to decolonize cotton? To decolonize clothing and everyday textiles? In *Flights* one of the novel's protagonists desires to rule over her own time, and, by spending maybe a little bit too much time in airports, she gets trapped in this privilege of the middle class, its movement stood still. Olga Tokarczuk writes in *Flights* that the king, when he still had power, never cared about the feeling of his minions, but rather about how soft or rough a material felt on the human body, the general atmosphere of an environment, like a curtain or a temperature in a room. A material quality. How do they transform? Is to name it a symbol or a trap? What are the rough, violent, and hard words for this touch? When the skin of the hands is ripped and left bleeding? When lungs can no longer breathe and tumors are growing inside one's own body? It is a surface, you say, but haven't clothes always been used as one of many parameters to restrain and restrict bodies, and only sometimes to let them run, let them stir?

Cassandra—cursed to utter true prophecies but never be believed
 Maria—mistress of the sea
 Ona—mother
 Edel—noble one
 Aida—happy, or, “run across the field”
 Anora—honor
 Aminah—trustworthy, also the name of the Prophet Muhammed's mother
 Delta region, and ultimately the bodies that inhabit them.

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This piece of writing is dedicated to Umida Niyazova, who was forced to flee her native Uzbekistan in 2009 because of her human rights work related to cotton.