



PURPLE PERILLA

**VARIATIONS ON A FEW
SENTENCES BY CAN XUE**

**A FOREWORD BY
SCHOLASTIQUE MUKASONGA**

(Fay) received a love letter: she didn't know who had sent it. This love letter wasn't much like a love letter.

This morning, like every other morning,
I don't expect any letters.
No use running to the mailbox,
there won't be any letters,
no love letters,
not even one love letter,
one anonymous love letter.
No one writes me letters,
no one these days writes letters,
not even anonymous letters,
especially not a love letter.
I stay in front of my computer.
I'm leaning over my computer screen,

I press a key: the emails scroll by,
from bottom to top.
That's all emails do, scroll from
bottom to top,

scroll endlessly,
nothing can stop them.
A love email,
a billet-doux,
a declaration of passionate love,
the pain of love, mad love,
impossible over email,
it will immediately wind up in the
spam folder,
in spam hell
mixed in with the horrific spam,
pornographic,
pedophilic,
evangelical,
satanist
nudist
conspiracy-theorist
Islamist
love spams burn in the deepest
circle of spam hell.

I'm overtaken with sudden rage.
Brusquely I shut the computer. The eye
of light goes out. I am completely alone
without emails.

I'll open the drawer of the old writing
desk. There's still—who left it here?—a
stack of notepaper. I pull out a sheet.

It's yellow, it has a nice thickness. I caress the grain. I search for a pen. Is there still a pen? Yes, in this drawer that I haven't opened in years, there's a Bic, a vestige from the time of writing, and I taunt the dark screen. I write from top to bottom and from left to right across the entire page:

I LOVE YOU I LOVE YOU I LOVE YOU

It's dangerous to stray from one's computer for too long, that's the implacable law of remote work. I return as quickly as possible to the abandoned screen.

Tomorrow, I'll find an envelope somewhere. I'll fold it carefully, end to end, my anonymous love letter. I'll find the courage to leave my attic. I'll descend the never-ending staircase (the elevator is, of course, out of commission). I'll go to the end of the street. I'll choose a mailbox, if mailboxes still exist, with a nice first name: Charles, Robert, Edouard, Yvon, Jean-Luc... I'll throw my letter in the box. I won't expect a response.

Don't belittle this ants' nest. Underneath it is a large amusement park.

Carrying my travel authorization form, I venture to the skylight of my studio on the top floor. The raised window carves out a rectangle of sky. The sky is empty. It's been a long time since the city pigeons vanished and the last gulls, rumor has it, found refuge on a few guano islands. The sky is empty. The long-haul airplanes don't emit their cottony trails anymore. And even today, the sky has no clouds. The clouds that the wind pushes where it likes. Where are the clouds, stranger, your marvelous clouds?

The world is confined to the rectangle of the skylight, which carves out a rectangle of impeccably blue sky, without birds, without planes, without clouds.

Perhaps by leaning out of it, one might see the street below. And at the bus

stop, a little girl who might be waiting for the bus. Who in the old days would wait for the bus. Who when the bus stops buys a ticket to the terminal. The last stop before the depot. The last stop, it's already basically the countryside. The bus is full of children like me. It's a public holiday. I know where they're going. They're going, like me, to Insect Park, they say with a laugh, the Entomological Institute for adults. The school teacher planned a lesson on the animals from before. When there were animals like we see today on the TV. Lions, elephants, cows... The teacher said that there were also little animals that were called insects. There were loads of them, millions of species, said the teacher, who always exaggerates when he talks about things from before. Apparently they've been preserved in this park. So that the visitors, especially the children, can better see these bugs that are often quite tiny, the scientists who are capable of everything have enlarged a few specimens.

It's true that the park insects, if we compare them to the ones they first showed

us pinned in display cases, are much fatter and much bigger, big enough to scare you. But, said the teacher, there's no need to fear these engorged bugs: they're beneath large domes of unbreakable plastic, they can crash into the walls as much as they like, they won't break the barrier.

"Let's enter," says the teacher, "we have passes to cut the line, stamped, validated, I bought the tickets."

All the children let out cries of horror when they discovered the spectacle on display beneath the immense transparent domes.

In a discordant concert of buzzes, screeches, and drones flutter swarms of mosquitos with bloody trunks, wasps with tiger fur, hairy bumblebees with shaggy mustaches. Asian hornets chase dragonflies whose wings look like fine enamel and cloisonné jewelry, like queens in savage times used to wear, says the teacher. An eruption of multicolored butterflies fall into the nets held by spider acrobats. On the

ground, in a landscape of dunes and reddish rocks, spiky stag beetles with jaws in the form of spears, spades, halberds, scythes, and javelins with barbed points all fight in perpetually re-commencing jousts. Columns of black and red ants rush to transport the cadavers to the labyrinths of their underground cities. They cross the comings and goings of the dung beetles who, like Sisyphus, push their balls of carefully molded fecal matter up a steep hill of short grass.

The teacher was eager to show us what he called “the show-stopper,” the park’s most spectacular and most popular attraction: the meal of the cannibal praying mantis who devours her husband. The mantis is like a very long blade of grass, neon green, reared on spindly legs that end in hooked pincers. Her little head resembles a grandmother’s bonnet with two fat bulging eyes that look like pompoms. She holds her tiny husband in her clutches. Diligently she butchers him, dismembers him, dislocates him. She ingests him little by little. “Perhaps he is hard to swallow,

the dear husband,” the teacher jokes, “especially because the loving wife has no teeth.”

The children are frightened, the young ones fight to hold back their tears, they mustn't cry in front of the adults.

“But,” interrupts a little girl, “my grandmother told me that before, there were bees that made honey. She even tasted it when she was little. She told me it was good.”

“Don't listen to your grandmother. Our synthetic honey is much better, it lowers your cholesterol.”

“But,” worries a boy, “if one day those insects escaped from the amusement park...”

“Have no fear, my little one, don't tell anyone, but these are not exactly insects like before, they have a little chip inside them, they're being controlled, and if there's a glitch, boom! they explode.”

My computer screen shakes. I have

to get back to the remote work that's been assigned to me, as to every good citizen. The doctors and psychologists specializing in remote work strongly recommend against letting ourselves be carried off by memories. Besides, the insect amusement park hasn't existed for a long time. Those neo-insects became too dangerous. And boom! it all exploded.

I close the skylight. It's not good to breathe in the outside air for too long. I resume my place before the computer. And boom! Back to real life.

Wolves won't come out in the daylight.

The wolves have entered the town.

That's what they said tonight on the news. It didn't come as a great surprise. We've been waiting for the announcement. For a year the alerts have multiplied. We hadn't paid attention at first. Who still cares about wolves? They live in fairytales. And that's where they'll stay. Leave the wolves to our grandmothers. But then the alerts multiplied. One a month, one a week, one a day, one every hour.

WOLF ALERT! WOLF ALERT!

The last wolves had been confined at the very tops of the mountains. Surveilled, surrounded. Prohibited from procreating above quota. Only enough to maintain a vestige of the species. A telltale pair. So how had they multiplied to this extent? Had the wolf-hunters

been negligent? Had they turned a blind eye to illegal couplings? A successful documentary had denounced the strange mores of certain peoples of the Altai: the mothers gave their firstborns to the she-wolves to be nursed and turned into fierce warriors, leaders of unsparing and cruel clans. But the children played for too long with the cubs. It turned them into wolf children. There was perhaps something true in those stories of werewolves. They were, confirmed certain politicians, the wolf-men who had become leaders of the pack.

Countless packs of wolves descended from the mountains, from the Urals, the Carpathians, the Abruzzos... First comes winter. The wolves are the children of winter. A glacial wind announces the arrival of their gray ranks. Then, little by little, the howls of wolves blend into the whistling of gales in the blizzard. The snow buries the countrysides and the towns. The trees gleam with frost sequins. Here come the wolves.

The wolves wait for night. Night is the domain of wolves. During the

day, the wolves hide in their dens. The police search for their lairs, the army patrols the terrain, the drones fly over the suspected areas. The wolves are invisible in the light of day.

The wolves come out at night. It renders them invincible. The weapons of men turn on those who wish to use them. The drones refuse to obey. The war against the wolves is useless. Better to negotiate. The wolves are reasonable beings. An agreement can be reached. The negotiations are successful. The accords are signed. An equitable division is found. The wolves will have total sovereignty over the night. The day will be left for men.

Night has fallen on the town. All the lights must be extinguished. An order from the municipality. It is forbidden to go out once the sun has set. The curfew must be strictly obeyed. We are even encouraged to close the blinds and draw the curtains. We must resist the temptation to glance out the window.

But the temptation is too strong.

Many succumb to it. They go out in the streets. The wolves entice them. The eyes of the wolves shine in the darkness. The beauty of wolves is fatal. The reckless ones vanish. Some say they're devoured by the wolves, others that they become wolves. In the end, maybe it's the same thing.

—SM

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Translated by Emma Ramadan