



Te vertalen fragment voor de workshop Found in Translation met Olivia Sudjic op 7 maart 2018 in internationaal literatuurhuis Passa Porta, Brussel.

Sympathy (excerpt)

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I.

I wasn't with her when the fever started. I didn't even know she was sick. I'd known nearly everything about her until then, and could have recalled the smallest detail of any given day, whether she'd spent it with me or not. For months her presence, and telepresence, had given shape to my new life in New York. Now, with the stroke of a finger, it had gone.

Unfollow. Intended as a symbolic gesture only, a symbolic *fuck you*, assuming that I'd still have a level of public access. I'd observed her this way long before we met, but it appeared that her privacy had been altered since then. Very recently, I guessed. I was alarmed by her inhibition or what it meant she had to hide. Before, anyone could find her. Just by typing her name they would get an instant synopsis of her life: the neat grid of her pictures, captioned with her thoughts and feelings, tagged with a location and timestamped. Anyone could track her progress through the city, or slip backwards into her past, to her vacations and graduations. I can't have been the only one who'd done it so successfully. But now I was locked out. A white wall had descended, blank except for a padlock symbol.

More than her physical absence, it was this whiteout that was disorienting. There was little to suggest that time was passing. No news of her mornings or meals, no filtered sunsets or stars. As darkness fell in my world, the light from hers tormented me, remaining the same bright hospital white. I butted my index finger repeatedly against the wall, but her defiant little mouth, just visible in the porthole containing her profile

picture, turned my symbolic gesture back towards me: *Fuck you*. It was all symbolic. I touched the mouth; it was hard and would admit nothing. Her face was hard too. It denied, or felt nothing. No amount of pressure made any difference. There was nothing I could depress except *Follow* or *Back*. I couldn't decide which, so I waited, hoping that the unhappy choice would be taken away. Sometimes I would cover the glare with the palm of my hand, cancelling her light completely by squeezing my knuckles together. I'd count out sixty Mississippi and then flare them open again, hoping with this expansive motion to have magically sprung the lock, or to discover that the wall was only a temporary measure and she'd now restored her previous settings. When she did not, I tried more inventive routes. Rather than typing in *her* name, like any fool, I interrogated other names I knew — the names of her friends — pressing on every back door I could think of for a glimpse of where she was and who she was with, hoping to find her sheltering in one of their pictures. Not one of them had seen her, or if they had, they were hiding the fact. Or she was hiding somewhere in that labyrinth of other people's lives, but behind the lens itself.

It didn't take long for my resolve to weaken; then, after I'd admitted defeat, tapping *Follow* again, the time spent waiting for her to approve my request passed impossibly slowly. For whole minutes I convinced myself that it was the best thing to have happened, that this was in fact the only way out: to know nothing more about her from now on. It was useless, however. I knew too much already, and for long hours in between those minutes I tortured myself with grim fantasies — what was happening behind the wall as I waited for reentry.

Follow, once white, was now an arresting grey, the word replaced by *Requested*. I felt this new word did not convey proper urgency. For a start, I did not like the past tense. I glared at the word as I lay in bed, certain that my envoy was not requesting hard enough. I wondered how I might take back control of the situation. When we had spent rare nights apart before, I'd kept our message thread open, in order to watch her name waxing on- and offline in the grey bar at the top of the screen, pressing it every so often to keep it lit. By doing this I'd felt as though I had her next to me, as if she lay beside me breathing, but trying that trick then felt more like lying beside a corpse for comfort.

When I wasn't watching the white wall, I watched the grey bar. At least there time moved on. It didn't tell the *actual* time, but how long had passed since she'd gone off-grid. I wanted to breathe the same atmosphere as her. I opened the windows as many

inches as I could, felt the currents of air that moved between the tall buildings, and imagined liquefying them, creating a hydraulic system between us, so that I could position and push her finger down just by levering mine above the button. Once, I felt sure I'd seen her status morph from *last seen* to *online* and from *online* to the pendulous *typing*: a sign of life, like steam on a mirror. Then I had blinked hard, and again the grey bar, the headstone above the message thread, confirmed that she was not.

[...]

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