

JULES SPINATSCH.  
DAVOS IS A VERB

IN THE BEGINNING UNSMOKE YOUR MIND  
WAS THE WORD. TIM JACKSON  
AND THE WORD WAS  
WITH DAVOS. AND THE  
WORD WAS DAVOS. IN DAVOS WAS GROWTH.  
AND WITHOUT GROWTH WAS NOT ANY  
THING MADE THAT WAS MADE —

*A sudden jolt.*

*The squeal of metal wheel on freezing rail.*

*Was I asleep? Where am I?*

Looking up, I register a window. Beyond the cold glass lies an almost liquid darkness. A single light is shining somewhere impossibly high above us. A light that shineth in the darkness. And the darkness comprehends it not. And the passenger comprehends it not. My vision adjusts. Awareness returns. Black outlines texture the impenetrability of the night. Mountains! We are deep in the mountains. What time is it?

The brakes release with a hiss. The wheels turn again. Metal on metal. A sign comes into view. And the Word was Davos. More lights. More signs. More mountains. And then precipitously we have arrived. In Davos Platz. Later than intended. Delayed by a rail strike in France. An engine failure in Zurich. But here we are at last. It's Monday, 20 January 2020. The time is 10 pm.

*The Promenade*

The night air assaults me as I descend from the train. A rush of breath. The sharpness of frost. I pause to wind a scarf more tightly round my neck. I'm trying to remember why it was so important to come by train. And not, absolutely not, to fly. I believe... I'm not sure. I think it had something to do with not burning enough carbon to sustain a sub-Saharan household for an entire year. A young man pushes past me. Skis balanced precariously on one shoulder. I move quickly to avoid their swaying tips. My foot slides on a thin layer of ice. A dusting of snow has fallen. The slopes will be perfect tomorrow. A moment's envy. I'm not here to ski.

*'Herr Jackson?'*

Two young men in dark coats step forward smiling. 'How was your journey?' They usher me towards a sleek black saloon. I would be happier to walk. 'How far is it?' I ask. 'Not far,' says my driver. 'Nowhere is far in Davos,' says his companion. And then, perhaps

to justify the flashy ride, they offer me a tour of the town. At a speed slightly slower than walking pace, we weave our way carefully through the late-night crowds that throng the Promenade.

I am seeing for the first time the makeover enacted on Davos each year during the third week in January — the week of the World Economic Forum. For half a century now this small Swiss town — the highest town in Europe — has played host to the great and the good. The heads of state and the CEOs. The gatekeepers of privilege and power. The captains of capitalism have gathered here for five decades to celebrate success and to jostle for supremacy. Sharp suits. Posh frocks. Slick haircuts. Bright lights and limousines. Tonight is opening night. 'It's a jamboree,' says my driver. 'It's a jungle,' growls his companion. And we share a humourless laugh.

It started out so simple — a winter retreat for the super-elite. A high-class bazaar, the *Financial Times* once called it. A place to indulge in 'small talk and big deals,' said the *Economist*. In its heyday, it boasted celebrity after celebrity. Parties that owed more to outrage than to good taste. Every now and then, its organisers would try to clean up the act. Limiting participation. Shifting the emphasis. Changing the tone. But since the financial crisis in 2008, there has been an unruly explosion of activities. Davos has had to evolve — and evolve again.

For some years now, its local stores and offices have earned a small fortune renting out space to their fickle visitors. The hastily converted Promenade is home to a thousand competing claims. A feverish parade of bright, neon-lit, designer studios. A curious collage of corporate branding and New Age spirituality. Power and privilege posing as planetary vision. This is the transformation documented so meticulously by Jules Spinatsch in the pages of this book.

Along the Promenade we find ourselves held up briefly by crowds spilling out from one of these pop-up stores. The Jet Set fashion boutique at number 63 has been taken over by tobacco giant Philip Morris International. Sheryl Crow is playing there tonight. A sign in the window of the store invites you to UNSMOKE your mind. It's the latest campaign by PMI to defend its lucrative vaping market against punitive regulation, while continuing to expand its cigarette brands. 'Let's not quit on smokers' is one of its canny taglines.

Beyond the veil of decorum. On the periphery of vision. A bearded man in a woolly hat and a shabby overcoat clutches a folded newspaper in his ungloved

hand. His head is bowed against the cold. Against the night. Against the revelry. Elsewhere a worker puts the finishing touches to a hasty façade. Another in a fluorescent jacket attends to a pile of debris at the side of the road. Here on one corner is a small group of unruly activists. Wearing the red nose of the clown and waving the rainbow flags of protest. Dirty snow is piled carelessly on the sidewalk. Beneath the spectacle of wealth and advantage lie the tell-tale signs of a soberer reality.

Spinatsch has sensed this too. His art is to see beyond the façade. To turn each simple image inside out. Reflection upon reflection. Layer upon layer. These are the visual tricks of his trade. His juxtaposition leads us beyond the happy-ever-after. His images reveal not what power would portray, but the intricate reality that lies behind it. Tonight is all mating ritual and pecking order. Tomorrow the jousting begins.

#### *All trumped up*

First up will be the US President Donald Trump. Who will be great. So great. He'll give the best speech ever delivered. He'll use a huge, a tremendous number of superlatives. So many superlatives. You wouldn't believe it. (In fact, it would be best not to believe it. Few of his claims will survive the factchecker.) 'This is a time for tremendous hope and joy and optimism and action,' Trump will declare in a rare fragment of coherent prose. He will gaze with unimpeachable self-assurance across a sea of upturned faces. Almost unforgivably, none of them will yet be prepared to challenge him. All of them will still be happy to applaud. 'To embrace the possibilities of tomorrow,' he will proclaim, 'we must reject the perennial prophets of doom and their predictions of the apocalypse. They are the heirs of yesterday's foolish fortune-tellers.'

To whom can he possibly be referring? On the outskirts of Davos, two days later, his limousine will find itself delayed and diverted by a colourful group of young protesters under the unlikely leadership of his seventeen-year-old nemesis, the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg. Speaking truth to power with the assurance of a seer. 'Is she the chief economist? Or who is she? I'm confused,' Trump's Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin will quip. 'After she goes and studies economics in college she can come back and explain that to us,' It's a moment he should instantly regret. But he won't. 'A joke,' he will insist. 'That was funny.' But no one will laugh.

The two most powerful men in the world are taking aim at an autistic schoolgirl. Really? They are broken caricatures from an old B-movie playing out their jaded prejudice with no sense at all for the angry new vibe of the kids on the street. Climate activism will not be ushered into the corners of polite society by political dinosaurs. These arrogant men deserve no place in the slow forgetting of history. Do they sense already the change this year will bring for them? Does the dark ever dread the onset of the light?

Beyond the shimmering façade, the foundations are sinking. The snow above the town is thinner this year than at any time since the Forum's first meeting in 1971. In Australia, the fires that have burnt through the long 'black summer' are raging still. This January will turn out to be the warmest start to any year on record. Thunberg is right. For thirty years, the science has been crystal clear. It's our political vision that is clouded.

#### *Mirror, mirror*

Spinatsch can see it. I can sense it. A thinly veiled anxiety pervades the 50th World Economic Forum. Especially here on opening night. The flamboyant signs along the Promenade betray a sense of desperate affirmation. Growth forever, proclaims one. #GrowingEurope, says another. How you grow matters, insists a third. For half a century now, the central narrative at the World Economic Forum has revolved around this indelible creed. That Growth is the light of the world. Half a century of hubris. An unshakable certainty that capitalism is the 'end of history'. That more is irrefutably better.

'People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction,' Greta reminded the UN Conference on Climate Change a few short months ago. 'And all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth.' This is now her second visit to Davos. Her influence is like acid. Corroding the lies that sustain its dubious politics. No wonder the big guns line up against her.

My driver stops the car momentarily and points to a converted office at Promenade 76. A huge glass window reveals a temporary studio. 'This is us,' he says. A mirror at the rear of the studio, designed to make the space seem bigger, posts our own reflection back to us. This is us. In a manner of speaking. But that's not what he meant. In the window hangs an illuminated sign in the shape of brightly lit handwriting. It is to this sign that my driver is pointing. 'Is growth an illusion?' it reads. I smile. To question the fairy tale is possible at last.

Deutsche Bank are the unlikely hosts of a week-long conversation which in previous years would have been unthinkable. It would be nice to think we have Thunberg to thank for that. But the truth is less romantic. The rate of growth across the richest nations on the planet has fallen from almost 5% when Klaus Schwab founded the Forum to little more than 1% per year in recent years. This year, for reasons that remain hidden from sight right now, the global economy will shrink by more than 4%. Europe's economy will decline by twice that. The light of Growth is fading. And darkness moves upon the face of the deep.

This day has been a long time coming. But it's still a surprise to many. Promenade 76 is a maverick moment on the margins of power. It flaunts its seditious message openly enough, on the fringe of the Forum. Meanwhile, the Emperors of capitalism parade their newest clothes on the catwalks of Davos: deepening their grip on the central narrative; exorcising their anxiety through relentless repetition of the one true faith. And the light shines in the darkness. And we beheld its glory. The glory as of the only begotten. Full of grace and truth.

I don't know this yet. But Spinatsch has stood where we have stopped and pointed his lens at this studio. In the photograph on this page, you will find the photographer himself. Standing here outside this very window. Reflected in the studio mirror. The photo captures the image of a man capturing an image of himself.

There is something bewildering about the unlit question in this image. Why is it readable? By the time I see this photograph, I will have stood inside that studio. I will have noticed for myself that from the inside out the sign reads backwards. As it must of course, if it is to be read from the outside correctly. Here in this final photograph we seem to be looking from the inside out. But we are seeing the sign from the outside in. Almost a year later, I will puzzle over these disconcerting optics. And eventually I will give up. Perhaps their lesson is that the reflection of a reflection is our only clue to reality.

### *The Great Reset*

A surprising consensus will emerge this year that capitalism has failed us. Debt overhang, trade wars, capricious leaders: nobody will quite be able to decide who or what is most to blame. But the damage will



already be plain to see. Capitalism has left too many people behind. Its rewards have been too unequally dispensed. Its promise has been corrupted by greed and irresponsibility. A decade of austerity has decimated basic services. Populism has undermined the fabric of society.

But nobody will quite dare to point out the blindingly obvious: that capitalism itself is responsible for its own deficiencies. Its neglect of nature, its denigration of work, its capture of politics, its distortion of the money system, its insistence that more is always better, against the grain of evidence and reason. The myth of growth has been coded into the DNA of the Forum from before the dawn of time. Promenade 76 will remain a Davos anomaly. The mood music elsewhere will play a familiar tune. A main stage seminar 'Debunking the limits to growth' is much more on point.

One brave politician, the newly appointed young Chancellor of Austria, Sebastian Kurz, will briefly acknowledge there is a debate to be had. About



in adversity, it will be the rich and the privileged who survive the best. While the frontline workers, those who will turn out to matter more than ever, will overpopulate the tragic statistics of the year 2020. Chronically underpaid and dangerously exposed. It is the poor who will bear the brunt of capitalism's failure. Same as it ever was. Chaos and uncertainty will follow. Eleven months later, the fate of the 51st Forum will still hang precariously in the balance. So will the future of Davos itself. Growing tired of the circus, the architects of the World Economic Forum will find a convenient excuse for what they will call *The Great Reset*. This new and decisive initiative will 'help inform all those determining the future state of global relations, the direction of national economies, the priorities of societies, the nature of business models and the management of a global commons'.

It all sounds marvellous. Where do I sign up? Well. We'll let you know. Later. In the meantime, here's one we prepared earlier. We're calling it *The Davos Agenda*. It will happen in January. It will be virtual, of course. For safety reasons. There'll be no opening night. There'll be no façade. No hasty repurposing of the Promenade. No sharp suits. No posh frocks. No limousines. Davos Klosters will have a remarkably quiet January. Some will surely welcome that.

But the small print of the new plan will reveal a fascinating detail. The new *Davos Agenda* will 'feature' heads of state and captains of industry: the Forum's 'core communities'. Gone the climate strikers — holding up the limousines. Gone the perennial prophets of doom — betraying the one true faith. Gone the spiritual voyagers — seeking a different kind of growth. Gone the heirs of yesterday's foolish fortune-tellers. Greta should be back in class now anyway.

What does power do when its influence starts to fade? Cling on relentlessly? Let go gracefully? Or adapt and change. The most obvious strategy of all is to use what power remains to modify the rules. Welcome to *The Great Reset*. No jamboree. No bazaar. No jungle. A chance for the elite to clear the streets of dissidence and protest. It's in your own best interest, folks.

*Guest*

The morning after the opening night, I am woken by a wild, haunting cry. My city radar cannot place it. So I allow myself to imagine. I know that wolves have returned to the Alps in recent years. Though none have

growth. About capitalism. About progress. He will even toy seductively with the idea of a 'postgrowth economy' — only to dismiss it in the very next instant. 'Happiness doesn't pay any pensions,' he will tell his audience. A light smile will play across his lips, as though this too is all just a joke. But very soon the laughter will fade. Very soon the tears will fall.

Even as the Forum is celebrating its half centenary along the crowded Promenade, a young Chinese doctor lies sick in a Wuhan hospital. His early warnings of a novel and pernicious coronavirus have already been fatally ignored. Two weeks from now he will be dead. Not long afterwards our most cherished creeds will lie in tatters. Consumerism, globalisation, trade: capitalism itself will be swept to one side as governments struggle to stem the tide of a global pandemic.

Had capitalism left society in robust health, the damage wouldn't be so profound. But it didn't. Precarity in work. Instability in finance. Tension in the body politic. A divided and impoverished society. Even

yet been seen in this vicinity. But the torment of that cry reminds me of an essay by the American naturalist Aldo Leopold called *Thinking Like a Mountain*, in which he describes the death of a female wolf at the hands of hunters. 'We reached the old wolf,' he writes, 'in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes.' Sleep is suddenly elusive.

Bleary-eyed, I wander into the living room of my borrowed home. On the table lies my host's brief welcome note. *Lieber Gast . . . Dear Guest . . .* I'm grateful for his euphemistic greeting. I am happy to be his Guest. And he my Host. In his nineteenth-century utopian novel *News from Nowhere*, William Morris names his narrator Guest. Guest travels alone to the eponymous Nowhere. And discovers a world where everything is done differently. Work is valued. Nature is respected. Needs are met. And sufficiency is enough. Nowhere is a million miles from capitalism. It's a million miles from Davos.

Sliding back the big glass door, I step out onto the balcony just as the first sweet light of dawn catches the snow-capped peaks that surround the town. As it does so, the howl of anguish comes again. 'An outburst of wild defiant sorrow and contempt for all the adversities of the world.' The deep Alpine blue of the morning sky speaks suddenly of an unquenchable thirst. It is the yearning of all life for life itself. Only the mountain can listen objectively to the howl of a wolf, wrote Leopold, a lifetime ago.

I wonder where my host is now. And whether he misses this astonishing view. I understand he was compensated handsomely for his role in our exchange. I hope the disruption was worth it. I hope the same is true for every converted premises along the neon-lit Promenade. An unhealthy reliance on the lavish fees now charged for prime Davos real estate will be a hard habit to break when the largesse is gone.

What is the town without the World Economic Forum? Will the citizens of Davos mourn or welcome its passing? And what of capitalism itself? When we have bought and sold all there is to buy and sell, who will care what price was paid? Will the mountains mourn our passing? Does the first night sense the final curtain? Does today's hope feel tomorrow's broken promise? Is reality just the reflection of a reflection? Is growth an illusion? Where the fuck am I? Who cares?

These are the questions of one walking, disoriented in the middle of the night. Surrounded by an unfamiliar geography. They populate the liminal space on the periphery of meaning. They haunt our sleep. They hide beyond the veil of consensus and the dogma of façade. Science skates over them. But art may seek to untangle them. And photography — fleetingly — may capture what lies beyond.

A man in a shabby overcoat plods wearily along the Davos Promenade, clutching yesterday's newspaper in his red-knuckled hand. Behind him, two young executives fidget on their phones and lean earnestly in towards each other. Caught in the glass of the neighbouring studio, where Sheryl Crow once sang for the tobacco crowd, the light of the dying sun casts the snow-capped peak of the Büelenhorn in liquid gold. The reflection is captured by an ornamental frame whose edges are illuminated in the gentlest shade of aquamarine. Image upon image. Layer upon layer. Unsmoke your mind. If it is allowable to have a favourite amongst these many captivating images, this one will be mine.

*When I eventually get to see it.*