

# A singularity

Bastien Hauser

Novel

French



*"A singularity" traces the hallucinatory journey of a young man connected to a black hole. Bastien Hauser's writing is representative of a generation fully alight. It depicts the protagonist's thirst for the absolute as he is sucked into oblivion, into the sky and into the night.*

*"I try not to freak out, I tell myself that the world is full of coincidences, one more, one less. Except that a probability like this is forbidden. If I calculated it, if I knew how to calculate it, it would be so small, with dozens of zeros after the decimal point, it would be ridiculous. The things that we cannot reasonably imagine should be forbidden by a law of nature or by the constitution: so that we can avoid this kind of situation, avoid the day when press conferences are organised around the globe to present the first photo of a black hole while I observe the hole inside myself for the first time."*

Title

Une singularité

Publisher

Actes Sud

Publication date

March 2024

Pages

272

ISBN

978-2-330-18951-8

Translation rights

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Photo: Elise Comte

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Excerpt translated by Michelle Bailat-Jones

26 June 2019

23h18

When she asks me what I'm writing about, I say black holes, I'm writing about black holes. No one says anything. I look at my hands. Head buzzing, creeping shame. If no one reacts, such shame. And then Marta says wow and I'm grateful, Sam empties his glass, Joshua says, I've got some colleagues working in that, I could put you in contact, Cleo looks at me from across the room without saying anything, I'm waiting for her reaction, whether she'll smile or tease me, but there's nothing and I have the feeling that she's looking at me, really looking at me, for the first time, it's a thrill, for a fraction of a second I'm interesting, I'm a firework, a sunset, a supernova and then, like always, the feeling is gone.

Later, with the table shoved aside to make space, Marta and Samuel dance like lovers, I open the fridge to grab a beer and stand in front of it for the chill. It's indecently hot. I like the feeling of iced aluminum against my skin. Cleo places a hand on my hip, her face over my shoulder, she's on her tiptoes asking if there's anything left to drink. I hand her the can of beer in my hand and grab another. She says, I don't like beer; that's all there is, and she makes a face. When I open the window, all the air from the street rushes in. The smoke that fills the room hovers a few seconds and then dissipates, I think how we're the same, we only exist when the space between our bodies isn't enough to distinguish each of us, when we're huddled together in a kitchen or around a table in a café, when, all together, we make a cloud. I lean out the window, the street is calm, we're the only ones being loud, Britney Spears blasting, everyone loves it. Joshua is on his phone, typing compulsively, I want to ask him if everything is okay, but I don't. Cleo comes over to me, she looks at her beer and makes a disgusted face. If you don't like it, don't drink it. I'm not going to drink water, am I? She fixes her gaze onto mine and holds it, like a challenge, I try not to turn away, but I break first. I look at my hands, fiddle with my lighter.

She says, so you're writing about black holes? I nod, but she's waiting for more. I say that for the moment I'm getting information,

meeting people, I'm researching, it's still in the early stages. I'm praying she won't ask me why, why black holes, but the subject is so popular no one finds it shocking anymore. I say a silent thank you to pop science and pop culture while she tells me about a friend of hers who is writing science fiction, a totally out-there guy who's inventing planets, civilizations, languages. She says, I don't know how his brain works. I say, I can't even figure out how my own works and this makes her smile.

Joshua rejoins us. He shoves his face into Cleo's hair like trying to rid himself of an overly private thought. She wraps an arm around him, says, all good, babe? You look tired. The pair of them look into my eyes like I'm some kind of fairground animal, and for a moment I have the sense that I'm transparent. I have the sense they know exactly what I'm thinking, that they see what's inside me. I'm expecting them to shout, to suddenly jump back and say, you're disgusting, what is that thing, but instead Joshua asks me how long I'm planning to stay. I say, I don't know, I don't have my return ticket. You've got to stay until the eclipse! No idea what he's talking about. We're going to go camping in the desert and watch the eclipse, it's going to be mystic. He makes a movement with his hands that signifies spirituality, the cosmos, and everything beyond us. Marta shouts and her voice comes to me over the music, Abel, are you staying for the eclipse? I shrug, why not. She raises her arms, a victory gesture. I have known them for less than 24 hours, I feel like I've known them for years.

When there's nothing else to drink, I dance with Joshua, I like how he moves, his hand on my sweat-slick forearm, my hair is down and ends up in my mouth, Cleo changes the music, I recognize the first chords, I've heard them hundreds of times, it's Bonnie Tyler, everyone is excited, they're saying it's our song, Every now and then I get a little bit restless, Marta comes back with glitter, we spread handfuls of it over our faces, we take thousands of photos, some are already online, it looks like you're crying stars, I check myself in the mirror, And I dream of something wild, there's a big tear drop under my right eye, I light cigarette after cigarette, I love smoking when I'm dancing, I feel safe with so many bodies close to me, I can no longer tell whose limb is whose, only a mass of flesh moving together, We're living in a powder keg, I think of Sacha, Alois, Val, everyone else, and giving off sparks, I remember their eyes, red from crying all night, not all tears are stars and not all stars shine, I wonder what they would say to see me here, like a shadow on me all of the time, they'd certainly think I've

replaced them, but it's much more complicated, Sam waves the flame from a lighter and makes the glitter shine on our faces, Cleo is standing on a chair, she's magnificent, shouting into an imaginary microphone, Now I'm only falling apart, everyone is singing and I'm thinking of stars, how they collapse into themselves.

1.

10 April 2019

12h51

It looks like clouds, like billows of smoke, and he takes a green pen and circles a luminous dot. He says, do you see this spot, Mr. Fleck? It's the bruise. It's all I can see. You were lucky, you didn't bleed for long, you can thank your platelets, it doesn't appear that any areas involving motor skills were affected. It's too early for a prognosis, let's hope the bruise clears up. For the moment, there's no sign of swelling but we need to be careful. My brain is a dented car, a scratched bumper, the passenger side caved in. He says nothing, looking at me for a long time. He is performing compassion. I look away. He seems younger than me. I think it's because he's so close shaven. If I shaved like that, I'd look young, too, I'd look like a teenager.

The doctor gestures toward my brain again. You've heard about Broca's area? I don't react and so he moves his pen. It's an area in the brain that is intimately connected to language, there's nothing I can see to differentiate the zone from the rest of the brain, because the bruising is so close to it, we need to watch the situation carefully. He turns the display off. The spot remains imprinted on my cornea like a star that's been dead for millions of years. I've lifted my head toward the summer sky, flooding my retina with light particles that make little lakes and alter my vision. He keeps speaking but I'm no longer listening.

All the images from everything that happened are right there, but I don't understand them.

Sacha's in her kitchen, the pain just above my temple, my plummeting stomach, the dizziness, my hand trying to grab the table but grabbing nothing, the sound of broken glass, the smooth feel of the floor tiles against the back of my skull, the ceiling lamp that

sways between my eyelashes, my ears filled with cotton and Sacha shouting amidst it all.

I've replayed the scene dozens of times, trying to explain it and then I stopped trying. I hear Sacha say, one second you were there, she points where with her finger, and the next you're flat on the ground, I was so scared. But what I want to know is what makes the bridge? How do you go from one second to another, from point A to point B? One second everything is fine and the next everything is different. These days I consider each second of my life individually, not in a flow, but as a puzzle. Nothing moves anymore, nothing jangles, instead everything is inert, all just there, my entire life spread out flat in front of me like a world map torn into pieces.

The doctor is sitting behind his desk, I watch him articulate my name, I hear each syllable, but I don't react. They mean nothing, they have no more connection to me than any other syllable. The feeling rushes at me that I'm at fault, that I'm the person who tore the world map apart, that there's a knife in my jacket, a huge bloody knife, that we're no longer in a hospital but at the police station, that he isn't a doctor but a cop, that in just a moment they're going to accuse me of a crime, handcuff me, take my mugshot, and get me into a striped jumpsuit. I'm hardly breathing. Sacha puts her hand on my forearm. I'd forgotten she was next to me. She looks into my eyes, I watch her fingers stroke my skin, the doctor watches us. For a moment, they're waiting for the answer to a question I didn't hear. I swallow, the doctor continues. Sacha drops my arm, brings out a notebook and takes some notes. I read fatigue, disorientation, loss of memory, difficulty finding his words, and a little lower down, set appointment for follow-up. I sense in their voices that the conversation is winding to its end. Sacha asks some questions, I think, and then she stands. I get up, too, and follow her into the hallway after placing my hand into the doctor's hand.

As we cross the parking lot, Sacha says, I'm calling a taxi, and I watch plumes of white smoke billow out from the air vents, they dance a moment in front of the concrete block of the pediatrics wing before quickly rising. I see my brain again, it's furled gray matter, cut into slices, scanned and projected. I watch it float up, superimpose itself onto the clouds and disappear because I'm unable to distinguish between the vapor that is just there, a few meters from me, and the vapors filling the sky. Everything sits

on the same plane, the perception of space is an illusion, if I stretch out my hand I will graze the constellations. Sacha makes a sign to the taxi that is pulling up and stopping in front of us. For an instant, my brain merges with the sky, Sacha calls my name, she's already seated in the back of the taxi, Abel, are you coming? We're waiting for you, the question in her eyes and in the eyes of the driver; the meter is already running.