

the next two days of everything

a smith

A note on the text

This work is written for theatre spaces but can be performed in any room that can serve as such, so long as it is quiet, comfortable, and the performer and audience can see each other.

The character in the piece is a theatre maker from the UK who lives in Norway.

The piece is set in the theatre or room in the time it is being presented. The room, location and country should be changed each time the text is performed in a different place. These are indicated in the text with an asterisk.

Now, on the whole I think I'm doing OK. I hope so. I'm trying to live a good life.

I pay my taxes. I say hello to my neighbours. I talk to the man who works in the shop on the corner of my street.

I like to think of myself as the kind of person who understands things, you know? I try to understand things.

I listen to the radio. I read the paper. I surf the internet. I go to the cinema and the theatre. I read books. I like to try and keep up with what's going on. I imagine you do too. I like to know what's happening. Out there in the world.

I see how the oil is running out. How the climate is shifting and the sea levels are rising. I see how we're constantly at war. I hear how the poor are still starving and the rich are still playing. I think, well, on the whole, it's not looking too good is it? It's not going too well, is it?

I find it difficult. I get concerned. These are my concerns. Everywhere I go I meet them. I wonder what I can do.

And then I'm looking at my notebook and I realise that I might be making something. And then here I am. Here we are. Making something.

A pause

I live in Oslo.

I like the feel and the size of the city. It's a capital, but it isn't big. There's only half a million people but it has everything you need.

I don't think that it's possible to live in Norway and not think about oil. It's a bit of a fairytale. There they were in the sixties. Not very rich. On the edge of Europe. Getting on with life. Getting over the war. Farming and fishing. And then someone comes along and works out there might be some oil under the sea and boom! It's like they've won the lottery.

I heard that when we discovered how much oil was off the coast of Europe all our politicians met to change the laws on who owned which bit of the land under the sea, and in the change Norway became much bigger. The idea was that when Europe became more united in the future, there would be a bigger share of the wealth for everyone. More security for everyone.

I also heard that when the politicians from Norway and Denmark met to meet and talk about who would get which bit of the land under the sea, the minister from Denmark had a bit too much to drink with his lunch, and he didn't realise quite how much of a fortune he was signing away to Norway.

I wouldn't want something like that on my conscience, would you?

I wouldn't be in that position anyway.

A pause

Oil is amazing! It makes so much possible. It helps us travel. It keeps us warm. It helps us make and grow the food that we eat, then helps it get to the shop. It even makes the plastic bag that I carry it home from the shop in! But only on the days where I forget my reusable bag, or on the days that I have to pick up a plastic one because I need it for the rubbish.

My glasses are made from it. Your glasses. My shoes. Your shoes. The clothes we are wearing depend on it.

Without oil, it would be hard to imagine the beer that we might have together after this performance. Or glass of wine. Or soft drink. In fact without it, it would be hard to imagine this performance.

Music

A while ago I was in Stamsund. Stamsund is a small town off the coast of the North of Norway in a group of islands called Lofoten.

The main industry there is fishing, which I'm not too good at – especially the killing bit – but luckily I wasn't there to do any of that. In Stamsund every year they also host an international theatre festival.

I really like the festival. With all these artists and audiences from different places in the world walking around it feels like a bit of retreat, a bit of a utopia, even. The population of the town grows a little, which feels like a good thing. For the local economy. For morale.

It's above the arctic circle too so if you're lucky the sun is shining all day and all night. On the last night of the festival there was a party, and some people got so drunk that they fell asleep outside. The next day it was easy to spot them because they were all walking round with heads the colour of salmon.

Anyway it's great. You do your work and watch other peoples work. You eat and drink together and you talk and listen to each other. And the setting is perfect. It's so peaceful and fresh and still. The islands look amazing. They feel almost prehistoric. Like they live and breath and grow straight out of the sea.

A pause

While I was there I heard that there were plans to drill for oil off the coast of Lofoten. I couldn't believe it! But apparently the oil companies were saying that nothing was definite. They said that the moment they were just using some radars and sonar and doing some seismic testing. They said that the landscape and wildlife was safe. That nothing was being damaged or disturbed.

Someone said that was all wrong. They said that it was too late. That the seismic testing had frightened all the fish and that they weren't breeding. They said that the fish population was going to fall whether they ended up drilling or not.

Someone else said they thought it was a good idea. They said that it was good to think about bringing in some money. They said that the islands had had hard times in the past and they might have more hard times in the future.

All this talk of oil and dead fish and making money meant that the spell of Stamsund felt a bit broken. My faith in humanity felt a bit bruised. My liberal sensibilities felt a bit challenged.

I stood there trying to breath in and look at the mountains and the birds and the sunshine on the sea. I wanted to feel connected. I wanted to feel human. But it just wasn't happening.

A pause

I wonder if I don't get that kind of feeling when I look at nature anymore. I wonder if I only get it when I look at things that we've made ourselves. Like tall buildings or planes. Computers or Ipods.

A pause

When you start thinking about oil, you realise pretty soon that you can't just think about one thing. Pretty soon you'll start thinking about the environment too.

A pause

And the climate.

A pause

Then there's politics. And money. It all comes back to the money. People are always saying to me, isn't it expensive to live in Norway? And the answer is yes. It is. But I think it's probably relative. What with all the space and the nature and the oil.

And more than once people have said to me that now the planets getting hotter, the weather in Norway is going to get better. It's further south that the sun and the heat will get worse and slowly kill thousands of people.

A pause

I was in Dublin for a weekend. It felt like the city had really changed since I'd been there last. There were more people. It's become more multicultural. They've also joined the euro so the economy has got much stronger.

While I was there there was a big vote going on to decide whether Ireland should agree to something called the Lisbon Treaty. There were posters all over the place. On the posters all the politicians were giving a big smile. And next to them was a tick. Or a cross. And vote yes or vote no.

The EU website said that the Lisbon treaty was a response to the challenges we faced today. It said that it wanted to promote equal rights, justice and freedom, and make our future more secure. I thought it sounded great! But the next day it was all over the papers that the Irish had voted no.

One paper said that it was a disaster. The beginning of the end for a United Europe. Another said that it was a victory for common sense, that it proved that you just couldn't get different cultures or countries to get on. Most of the people I talked to about it were happy. They said that they didn't understand the treaty. They didn't understand what it was for, what it could do for them or how it could help them. So they had voted no, or not voted at all.

A pause

I wonder what the politicians are really up to. I wonder what they really think.

I wonder why I don't write more letters or emails. I wonder why why we are not marching more. I wonder if it's enough that I take my used batteries and lightbulbs to the recycling station. I wonder if I should be buying the apples from Spain rather than the ones I really like that come from America.

I wonder if I should really be flying somewhere next week.

A pause

Then I was in Lisbon! Where the treaty comes from! A beautiful city. Near the sea. Near the equator.

A lot of the buildings are covered in tiles with all sorts of different patterns and colours. I thought they were just there because they looked nice, but while I was taking a guided tour on a tram round the city I found out that they actually help control the heat. They reflect the sun and keep the houses and flats and streets in the city cool.

I was working in Lisbon. In the headquarters of a massive bank. I wasn't working with the money, thankfully. I failed maths three times at school! The bank also has a theatre and an art gallery attached.

They really looked after their staff. There was a fantastic canteen. And a roof garden too! On the second day we were there we were having breakfast in our hotel over the road and we watched a man mowing the lawn. Ten floors up on the roof of a massive bank!

While I was there I heard that in the future the bank was planning to power the whole building by installing huge solar panels on the roof. They were going to help cook the cheese omelettes that I had for my lunch. They were going to power the lawn mower and the lights in the theatre!

I was surprised. And glad. I don't know about you, but most of the time I walk around thinking that some of the biggest challenges to the challenges we face today come from the big guys. You know, the banks. The multinationals.

I always think it's them that are responsible for tempting farmers off the land to work in factories. It's them that are helping supply arms to dictators. It's them that are keeping developing nations in debt.

I often think that all the big guys care about is making money, you know? Maybe giving a bit to the arts, but mostly just making money.

And of course they care about that. But I thought that it was great to find out that in this bank, in the next two years, they were working out a way to power this massive building by the sun. A massive bank in the middle of Lisbon with a theatre and an art gallery, and no electricity bills.

Their lights aren't going to go out in 2050 or whenever people say the lights are going to go out. They're not going to bake to death. Just like their ancestors did with the tiles, they're going to stick some stuff on the walls and the roof and keep going for a while. They're going to put up those solar panels and gently slow down the inevitable end to all of this.

A pause

On the way out of Lisbon I looked out of the car window and wondered if I would ever visit the city again. I hoped so. I really liked it. But we don't know how possible all of this travelling might be in the future do we?

We got to the airport and I said thanks to the man who had driven me there and shook his hand. Then I went inside and got in the queue to check in.

A pause

I try to not mind being in an airport. I try to be positive. It means I'm going somewhere. Or coming home. The queues aren't going to move any faster if I get angry or impatient, are they? I try to be a bit zen about these things.

I travel for work mostly, though that can also be a pleasure. I'm lucky. It can be difficult, though. Sometimes it feels like I fly a lot. I fly a lot. And of course I feel a bit guilty about it.

Loads of the airports that I have been to recently are expanding. I often sit in them and wonder what's going to happen to them in the future. I wonder what the buildings will become when they can't be airports anymore.

I always think that they'll end up becoming art galleries. Most of the big airports I have been to would make excellent art galleries. Lots of light. Open space. A cafe. A shop. Plenty of toilets.

And by then we'll probably have invented teleportation. We'll be stepping into pods, pressing buttons and boom! We're on holiday in Thailand! Boom! We're shopping in New York! Boom! We're off to the theatre in Oslo.*

A pause

On my desk at home I have a writing mat. You know, a kind of massive mouse mat. The picture on it is a political map of the world. Sometimes when I'm working I just lift up my keyboard or papers and sit and look at it. I can look at it for ages.

I look at where I am. Where I come from. Where other people come from. I look at places that I have never been to. At places I'll probably never go to. I look at where places are in relation to other places in the world. I imagine what places are like. What they smell and sound like. How people are there. Who their leaders are. How they behave. How they think. How they treat each other.

Music

I was in Singapore. We had to fly for twelve hours to get there. On the way, we looked down through the clouds and saw the mountain ranges of Afghanistan. Before I went someone told me they had read that Singapore had been described as being like 'Disneyland with the death penalty'. Apparently they hang people. At dawn on a Friday.

Singapore used to be a fishing village. Then in the 1800's it was established as a trading post by the British. Now it's an independent microstate. People still trade from there, but I wasn't there to do any of that.

Of course I didn't feel too good about the capital punishment thing, but other than that I thought Singapore was great. It seemed to be really aware of its diversity. The government seemed to have made and be making a real attempt at having, allowing and helping different cultures live next to each other.

At first I couldn't work out where anyone in Singapore was. Even though it's only about one percent the size of Norway, the population is more or less the same, but every day we would walk for about fifteen minutes between the hotel and the theatre and hardly see anyone. Just people in shops or cars or working on the pavements.

Then on about the third day my colleague realised we could walk through a shopping mall. And we realised that this was where all the people were, under the ground and perfectly air conditioned. There's air conditioning everywhere in Singapore. The electricity bills must be massive.

It's a very futuristic place. There's a lot of business, a lot of busy-ness, a lot of outdoor food courts, a lot of temples, a lot of shopping centres, and a lot of high rise buildings. On the last night we were there we went for a drink in a bar seventy-two floors up. Your ears popped in the lift!

The bar was filled with neon and ultra-violet. Everything glowed. Our faces. The tables. We drank lychee martini and looked out at the glow of the lights of the city. The lights of the boats on the blackness of the water. The lights of the cars on the arteries of the roads. The lights in the towers all around us. It all felt a bit like being in some kind of dystopian science fiction novel.

A pause

I came back home with loads of trinkets. You know, Buddha's. Charms. Incense. I also bought a Maneki Neko. One of those golden cats that waves like this.

Waves

A couple of months later I found out that actually the cat is beckoning, not waving. Apparently a lot of people from the west get confused about this.

The cat is supposed to bring good luck and good fortune. Shops often have them in the window, inviting people in to buy things.

The story is that once a wealthy man was taking shelter from a storm under a tree when a cat from a nearby temple beckoned him in. He followed the cat, and when he did, the tree that he had been standing under was struck by lightning. Believing that the cat had saved his life he donated money to the temple, and then when the cat died a statue was built in its honour.

And now a version of this statue sits waving, or beckoning, in my living room. I don't know if I've been any luckier or wealthier since I got it. Maybe. I certainly find something comforting in the endless repetition of the gesture. Even when I'm not at home it's waving, or beckoning. It's doing it now. Unless the battery has run out.

A pause

When I'm working from home I like to go for a walk in the afternoon. Maybe I get stuck on something. Maybe I'm lucky enough not to have much work to do. Most days something needs to be picked up. Some batteries, something for dinner, some ink or paper for the printer.

I walk around and look at the city. I am in the city. I am the city. Part of the city. I look around. I want to think about what's happening. What's going to happen. I try to see the good. I want to see the good. I want to fill my days with poetry. The poetry of the everyday.

Here is a someone buying an ice cream for their partner. Here are two people swapping make-up tips. Here is someone asking for directions. Here is someone pointing the way. Here are some friends sharing a pizza. Here is someone drinking coffee alone. Here is someone dropping their glove, and someone else picking it up. Here is someone being helped into a car. Here is a pushchair being lifted down the stairs.

I don't mind if you think that I am romantic. Or misguided. Or both. Maybe I am. But I don't want to forget these moments. Getting through security. Stepping on to the train. Walking home from the shops. I want to think about where I am. And what's happening. And why. I want to see beauty in the rubbish bin, hear music in a mobile phone conversation or the crying of a child.

I want to think that it's great where I am. That I managed to get there. Like I managed to get here. Like we did.

All sorts of things could have happened. All sorts of things did happen. One day a man tied a key to a kite. One day a girl went to hide in a wardrobe. One day a woman took a seat on a bus. One day a boy opened a book.

One day we took our showers and put on our clothes. We put on our coats, left our houses and our flats, and made our way. Then we came through that door.

A pause

I wonder where we'll be in the next ten years. Or five. I wonder what's going to happen to us next week. Or even in the next two days.

A pause

One time I was in the Barents region, where the borders of Russia, Finland and Norway meet. It's one of the only places in the world where three time zones exist in the same place. It's very confusing. Especially in winter, when it's also dark for most of the day.

For a long time the area was associated with mining, but the mine on the Norwegian side of the border is closed now. While I was there someone told me that they were thinking of re-opening it. They said that plan was to bring people in and out of Russia to work in it. It was a perfect situation, they said. They said that people from Norway didn't really want to do that kind of work anymore, and the Russians really needed a boost to their economy.

I wasn't there to do any mining anyway, thankfully, but to do a performance in an arts festival that celebrated the return of the sun.

On the second day we were there we crossed into Russia and performed our show. Then at the end of the night we had to get a driver to take us to the next town to a hotel. Because of the festival all the hotels in the town where we were staying were already booked.

So at about ten, eleven, or perhaps twelve o'clock this van arrived. I climbed in the front and my two colleagues got in the back. I reached to put on my seatbelt but it didn't work. I didn't say anything. I couldn't say anything! So I just held it there and thought, well, we're just driving to the next town.

And we set off, and pretty soon we were out of any kind of urban area. And in front of me all I could see was the headlights of the van on the snowy road. And when the van reaches a certain speed it begins to make this really high pitched whining sound. But it's OK, because to counteract it the driver plays really loud electro pop on the stereo.

So I'm sitting there listening to the WEEEEEE and the nnkannkannka, and at some point I turn to my right and look out of the window. I look and I look and I can't see anything. I look and I look and there is nothing but blackness. I turn to my left and all I can see is the drivers face in the glow of the lights on the dashboard. And I think to myself, this is just one of those moments in life where you just have to trust the situation. Just trust the people and the situation and be in it.

And for the next twenty minutes I just sit like this, trying to take some deep breaths.

A pause

Eventually we get to the hotel and I get out of the van and I thank the driver with a nod and a shake of his hand. We check in and go to our rooms and I just fall into bed. I don't feel any need to turn on the television and see what else is happening in the world.

So that night there are no hostage situations. That night there are no insurgents targeted or terrorist cells infiltrated. That night there are no car bombs, missile attacks or genocides. Emissions and sea levels are not rising. Commodities aren't falling.

That night there is just me. Slipping into a dreamless sleep.

A pause

When I was young the thing that terrified me most in the world was nuclear war. There was lots of stuff in the papers about it. There was a leaflet called 'Protect and Survive' that came through our door. There were films about it and debates on the television. There were lots of books published.

I would imagine it all the time. I could imagine it. There would be a big blast in the sky. Boom! And then a white flash of light. And if you didn't evaporate or disintegrate or go blind in that then you would see the mushroom cloud explode. And then a huge wave of energy would tear away everything. And then you were dead.

I used to hope that I would be in the middle of it. I heard that if you were in the middle of it – in a city – then your life would be over in an instant. I thought that would be the best thing. I grew up in the country, though.

A pause

One Sunday morning when I was about ten or eleven I woke up and there was a massive thunderstorm outside. It was sending booms of thunder through the the village. The whole house was shaking. Outside my bedroom door I could hear the family dog going crazy. I was too.

I was convinced that it was a nuclear attack. That it was the end. So I just lay there. Frozen. Listening to the boom... boom... boom... staring at the ceiling and waiting to slowly die.

But eventually it calmed down. And nothing was happening so I got up and I got dressed and I went downstairs. And I found out that it was only a storm, and everybody smiled and said how amazed they were that I had slept through it. And I smiled and got my breakfast and pretended that I had. I remember feeling so alive that day. The lines and the colours of that day seemed so defined.

Now I wake up in a different bed. In a different country. I am an adult. And in the stillness of the morning I lie and look at the ceiling and think about what I've heard or read. I think about the impending catastrophe. How we've made such a mess. How we might turn it around. How it's like we're walking blindfolded toward the edge of a steep cliff, with no plan B.

Boom!

Music

I was visiting a Buddhist monastery in Scotland called Samye Ling. The weather was beautiful. A clear blue sky on a cold winters day. The colours were bright and sharp. The sun glinted off the gold leaf of the statues. The gardens had a crisp layer of frost.

We wandered round and took a good look at everything. Took our shoes off and looked in the temple. We walked clockwise around the gardens because a sign told us that it was the most harmonious path to follow. We took lots of photos.

I'm not a Buddhist, though my girlfriend often says that she thinks I am close to being one. I dont mind that. I like all their ideas about presence and harmony and calmness. I think I would find it hard to be a monk, though. I like my newspapers and books and other people too much.

But at Samye Ling on a day like this, with the sun shining like this and everything and everyone looking beautiful like this you might just have had reason to think that they had got something going on.

We had a cappuccino in the café, which also sold food for the Buddhists that were staying there. It was good to see that every now and again the Buddhists felt the need for a bit of chocolate, or just the simplicity of opening a tin of beans for their dinner.

We went to the bookshop and bought a few things. I bought a placard to hang over the door of our flat which has a prayer to bring us good luck, and transform any negative karma that might get in.

Everyone was so nice to us. Everyone behaved in such a nice way to each other. And on a day like this day it looked so beautiful.

I'm sure it would have been a different story if it had been raining or even just cloudy, but I was standing there on this day and thinking well this is great. This is the opposite of the world that I have been thinking and reading and hearing a lot about lately. This isn't corrupt or abstract or disrespected. It's not spiritually empty. It's not filled with contempt.

This wasn't the world that could end in an hour, with just a few bombs or the right mix of chemicals. It wasn't a world where a deadly virus could be spilt and make its way around the globe in a couple of days. It wasn't a world where rifles are being held to our heads and knives to our hearts. It was peaceful and it was calm. And it felt good breathing in the crisp clean air. There didn't seem to be much cynicism. There didn't seem to be much doubt. There didn't seem to be much drama.

A pause

But you have to be realistic. The population of the world is growing. The climate is shifting. The planet is getting hotter. More disasters are on their way. Natural and man-made. In the future food will become more and more hard to come by. Energy too.

If it all starts to go wrong I don't know how much use I'll be. I'm OK with the basic practical stuff. I could probably get a fire going, but I don't think I could build a great shelter or set traps for animals. I can't use a weapon. I certainly couldn't make decisions about who to kill or not kill, attack or not attack. Feed or not feed. I wouldn't want to.

I would want to try and get along. I would want to try meeting. Talking. But I think a lot of people might say that I was being unrealistic. That the time is coming where we might have to start thinking about ourselves. That we might have to go beyond trying to share something. That we might have to take action then live with the consequences rather than consider or try to plan anything first.

I read that we should be prepared, though. I read that in case of any emergency we should have a knife, a torch, a radio with batteries, some tins of food and a bit of spare money stored away in our houses. I read that its a good idea to decide on a rendezvous point with your loved ones in case you get split up.

A pause

I was in Bergen, on the west coast of Norway. People from other parts of Norway always say how it rains all the time there, but I think its beautiful. It's got the feel of a city, but everywhere you go you can see the nature. Everything feels close.

For a long time Bergen was the capital of Norway. The major port of trade. Now one of its biggest exports is death metal. I wasn't there to play any death metal but I did listen to a bit.

The second day I was there I was sitting in my hotel room watching the TV. It was all over the news that the financial crisis was beginning to happen. In the USA the government were talking about giving the banks seven hundred billion dollars to help them out.

While I was watching this my phone rang. It was a man calling from India called Jeik. He was calling on behalf of my bank in the UK. He told me that the bank had become bit concerned about my overdraft. He wondered why no money had gone into my account for a while.

I explained my situation to Jeik. I explained that I lived and worked in Norway now, but also sometimes back in the UK. I said that I would be working in England soon and that some money would go into that account then. He asked when. Sometime in the next two months, I said. He asked when exactly.

I said I didn't know. He said that he needed more clarity. What did he mean? I said. He said that the bank needed to see some commitment to the account.

I got a bit upset, a bit angry, even. And then I got more angry with myself because it was making me angry, and I didn't want to be angry with Jeik because I didn't think it was his fault. Not entirely. So I kept on apologising, and Jeik kept saying it's OK sir. But I'd already asked him not to call me sir, and I didn't know that it was.

I told him that there was no doubt that I was committed to the account, and that I would put some money in soon, but I couldn't do it now. He said that was difficult. I said I realised it was difficult, but was it not possible to come to some sort of compromise? No, he said. He said that he needed to work it out now. He said that if I could just make an agreement with him then that would set the record straight and the bank would be happy and he and his colleagues could stop calling.

I didn't really understand what was happening. On the television all the banks were losing a lot of money, and the governments of the world were trying to help them out. Everything was going wrong in loads of different countries. Economies were failing. The markets were in decline. The price of oil was dropping. Everything was losing value. People kept on saying a recession was on its way.

Politicians and people on the TV kept on appearing and smiling and talking about how we had to take necessary steps. That there was no time to wait around. Some other people were saying that it showed that we just couldn't carry on living like this. That we were just not sustainable living like this.

A pause

Later that night I was taking a beer with the man from the theatre who had organised the performance I was doing. I was asking him what it was like to live in Bergen. I was curious.

He said he thought if you lived somewhere like this then it was important that you could dream a little. What with the mountains in one direction and the sea in the other, it was important that you could travel somehow, that you could go places. Even if it was just inside your head.

He told me a great story about how a few years ago, when he didn't have much money and couldn't afford to go anywhere, each morning he would drop off his kid at kindergarten, and then on the way to work he would stop at the train station for a coffee. He would sit down, read the papers, and watch people leaving, and people arriving.

Later on I was walking down by the harbour. I was watching the sun go down and the boats doing exactly the same thing, bringing people and things in and out of the city. And I was thinking, we're not going to stop this, are we?

Even if all the money runs out. Even when we get to the last tins of food or drops of petrol. Even if the sun is baking our gardens dry and stopping the taps from flowing. Even if the tide is washing away the remains of the streets in our cities. We'll still be moving. We've been doing it for years. Maybe in the future we'll just have to do it more slowly, or start doing it in our heads again.

A pause

I was in Oslo. In the Black Box Teater*. We were. We were making something. We'd almost got to the end.

We can go and have that beer together. Or glass of wine. Or soft drink.

But before we do I just want to say thanks. For being here tonight. And thanks for listening.