

A Story

Written by: Kristof Malfait
Illustrated by: some AI

ULSPRA.org

A Perfectly Fine Morning

Nobody had decided to be there together. It had simply happened. Without consent nor objection and without anyone bringing adequate snacks.

The girl sat on a rock, vaguely considering if it was too hard to be comfortable or too convenient to abandon.

The seagull stood nearby, unnecessarily large, surveying a landscape that had nothing in particular to deserve his attention.

The old cat lay across a patch of grass, in the posture of having given up and considering that an achievement.

The girl looked at the sky.

As if it might have something to say.

"Do we even know what we're waiting for?" she asked.

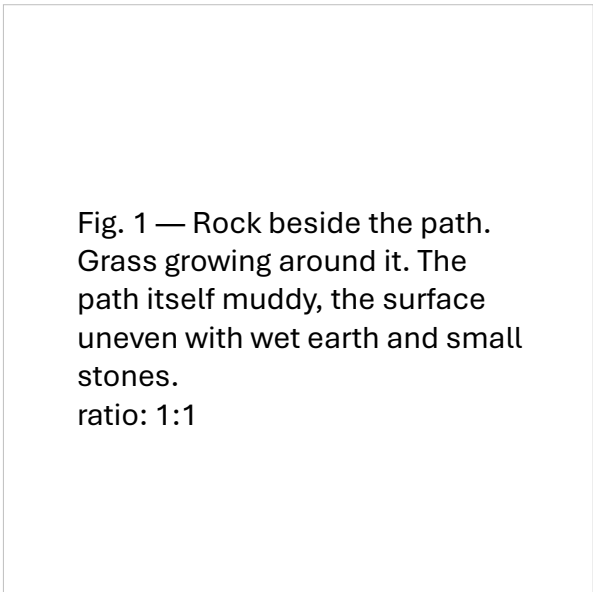


Fig. 1 — Rock beside the path.
Grass growing around it. The
path itself muddy, the surface
uneven with wet earth and small
stones.
ratio: 1:1

Maybe they're not even waiting, thought the virus, drifting invisibly at approximately shoulder height. *Waiting requires expectation. Does anyone here have any?*

The seagull ruffled his feathers as a conviction surfaced that had been waiting for exactly this kind of excuse. A tuft of down detached itself and drifted onto the girl's sleeve. The seagull wondered if she had seen where it came from. The girl wondered if he had noticed where it had landed.

There, thought the virus.

But neither asked.

"What if we're just waiting," said the seagull, "for the universe to confirm somehow that everything's as pointless as we always thought it would be?"

The girl considered this seriously.

"So, what if it did?" she finally asked.

The cat's tail moved once. Slowly.

"Would that matter?" it said, without looking up.

Nobody answered. The rock had not reconsidered its hardness. The landscape kept just lying around.

What if it did matter? thought the virus.

Fig. 2 —
Something
suspended in the
air. The drawing
does not fully
clarify what it is. It
is transparent,
ratio: 1:1

A Walk With No Particular Destination, Which Is Fine

"Maybe we should go for a walk," said the girl.

The cat opened one eye. Which instantly felt like too much involvement. And so it was too late.

"I was almost enjoying doing nothing."

"Well," said the girl, "then we can do nothing in motion."

The seagull spread his wings, assessed the situation and folded them again. "Ah yes. The ancient cure for existential dread.

Nothing like walking to distract us from the yawning void."

"I wasn't aware I was dreading anything," said the girl.

"Give it some time," said the cat.

They walked.

The virus found the cooling stillness they left behind less accommodating.

The path was muddier than seemed strictly necessary for the story. The cat stopped twice to reconsider, then continued, which he would later describe as the second worst decision of the morning. The mud deepened slightly. Nobody mentioned it, which required some effort.

They kept walking.

The girl stepped around a particularly bad patch and then, without thinking, said "careful" to nobody in particular. Guiding them off the path, where a snail had been waiting patiently on the verge.

"Where are you going?" it asked. "Or just moving?"

The seagull looked down at the snail. "We don't know. But there might be an answer at the end of this road. Or a snackbar."

"Both, preferably," said the cat.

"Weren't we just waiting for the universe to confirm the meaninglessness of everything?" asked the girl.

"Waiting, yes," he said. "Walking is different."

The snail considered this. "A very fashionable pursuit nowadays," it said, to nobody in particular, since they were already gone.

Does moving count as purpose? thought the virus. Or does it only count if you know what you're moving toward?

The seagull was slightly ahead.

The cat was slightly behind.

The girl was in the middle, which was not a position either of them had chosen.

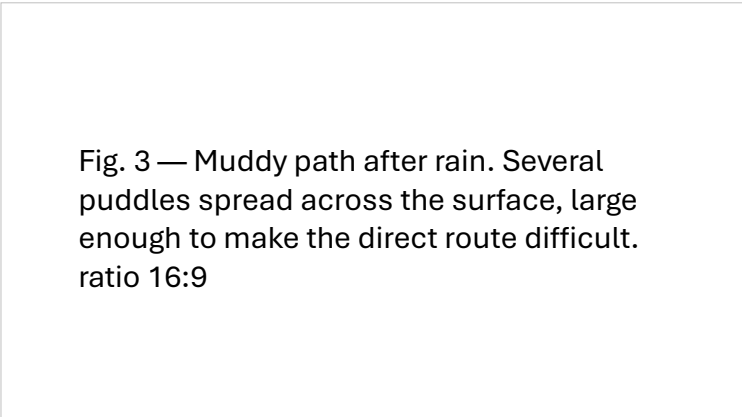


Fig. 3 — Muddy path after rain. Several puddles spread across the surface, large enough to make the direct route difficult.
ratio 16:9

A Fork In The Road, Which Is Technically Progress

The path continued until it stopped continuing as it was and became two paths instead, thus complicating everything.

A goat stood at the exact point where it split. It had clearly been there long enough to have opinions about both directions. The girl noticed this and took it for wisdom, which was not her first mistake of the day.

"Which way should we take?" she asked.

The goat looked at the left path. Then the right. Then back at the girl.

"All paths are the same until you regret them." It managed to sound wise and be completely unhelpful simultaneously.

The seagull tilted his head. "That is not an answer."

"Technically, it is," said the goat calmly. "And I find it helps to say it with confidence."

Confidence, thought the virus. *The difference between wisdom and its most convincing imitation.*

The cat lay down, which he considered the way of announcing he had already made a decision.

"Now," said the goat, "would you like a haiku?"

Nobody answered. The goat produced one anyway.

Two roads diverge here
One leads to small disappointment
The other,
more or less.

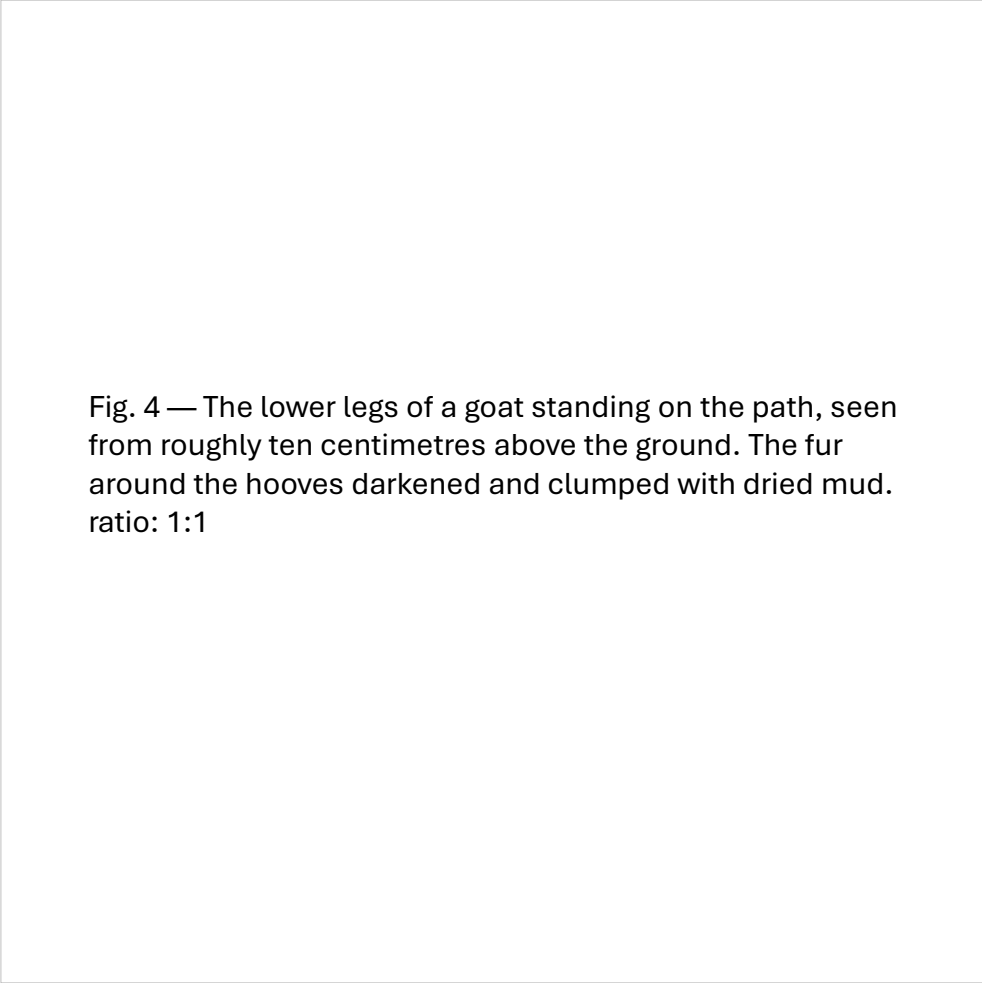


Fig. 4 — The lower legs of a goat standing on the path, seen from roughly ten centimetres above the ground. The fur around the hooves darkened and clumped with dried mud.
ratio: 1:1

"That is not a haiku," said the seagull.

"But it worked," said the goat, leaving the seagull mildly confused. Which was unusual.

The girl looked at the left path, then the right, then at the goat.

"What if we follow your advice and it goes wrong? Who's responsible?"

The seagull answered immediately, having already fully recovered from its confusion.

"The listener's fault for listening. Advice is just someone else's mistake in a costume."

The goat ignored this. "At most," it said,

"responsibility is shared. But the regret is distributed unevenly."

The cat, growing tired of a discussion that was keeping him from doing nothing, opened one eye.

"That's the curse of free will. Sounds empowering. Isn't." Then closed it again.

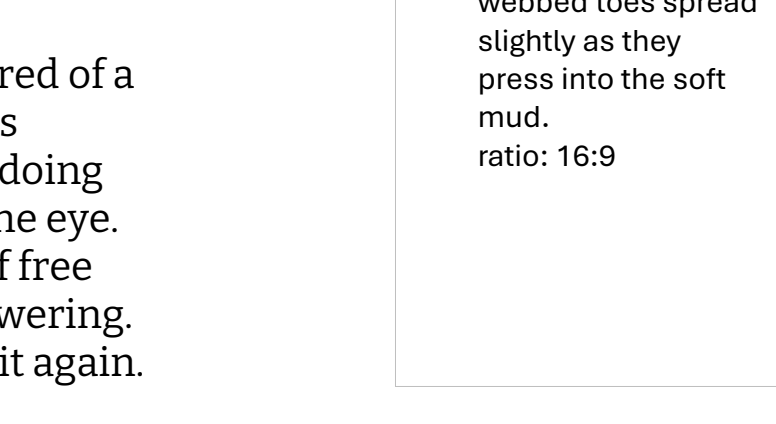


Fig. 5 — A seagull's foot resting on the ground, seen from very close by. The webbed toes spread slightly as they press into the soft mud.

ratio: 16:9

But what is the alternative? thought the virus. To stand at the fork forever? The goat seems to manage. Though it's unclear if it is content or simply very good at standing.

The girl squared her shoulders, which was something she did when she had decided to be brave about something. Or at least give that impression.

"I'm choosing left. Even if it's wrong, at least it's my choice."

"Bold," said the seagull. "Tragic. Delicious."

The cat stood, stretched to an unreasonable length and walked right.

"Someone has to disagree," he said. "Might as well be me." He did not look back. Though he walked slowly enough that looking back would have been possible.

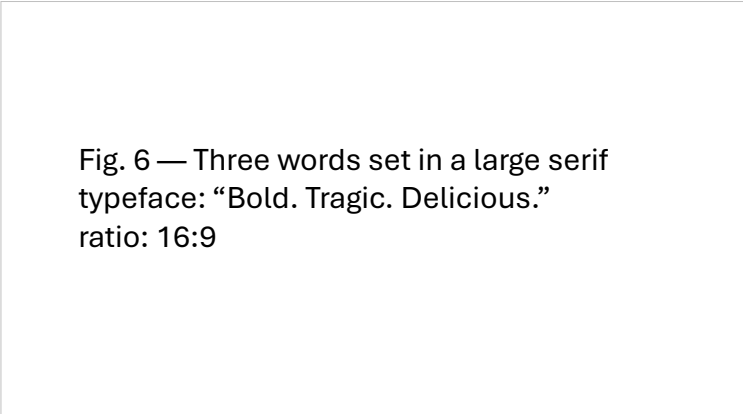


Fig. 6 — Three words set in a large serif typeface: "Bold. Tragic. Delicious."
ratio: 16:9

"What about you?" the girl asked the goat.

"I'll stay here," said the goat, its gaze fixed on the path they had come from, "and ponder today's manifestation of the illusion of agency."

The seagull looked between both paths, then at the goat, then at the sky.

"Is there a third option?"

"Going back," said the goat.

"Though most people never consider it. Though few seem to notice it's there."

The girl looked at the path they had come from. For just a moment.

"Left", she said.

As though moving forward is always better than staying together, thought the virus.

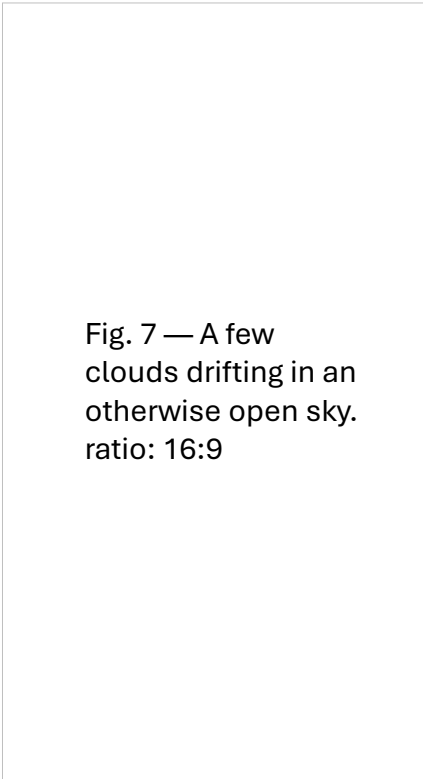


Fig. 7 — A few clouds drifting in an otherwise open sky.
ratio: 16:9

The Sky, From Below

"Do you see that?" said the girl.

She had stopped walking. Somewhere ahead, something caught the light and gave it back differently.

The seagull rose briefly. From up there, the angle was sufficient.

He saw exactly what it was.

He landed behind the girl and said nothing.

"There's something," she said. "Over there."

"Yes," said the seagull.

Does kindness count, thought the virus, if it doesn't change the outcome?

They walked toward it. For the girl, only the light was certain. But she took it as encouragement anyhow. The seagull now walked beside her.

"We must be somewhere near it now", she said. "It has to be around here."

"Yes," said the seagull.

The girl looked down.

The sky looked back at her from the surface of a big puddle, as unhelpful as ever, just closer and slightly distorted.

"Oh," said the girl.

This path had been the wrong choice, she thought. This was what left sounded like. A small disappointment, which was, after all, what the haiku had promised.

Or was this the lesser?

The seagull examined a point somewhere in the far distance with great interest.

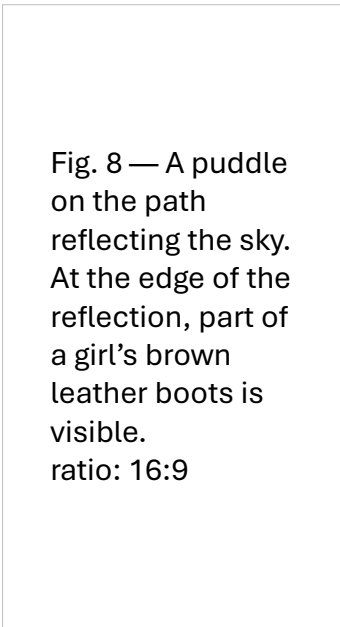


Fig. 8 — A puddle on the path reflecting the sky. At the edge of the reflection, part of a girl's brown leather boots is visible.
ratio: 16:9

"You knew," she said.

"Yes," said the seagull.

It was the third time he had said it since seeing the puddle. And the only thing he had said. Which, for him, amounted to extraordinary restraint. She looked at him. He continued examining the distance. The girl looked at the puddle for a moment longer. Then she almost smiled. As if she was on to him.

There, thought the virus.

The Cat - To Less

The right path had the considerable advantage of containing fewer opinions. It was, at least, his own.

The cat walked without stopping to reconsider. Nobody was watching, so there was no particular reason to look as though he didn't care. He didn't have to not-care out loud. He could just walk.

Then, off to the left - the glimpse. He stopped.

He looked at it for a moment. Then looked away.

He kept walking.

It was probably nothing. And if it was something, it was theirs, not his. He had chosen this path specifically to avoid things being anyone's. That had seemed like the point.

He wasn't sure why it felt different now.

The path continued. So did he. Somewhere to the left, the others were doing something. He tried not to think about this.

He found a flat dry stone and sat on it, pretending he had intended to do exactly this all along. Even though there was nobody to pretend to.

The glimpse was still there, at the edge of things. He didn't look.

This, he decided, *must be the less road*.
He had hoped it would be. That part had worked.
That wasn't the problem.

Fig. 9 —The path continues ahead; something indistinct remains off to the left.
ratio: 16:9

Together Again, More Or Less

The paths rejoined without ceremony.

The cat was already sitting on a low wall when the girl and the seagull arrived. He had been there for some time. He was not waiting, he would have said, if anyone had asked. Nobody did.

"You're here," said the girl.

The cat looked up - briefly - then back down. "Yes," he said, trying to sound mildly irritated.

The seagull landed nearby and immediately began examining the horizon with professional interest, clearly wanting to appear unbothered.

The girl
sat down.
The cat's
tail
brushed
against
her leg. He
didn't
move it
away.

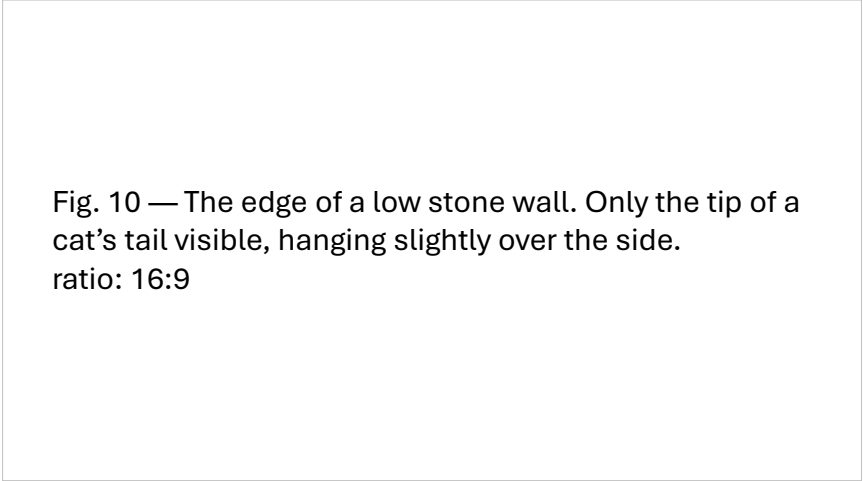


Fig. 10 — The edge of a low stone wall. Only the tip of a cat's tail visible, hanging slightly over the side.
ratio: 16:9

There. The path did what they couldn't, thought the virus. It brought them back. To the same spot or to each other? Whether they noticed the difference was another matter.

After a while the girl said, "Do you think we'd be the same if we hadn't met in the first place?"

The seagull turned from the horizon. "Is that a question or a confession you're trying to disguise grammatically?"

The cat looked at the wall beneath him, then at the path the others had come from. Then back at the wall.

"What's over there?" he said. To nobody in particular.

"More road?" said the girl.

The cat said nothing. The wall was very interesting suddenly.

Probably some questions are better left, thought the virus, until you know which answer you can live with.

They got up and walked. For a while nobody said anything, which was either comfortable or awkward, depending on who you would ask.

Then the girl said, "I miss my friends."

"You don't miss them," said the seagull. "You miss the convenience of feeling known without having to explain yourself."

The girl stopped walking. So did the cat, without knowing why. The seagull continued, unbothered.

The silence that followed was long enough to make the cat uneasy. The next question would not be for the seagull.

"What about you?" she finally asked the cat.

"What about me what?"

"Friends."

The cat's tail moved once. "It feels like safety," he said. The words were arriving from somewhere he hadn't checked in a while.

"Being carried around in someone else's head." He paused.

The girl nodded.

"Even if it just makes you their emotional storage unit," he said.

The girl looked at the cat. He looked at the seagull moving on.

"So what if I don't want to share myself anymore then?" said the girl. "Is that selfishness? And is that bad?"

"That's too many questions," said the cat. "But it all fades when, in the end, there's no one left to notice you're missing."

The girl was quiet.

"So I might end up alone," she said. "Is that the price?"

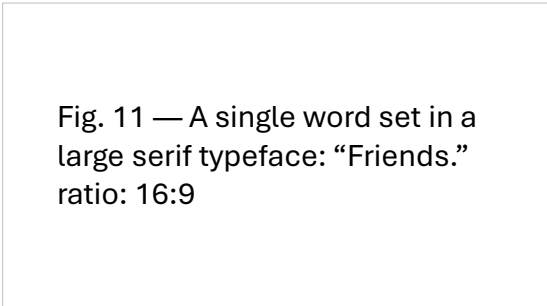


Fig. 11 — A single word set in a large serif typeface: "Friends."
ratio: 16:9

"No," said the cat. "It's the reward."

Is that what they tell themselves, thought the virus, to make the distance feel chosen?

The seagull, who had been unusually quiet, returned "Shall we keep walking?"

It was not, for once, a rhetorical question.

Fig.12 — Variation on fig. 2
ratio: 1:1

The Way Back, Which Nobody Took

The day had been getting on. Nobody said this, but the light had changed in the way that becoming something else was no longer avoidable.

"We could go back," said the girl.

It sounded like she did not quite mean it, but wanted to have said it.

"Back," repeated the seagull, testing the word for structural integrity. "Back to what, exactly?"

"To where we started."

"We started with nothing. It's still there," said the cat.

"At least it was familiar nothing," said the girl.

Is that what she wants now? thought the virus. *Familiar nothing.*

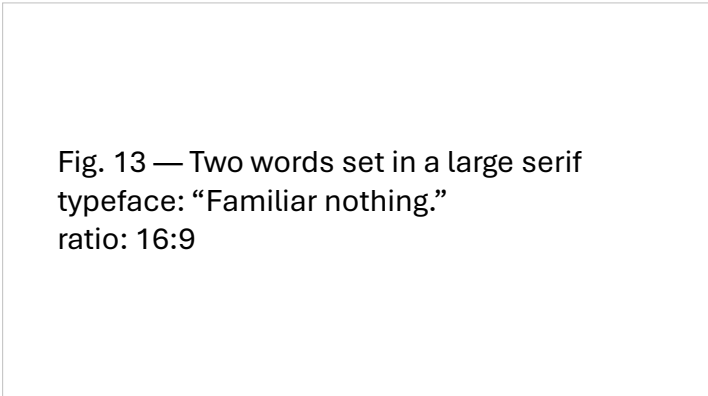


Fig. 13 — Two words set in a large serif
typeface: "Familiar nothing."
ratio: 16:9

The seagull looked at the path behind them. Then ahead. "The goat said going back was a third option."

"The goat said it was usually worse," said the cat.

The seagull looked at him. The cat looked back. For a moment longer than either intended.

There, thought the virus.

Then they both looked away.

Going back, thought the virus. *It might have been better for her.*

But they have already decided to go on.

"The goat is still at the fork," said the girl, "Pondering."

"Probably pondering us," said the seagull.

"Probably everyone," said the girl. "We're not special."

And so, thought the virus. *The distance she has covered.*

They kept walking forward, which was what they had always done.

Though this time it seemed to be dressed up as a choice, for her benefit.

"Shall we just stop trying to improve things?" said the cat, eventually.

"Were we trying?" said the girl.

"Apparently," said the cat, "it doesn't seem to have helped."

The girl looked ahead. The path continued.

"No," she said. "It doesn't."

And somewhere not far ahead, just visible through the trees, was something that might be a building.

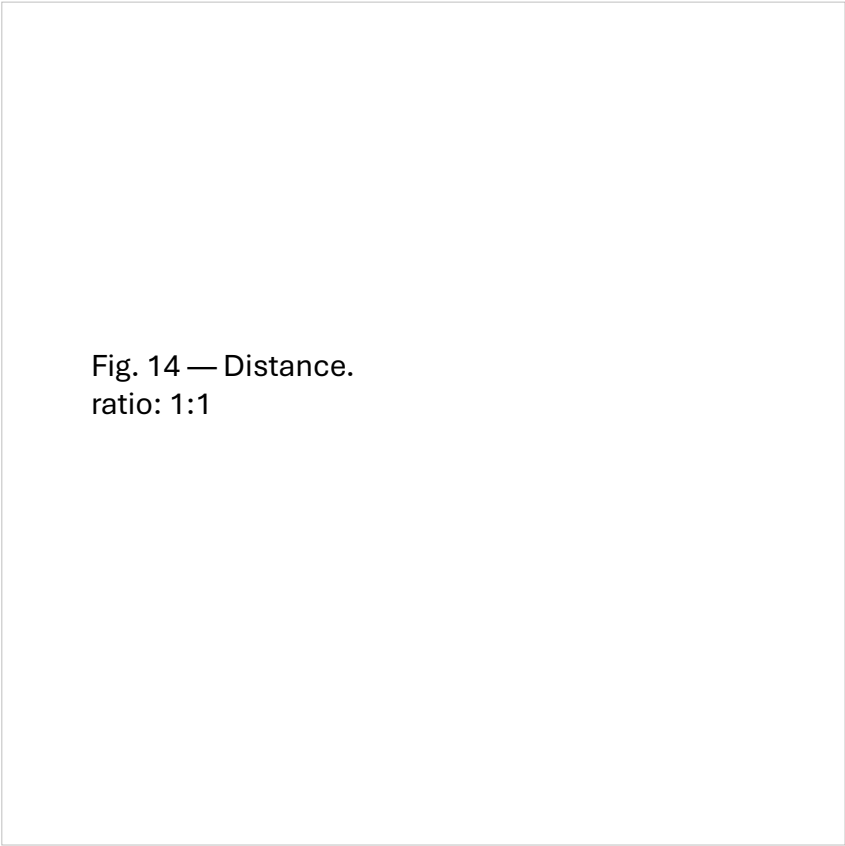


Fig. 14 — Distance.
ratio: 1:1

The Snackbar

It was a snackbar. They could see that now.

"There," said the seagull, with the satisfaction of someone whose least credible prediction had just been vindicated.

Nobody answered. The girl looked at it. Then at the sky. It had nothing to say. It never had. She looked at it for a long time. Then she looked back down, at the snackbar.

It was closed. A handwritten sign said so.

The seagull examined the sign. Then the door. Then the sign again.

"It's closed," he said.

"Yes," said the girl.

They sat down outside anyway. Continuing was no longer an option anyone was willing to suggest.

Nobody spoke.

We've come a long way, thought the virus, drifting just above her shoulder.

It stayed there for a moment. The closed sign. The cat's stillness.

The seagull looking at some distant point. The girl.

It was not nothing.

And then, quietly, without announcement or intention, the virus drifted closer.

And touched the girl.

The girl sat for a moment longer. Then she said:

"Not everything happens for a reason. But everything does have its consequence."

She paused.

"Doesn't it."

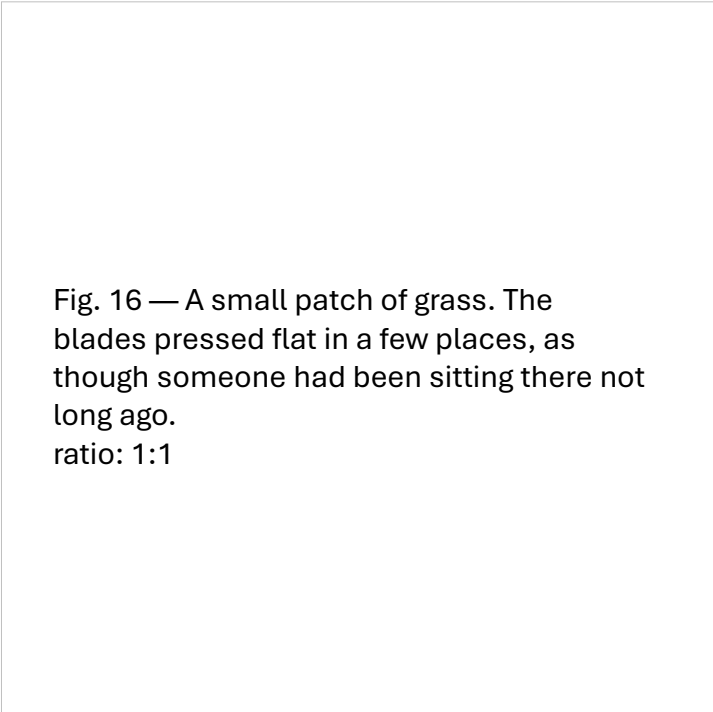


Fig. 16 — A small patch of grass. The blades pressed flat in a few places, as though someone had been sitting there not long ago.

ratio: 1:1

The cat's tail
moved once.
The seagull
ruffled his
feathers.
Neither
confirmed nor
denied.
And for once,
nobody asked
what came
next.