

# Five Dials



NUMBER 26

*Berlin. London. And More.*

FEATURING

JAN BRANDT 13 *Berlin Is Truly The Worst*

PETER STAMM 15 *New Fiction*

JUDITH SCHALANSKY 29 *No More Children*

TILMAN RAMMSTEDT 52 *I Like To Party; I Like, I Like To Party*

*... Plus three essays on W.G. Sebald, Will Wiles's gambling habits,  
Paul Maliszewski in Washington, short cuts through London, and the biggest palindrome  
you've seen, care of Demetri Martin. Plus more ...*



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LETTERS FROM...

## Our Glorious Readers

*and other sources*

'MORE BEARS, please,' writes Emmelia Jackson of Calgary, Alberta, in response to our recent 'B' Issue. 'Some magazines have yearly special issues. I think *Five Dials* should have a yearly bear issue, just to keep up with what's happening in the world of bears.' She was a fan, naturally, of Amy Leach's essay on pandas, as was Will Turner of London, who wrote: 'Why would I ever in a million years care about pandas? But it was a good essay in that it was about pandas even though it was about more than pandas.' He signed off his email with: 'Sorry, I've had a few. I'm typing this on my iPhone.'

I'M GETTING tired of bad book recommendations,' writes *Five Dials* reader Aaron MacDonald of Tucson, Arizona. 'You know that feeling when you're in a book store and someone's giving you

a recommendation and from the outset you're like: Why are you even telling me about *Eat, Pray, Love*? I'm all for supporting independent stores, but I need some good recommendations next time I'm in one. Somebody tells a guy like me to read *Eat, Pray, Love* and at first I'm like the problem must be the goddamn book store employee. But then I start thinking: what kind of signals am I sending out? What is it about me that makes people think *Eat, Pray, Love*?'

OUR FIRST short-story adoption initiative has been going well. Contributor Zsuzsi Gartner has received postcards from around the world offering up homes to her orphaned short-story openings. Writer Janina Matthewson excitedly tweeted on 1 November that she'd received in the post a certificate

dubbing her mother of one of the openings. Zsuzsi is living off-line at the moment, so she won't have seen the tweet. We will relay the news to her verbally. (Zsuzsi's orphans will also be excerpted in the January issue of *Harper's*.)

'I CAN USUALLY print up *Five Dials* on a work computer,' writes Brad Hayden in New York, 'but I used the colour printer for the Cork issue and got busted, so thanks for that. The black and white printer is about five feet away, so when I print up the issues I usually wander over right away and get them. Messing with the colour printer wasn't such a good idea.'

'HI DUDE,' read the friendly piece of spam we received in mid-October from someone supposedly named Conrad Jefferies. 'How are your boobs?' Jefferies will never know. It is *Five Dials* editorial policy to refrain from answering spam email. ◇

## On Ewen and German

I don't have much to say to preface this issue, mostly because the heavy lifting was done by one of my co-editors, Anna Kelly, who will take over this letter from the editor in a few moments to explain just why and how we got to Berlin. I should add there will be an addendum to this already lengthy issue, which will feature photos from our event in Berlin, as well as some of the pieces that couldn't fit into what looks to be the longest *Five Dials* ever. You'll notice we have a proper back section and, following the lead of every single magazine in the UK, we have a column dedicated to food writing, though Paul Ewen's contribution perhaps does not fit the usual stereotype. (I doubt he'll be asked to write about food ever again, by anyone, anywhere, which is probably what makes the piece so good.) I will also point out the first *Five Dials* questionnaire. Find it, print it, fill it in, and return to us at the 5D HQ on the Strand in London. We'll give you a free book in return. That's the deal. Now, here's the story behind the issue.

Anna writes:

'I always wanted to know the secrets contained in other languages, but I think my motives were originally selfish, megalomaniacal and excluding rather than intellectually inspired. When I was at primary school, I was delighted when someone taught me Pig Latin (ichwhay orksway ikelay isthay, for the uninitiated). In the playground at school that week I incited my two loyal friends to share my excitement. From now on, I decreed, we would speak only Pig Latin to each other. We would share secrets and discuss boys without anyone having any idea! What's more, we would fill in exercises in the new-found 'language' in order to become more proficient. I doled out notebooks and proscribed sentences we would 'translate'.

'My two friends sensibly revolted and informed me that this new game was deeply boring. I was forced to abandon my brief and brilliant career as a bilingual Pig Latin speaker and go back to English full time.

'Some time soon afterwards, my oldest sister started secondary school and would come home every day full of new mysteries. One of these was German. I stared at her homework until she explained to me that a 'j' was pronounced like a 'y' and that in German all things – tables, chairs, houses – were either a 'girl', a 'boy' or a mysterious 'other', which she didn't really explain. To my eight-year-old self, unversed in gender theory, this seemed like the height of exoticism, its strangeness so exciting I couldn't wait to make it my own.

'Later, much later, when I'd finally got enough German down me to get into university, I sat at a desk and felt something strange happening when I read Rilke's *Duino Elegies* for the very first time. It felt like I was flying, like I was getting high. I read Ingeborg Bachmann's *Malina* three times in a row, fascinated, disturbed, reading in it something I couldn't quite understand but was instinctively drawn to. I realized that there's something about German poetry which is beautiful in a way I can't describe in English, something about its isches and swisches and klisches and klasches that makes it an ideal playground for onomatopoeia, but something more, too, in the wide, bleak expanses of its vowel-sounds. I read *The Confusions of Young Toerless* and felt that Robert Musil could see into my soul. I gorged on Kafka, Schnitzler, Mann, Jelinek.

'It's impossible to draw together all the literature written together in one language and try to ascribe to it some sort of unity, to say that German-language literature is one thing or another. But something about writing in German always excites me. I love the sentences, which somehow always seem like flat-pack boxes which you can unfold and build upwards, not like English and French sentences which are carpets rolling down a staircase, always in one direction. I love the sounds, the rhythm, the subtle changes to the ends of words, which change entire meanings.

'Since leaving university I've ventured

beyond undergraduate reading-list territory and been introduced to plenty of contemporary German-language writers playing with ideas, writing dark, brutal stories and using language like it's poetry. But falling in love with a foreign language and its books is only half the story if you want to share those books and authors in your mother tongue too.

'So this issue of *Five Dials* is a way of doing that, of sharing some German-language writers with our readers. As well as the usual *Five Dials* standard fare, it features writing by thirteen German voices, translated into English to give readers a taste of some German-language writers working today. We've wanted to do this issue for a while, just for fun, because *Five Dials* means that we can. Some issues are short and snappy; some are all about bears; others come out at 50 pages and proudly flaunt some of the best German-language voices you should be reading in this young century.

'But if part of its role is to flag up some writers working in German who I feel might excite the average *Five Dials* reader, then it's also important to point out that this is only a selection, a smattering. If Anglophone readers are guilty of fencing ourselves in from literature in other languages then this issue is more a couple of holes drilled in the fence than it is an attempt to knock anything down. The issue can't even nod towards any sort of exhaustiveness, and there are hundreds of brilliant writers who would be included if the issue hadn't already reached the length of a substantial novella. Also, most of the authors in the issue happen to be German, with a couple of notable exceptions from Switzerland and Austria, and there's no doubt that there's an argument that this is unrepresentative of German-language literature as a whole. So in a way this issue feels more like a beginning than it does a fait accompli, and putting it together has reminded me of how much more there is out there. But then that just leaves more opportunities for the future.'

In the meantime, enjoy the issue. You'll also find inside a dispatch from our Washington correspondent and one of the longest palindromes I've seen in years. It's in English, not German.

—CRAIG TAYLOR

# Our Town

'You think I don't know London? I been here ten years now, and it ain't have a part that I don't know. When them English people tell strangers they don't know where so and so is, I always know. From Pentonvilla right up to Musket Hill, all about by Claphand Common. I bet you can't call a name in London that I don't know where it is.'

Spoken by the character 'Big City'  
From *The Lonely Londoners*  
By Sam Selvon



Place: Brick Lane  
Date: November 2, 2012  
Time: 10:44 pm

This issue's itinerary:

Sweet, sweet action; London's Super Casino; rituals and codes; serious lone men; the Adelphi theatre; a web of barely visible pencil lines; Oliver Cromwell's daughters



## Will Wiles tries his luck at the Asper's Casino in Westfield

‘London’s Super Casino’ say the ads on the bus stops throughout the Olympic boroughs. A group frozen in joy at a gaming table, mid-success, an ecstatic moment of enrichment, instantaneous, effortless. This is presumably how the local landlords feel right now, what with their mutually agreed entitlement to sharp rent increases in honour of the XXXth Olympiad. Sudden, unearned accumulation: how very tempting. But most of us can’t afford the £250-grand ante to be seated at the green baize table of the east London property market, and can less afford entry to London’s Ultra Casino a mile to the west, sprouting its new spires in the haze. How else to get a taste of that sweet, sweet action? London’s Super Casino, say the ads – Asper’s – which occupies the top level of the Westfield Stratford shopping centre. A slice of Las Vegas just a short bus ride away in Newham. At Westfield, the discreet threshold of Asper’s – a glass-fronted lift lobby – is curiously tantalizing. There’s the slender chance of a workless payday, yes, but also a delicious frisson of risk; the possibility that the realm beyond might somehow divest me of all self-control and efficiently pauperize me. Such a place would have to be exotic. I was tempted, then, by the prospect of being tempted.

The expedition took place on Saturday afternoon. I was apprehensive. Was there a dress code? Would I have to sign up for some sort of membership? What if there was a cover charge or I had to buy a minimum quantity of chips or drinks to be allowed to enter? Fearful of a humiliating encounter on the door, I dressed smartly – black jacket and trousers, shirt, wedding shoes, even a tie rolled up in the jacket pocket, just in case. A red shirt, though, to project a mildly louche air. My preparations seem ridiculous in retrospect. This was a super casino, a product of curdled New Labour egalitarianism. Why should casino gambling be the preserve of the rich? It should be available to everyone! The then secretary of state for culture, media and sport (and gambling) went as far as to say that she detected a ‘hint of snobbery’ in the objections. Why, the super casinos were practically Bevanite! Let no man be turned away, tie or no tie.

I was through without a glance, past the red rope, into the curious penumbra of the gambling hall. The light in casinos is carefully controlled. There’s no daylight, something learned from Las Vegas. Being aware of the passing of time, the shifting of the sun in the sky, day turning into night or night into dawn, can shake a gambler’s focus, and must therefore be avoided if at all possible. But there is no actual gloom in Asper’s. Its colour scheme is more muted opulence than murk: chocolatey hardwood browns and dirty bronzes and golds. Giant rings of chandelier crystal in the ceiling light the tables themselves, in the middle of an open-plan space with artfully hidden edges. The lifts you arrived in are concealed behind a partition. To work at its best, the casino must become the gambler’s world. There is

nothing beyond, nothing below, and above the crystalline luminaires only the dozens of small black domes that conceal security cameras.

Light also spurts from the gambling machines, along with an aggressive, discordant medley of their massed whistles and catcalls, a sound as unwelcome as *hey-baby* street harassment to some, a Pavlovian dinner bell to others. One or two of the latter sort were hunched over the machines, locked in solitary gratification. But not many – all over, the casino was sparsely populated. At some of the tables croupiers stood neat and idle, waiting. I intended to play, to get the full experience, but this felt too soon, far too soon, so I headed to one of the two drinkeries at Asper’s, the Sky Bar – so called, I assume, because it’s the only place you can see the actual sky, Sky Sports being common to both bars. The bar, perhaps thanks to the daylight, is extremely pleasant, with brown leather chairs and sofas and a terrace overlooking the Westfield, filled with the boxy wicker furniture associated with expensive resort hotels. And it’s cheap, by London standards; another incentive to stay in the casino and stay gambling. ENGLISH BREAKFAST £5.25, OLYMPIC BREAKFAST £7.95, announces a promotional slideshow on one of the multiple flatscreens, along with plugs for the casino’s loyalty programme and the comforting message that anyone with a gambling problem will find help throughout the casino. Make up your mind, Asper’s, either repeat business is encouraged or it isn’t. The loyalty programme is called Aspire (geddit?), an appropriately New Labour touch.

While I was drinking my inexpensive OJ, the gambling hall had mysteriously filled up. I had decided to play blackjack, which struck me as an entertaining way of burning through my lavish £20 gambling budget. It had the right mix of tactics and dumb chance. But the blackjack tables were full, as were the poker tables, so roulette it was – the realm of purest dumb chance. Still, a busier casino meant more opportunities for people-watching, which was immediately, splendidly rewarding. The predominant style of dress was jeans and short-sleeved shirts, worn well – several groups of men seemed ready for a night out. Adding to the sense of a new pre-club ritual were a couple of groups of glamorous young women. These younger groups all burned with energy, but in an interestingly mannered, self-conscious way, as if on best behaviour. My jacket and shirt put me in a minority, but a well-represented one; at the next table was a man who could have been a partner in a small-town law firm, and beside him an intense man in a white football shirt who appeared to steadily widen from the top of the neck down. But what particularly stood out was a remarkable racial diversity. It’s rare to feel east London’s incredible, unique palimpsest of cultures in one place, but I could feel it at Asper’s.

Rituals and codes surround the obtaining and disposal of chips, and these ornate interactions must be part of the appeal of

the experience. Money has to be placed on the table, not passed directly to the croupier, presumably so it remains under the gaze of the panopticon ceiling. The note disappears into a slot, pushed down with a Perspex wedge. Unlucky chips are swept into another aperture, a circular metal-edged hole suggesting a Tim Burton/Heath Robinson netherworld of chutes and pipes where chips are sorted and organized by specially bred chip-chimps. Then there's the spin of the great wheel, 'no more bets', the clatter and scatter of the small white ball, the whole familiar business. I bet modestly, positioning my smart grey chips randomly at first, then focusing on the number thirty-four, my age. They all go down the memory hole – the little glass marker indicating the winning number only once makes its way to my end of the table, let alone anywhere near my solitary chip. Next to me, two Bengali men about my age are betting heavily on the number twenty, and the numbers around it, with heavy losses, though they never seem disheartened. On the other side of me is an older man in a wrinkled suit and glasses. He does not bet, but keeps up a running commentary: 'Twenty is a hard number to come by in this casino. I don't know why that is, but it is.'

And then my chips are gone. I didn't win once. Briefly, I'm gripped by an urge to buy more chips. This is, of course, very easy to do, and ATMs are provided for my convenience. Along-

side the inexpensive bar and the relaxed door policy, everything Asper's is extremely convenient and welcoming. It's a world away from the shadowy West End citadels that have hitherto been London's only option for casino gambling, with their barriers to entry, of which their secretive mystique was the first and most formidable. The imagination conjures swarthy, laconic men in gold-rimmed sunglasses and debauched contessas with intelligence agencies on speed dial. Nothing so sinister here at Westfield. Asper's is sinister in a whole other fashion, in that it takes the same mechanism for efficiently Dysoning up customers' money and makes it as accessible and matter-of-fact as a trip to John Lewis. I can't help but feel the experience should be a bit more terrifying.

My senseless moment of wishing to continue gambling passes as quickly as it arrived. My final sense of the gambling hall is one of *déjà vu*. Serious lone men, barely talking, leaning over tables positioning brightly coloured pieces . . . I'm fifteen again, war-gaming at Games Workshop on a Saturday afternoon. God only knows how long that addiction had me in its grasp, sucking the money from my pockets, or how I finally beat it – but I'm not going back. After a reasonably priced cup of coffee in that too-pleasant bar, I flee, back into the Westfield crowds. ◇

THE STRAND, WC2

## Sophie Elmhirst takes the road less travelled

**Y**ou know you know London when you can nose your way, no-hands, mapless. You can trace its alleys; skirt the high streets; slice through a slow surge of pedestrians. You know you know London when you know its short cuts.

Here's one, from a cabbie:

**HIM:** Say you're going from east to west on the Strand and you're stuck at the Adelphi Theatre. There's one left turn you can come off, at John Adam Street . . .

**ME:** Yeah.

**HIM:** Right. You can't get through, or people *think* you can't get through, because that comes out at Villiers Street which is a one-way street, so if you tuck a left on to York Buildings . . .

**ME:** Yeah? (*mystified*)

**HIM:** . . . there's a left turn before Buckingham Street, then *immediately left* there's a ramp goes down which looks closed, got a headroom sign and everything and it's a goods entrance, it's not a road even!

**ME:** But you're allowed to go through it?

**HIM:** Yeah, up until 11 o'clock. And it comes up under the Savoy

at the back of the Savoy entrance. So if you ever get stuck – say Trafalgar Square's rammed and you've committed yourself – then you can bang down to the Embankment rather than sitting with all that from Trafalgar Square. And you come out back of the Savoy at the river entrance where the traffic lights are just under Waterloo Bridge and then you can go right or left. You wouldn't think to look at it: you wouldn't have a *clue*. That's got to be the one. I don't usually tell people. If I'm going to use it, and they're not paying attention, I never tell them, so I do it quickly, and all of a sudden they look around and they're like . . . (*elaborate expression of wonder*)

**ME:** It's like Narnia!

**HIM:** Yeah! Exactly. They don't realize how they got in there! They're thinking: where *are* we?

'Follow the cabbie!' my mother says when driving in London. If you're stuck in a jam or they've closed a road, the cabbie in front will swing down a side street, like a mugger on the run, till he comes out just ahead of the clogged cars.

My mother, a walker, a woman who knows the way round Wren city churches like they're supermarket aisles, has her own favourite short cut. You start from somewhere north of Bond Street, say the Wallace Collection on Manchester Square, and you walk east, following a thread of passages and the odd cob-

bled mews, one never quite leading directly to another, all the way across, until you reach Tottenham Court Road. The route is parallel to Oxford Street, but is its antithesis, a tangle of alleyways. Somehow, it's almost impossible to plot the same course twice, as though the route resets after each journey, the city re-mapping its paths. 'I can never find it again,' my mother says, annoyed, but enchanted, like Lucy when the wardrobe goes back to being a wardrobe.

Who says you can't do short cuts underground? Not me.

Quickest way from Camden Town to Piccadilly Circus?

The innocent (the *tourist*) says, Northern Line to King's Cross, then change to the Piccadilly Line.

The short-cutter says, Northern Line to Euston (Bank branch only) then whip across the platform through a small arch and on to the Victoria Line southbound to Oxford Circus, then another shimmy across the platform through another small arch and you're on the Bakerloo Line southbound to Piccadilly Circus.

It's one to make the commuter's heart swell, her feet tappy

Imagine a map of London on which every route that has ever been walked is plotted. A thick stripe along Oxford Street, painted in gloopy oil to denote the uncountable number of steps trodden; a fat line tracing the Portobello Road; another across the wobbly bridge, and along the South Bank. But in the midst of all these thoroughfares, there would be a web of barely visible pencil lines, faint to indicate

rare patronage: the short cuts. The ones we use from day to day that map our lives in their quotidian particularity – from home to the station through the churchyard, from your sister's to the bus stop through the park.

I like to think that no one knows my favourite short cut – that it is one of those shadowy pencil lines – but I can't believe it's true. Anyway, I exposed it last summer, showed it off like a beaming parent, scampering excitedly one foot ahead of my companion the whole way (it goes through a passage called Star Yard *and* a secret garden). But then sharing a short cut is a sweet pleasure in itself: an invitation to someone to know a city the way you do, so that the faint line on the map of all our walks thickens and redraws.

Who would know the best short cuts?

A guide, surely. A guide to secret walks in London.

This, from Diane, of [secretlondonwalks.co.uk](http://secretlondonwalks.co.uk).

HER: Guides are the worst people to talk to about short cuts because we don't take them (!!!). Because when you're taking a tour you go up the most interesting little streets and down the alleys and down the back streets and so you end up taking a route that might not be the quickest one (!!!). So what I give you might not necessarily be the quickest way to walk but it would be the most interesting way to walk. (*New rule of short cuts: don't trust the name.*)

Diane tells me a route from Russell Square to Temple which takes in the Foundling Museum, a plaque for the poet Hilda Doolittle, an eighteenth-century burial ground in which one of Oliver Cromwell's daughters is buried, the house of Charles Dickens, the black-and-white timbered Staple Inn, the Royal Courts of Justice *and* the church from *The Da Vinci Code*.

ME: What got you walking?

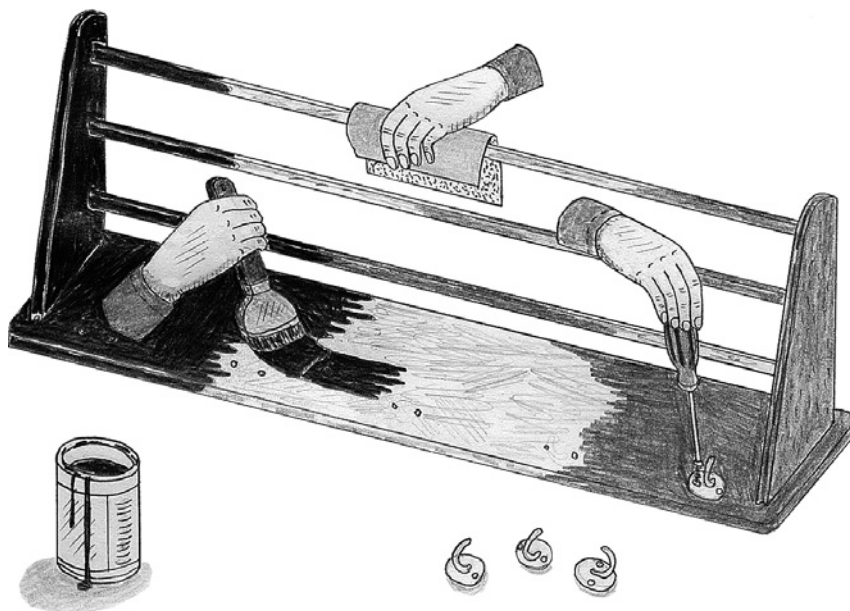
HER: It was in the early nineties, I was stuck in a rut, in a job I didn't enjoy. I thought maybe being a guide was something that was going to suit me. I haven't really stopped discovering London since. I'm always adding walks to my repertoire. I've got about ninety different walks now.

ME: Wow.

HER: London is very surprising. You can be on a busy road in what appears to be a rundown area surrounded by fried chicken shops and then you walk round the corner and you're in a street

of Victorian villas or a lovely square. And also there's the attraction that it changes a lot – in other cities I think there would come a point where I felt I knew everything there was to know. But London is forever changing, moving on.

One of those days, in the winter of 2010, when the snow had fallen overnight and was thick on the ground by morning. We walked to Hampstead Heath on the gritted roads and came back by the short cut – a passage that steals from Woodsome Road down through a tunnel, skirting some old cottages, all the way to Kentish Town. It's a gentle slope, which had, on a freezing afternoon, morphed into an elongated, curving ice ramp. We slid our way home, a journey punctuated by those arse-lurching moments when your newborn legs give way beneath you, and your wheeling arms desperately reach for invisible handles, and you stare so hard at your feet in tunnelled concentration that when you eventually emerge on to Lady Somerset Road, you blink with surprise, like a mole who's just burrowed its way into the light. ◇





# Palindromes for Specific Occasions

By *Demetri Martin*

Gently informing a DJ that there is a problem with the sound system:

*No music is, um, on.*

A German bouncer at a gay s&m bar telling an underage customer, who is standing in line, that he cannot let him enter the bar:

*Ya, get an ID, robust, subordinate gay.*

A father trying to connect with his estranged son by offering him some pizza:

*Son, I'm odd. Domino's?*

The head baker at a bakery instructing a new employee about how to deal with customers and then suddenly noticing what the new baker has made:

*Snub no man. Nice cinnamon buns!*

An American tourist angrily correcting his cab driver after landing in Italy and discovering that the driver is taking him to the wrong city:

*No. Rome, moron.*

A dialogue between a man and his young son. The man is trying to teach the boy the name of a piece of fruit and the difference between singular and plural:

– *Son, say a papaya.*  
– *Papayas.*  
– *No 's'.*

A butler politely asking the young son of his rich employer to go to the bathroom as he gets him ready for bed:

*Emit debris, sir. Bedtime.*

A comment said to a friend about the size of his old jeans, after he's lost a lot of weight.

*Massive Levis, Sam.*

A scientist's reaction to what he finds in a Petri dish.

*P.U.! Organisms in a group.*

A guy explaining to his friend how he feels about operas as he accidentally runs into a beehive.

*See, bro, operas are poor – Bees!*

A poem about a lonely man in a strip club, who contemplates the age-old battle of the sexes when he becomes infatuated with two of the club's dancers, Tina and Stella. As he watches the strippers, the bouncers watch him. Soon he begins to lose control of himself, proposing marriage to Stella and fondling two other dancers. At the same time, he starts to develop a gnawing sense of self-awareness, discovering that he, like the other men in the club, is as much a spectacle as the very strippers they are watching. Still, he cannot escape his own nature. And when he finally gets too intimate with one of the ladies, she wallops him with her boobs, turning his thoughts about the battle of the sexes into physical reality.

*Sexes. Eh, the sexes.*

*Never even. Still, it's DNA.*

*Never awed, I spot a boob.*

*O, wow! O, now two. Wow! OK.*

*A still animal sits afoot: one vamp, a lap maven.*

*O, timid loser, I sedate ye.*

*Yes, live devil, as I tip it, it is.*

*I tip it. I peep it.*

*'Send a man a gross orgasm!*

*I am, Ms, a crass, base dud.'*

*Ah, supple holes made me dire.*

*Lame fate got old, a most ogled omen.*

*O, did I tap a tit? A pat? I did.*

*Boobs or pasties, a bosom . . . Mmm –*

*Uh oh –*

*'Ahem, pal!'*

*Fast, I toss a tip.*

*'Mr, ass?': a warning.*

*I sat ogled.*

*O, men! O, me, to tame Tina!*

*To gits I'm all animal.*

*'Sit now,' I say, as I do.*

*'Got it!' A pull . . . up it now I peer . . . camise yonder I keep.*

*I tip, I riff, or on one post untied, I ring.*

*I say, 'O boy! My, my, baby. Ticklish?'*

*Alas, a bossy baby. Ergo, nope.*

*Yes, I rise. Yes.*

*'Ah, can I flow on, Miss?' I hit it.*

*'Oh, madam!' Stress all astir oft.*

*'Ah, we're too hot.'*

*Ah, we met a rebel god as animals.*

*I won't nod. I'll act.*

*Eyes open, I fall.*

*It's we few, dim, all ill.*

*I'm in a man-made reverie, babe.*

*Now on one pole: Stella!*

*Ever I wonder, Miss, as I tip (also ten, if stiff).*

*It's o so still. A creep's eyes peer.*

*Call it so.*

*So stiff, it's fine to slap. It is ass.*

*I'm red now.*

*I reveal, 'Let's elope!'*

*'No.'*

*Now one babe I revere.*

*Damn! A man.*

*I'm ill, ill amid we few still.*

*A fine pose yet call I don't.*

*Now I slam in a sad ogle.*

*'Berate me!'*

*'What?' O, hoot. Ere? What for?*

*'It's all,' asserts madam, 'ho tit.'*

*I hiss, 'I'm no wolf in a chase.'*

*Yes, I rise. Yep.*

*O, no. Grey baby's so basal.*

*Ah, silk city baby, my, my. O boy, a sign!*

*I ride it, nuts open. On or off, I rip it. I peek.*

*Ired, no? Yes, I'm a creep.*

*I won't. I pull up a tit.*

*'O God,' I say, as I won't.*

*I slam, in all, a mist.*

*I got an item, a totem.*

*One model got a sign in raw ass.*

*Armpit. Ass. O, tits. A flap! Me!*

*Ha, ho, hum. Mmm. O, so base.*

*It's a pro's boob.*

*Did I tap a tit? A pat? I did.*

*One model got so mad.*

*Lo, to get a female.*

*'Ride me, damsel.*

*O, help push a dude's abs.'*

*Sarcasm maims a gross organ, a mad nest.*

*I peep. I tip it. I sit. I tip.*

*It is a live devil's eye.*

*Yet a desire's old. I'm it: one vamp, a lap maven.*

*O, too fast I slam.*

*In all, it's a K.O.*

*Wow! Ow. Two now. Ow.*

*O, boob, a topside war.*

*Even and still it's never even.*

*Sexes. Eh, the sexes.*

# Memorial

*Paul Maliszewski finds answers to the big questions*

Elliot had questions about death. ‘Mommy,’ he said, ‘are ooo going to die?’ Elliot said *ooo* instead of *you*. He was three.

Hadley said she was going to die, eventually, yes. ‘We all will,’ she said.

‘Is Daddy going to die?’

‘Yes,’ she said.

We tried, my wife and I, to present Elliot with the truth. There was no point in being dishonest, or soft. The sideways answers were the ones that haunted.

‘Elliot,’ I said, ‘listen.’ He was making shapes with his fingers. Maybe he was listening, maybe he wasn’t. He liked to do the opposite of what we said. ‘We’re not going to die any time soon,’ I said. ‘Okay? You don’t have to worry about that.’

He nodded and looked past me, over my shoulder.

‘All right,’ I said, like anything was settled. The talk of dying unnerved me, and I felt my eyes tighten.

Hadley and Elliot had been talking about death for a while. It started one Sunday. They were on their way to the grocery store and passed by Arlington Cemetery. ‘Mommy,’ he asked, ‘what are those white things?’

‘Graves,’ she said.

‘What are graves?’

She told him they were markers for people who had died.

He didn’t understand, but he kept pressing, and she kept answering. Pretty much every Sunday was like that. The questions became just another part of his routine, like brushing teeth.

I asked Hadley, ‘Are you sure this is what we should be doing? I mean, is he ready or whatever?’

‘It’s only a matter of time,’ she said, ‘before somebody he knows dies.’

My wife was telling Elliot a story about Gran-gran.

‘Who’s Gran-gran?’ he asked.

‘Gran-gran was my grandmother,’ she said.

‘But how come I never met her?’

‘Because she died before you were born.’

Elliot thought about this. Time before he existed – that vast age which contained Buster Keaton, dinosaurs and early locomotives, as well as a spotty assortment of historical figures – was difficult to grasp. Elliot looked at pictures from our wedding and asked where he was. ‘But I miss Gran-gran,’ he said.

‘I know, sweetie. I miss her, too.’

‘But where can we get another one?’

‘Another Gran-gran?’

‘Yeah.’

‘We can’t get another one.’

‘Why can’t we buy a new one,’ he said, ‘at the store?’

‘You just can’t,’ Hadley said. ‘You can’t buy people at stores.’

One afternoon, after Elliot took a nap, we drove to the Jefferson Memorial. Naps were getting rare, and he had been wanting to go. We walked around the statue, looking at the words cut into the rock. Elliot knew his letters and a few words to see them, words like his name and *exit*, which he had learned from the signs.

‘I want to see more,’ he said.

‘This is all there is,’ I told him.

‘But I want to see ...’ He paused, thinking. ‘Inside,’ he said at last. Like there was some treasure being kept from him.

‘This is it,’ I said. ‘It’s just, you know, architecture. And this big statue.’ I pointed.

Elliot turned away. ‘No,’ he said. ‘No.’ ‘It’s a memorial, sweetie.’ Hadley held her hand out to him.

‘Where’s Thomas Jefferson?’ he said.

‘Thomas Jefferson,’ she said, ‘lived a long, long time ago.’

‘He’s dead?’

‘Yes.’

‘I want to go home,’ he said.

‘Hey, Elliot,’ I said. ‘Airplanes fly by here. Would you like to sit and watch some airplanes?’

Elliot, in bed, before sleep. ‘Why,’ he

asked, ‘is Thomas Jefferson dead?’

The room was dark, and we were lying beside him, my wife on one side, me on the other.

‘Because,’ Hadley said, ‘he lived a long time ago.’

‘But I miss him,’ Elliot said.

‘You can read about him,’ I said. It seemed insufficient, I knew. ‘He left a lot of letters,’ I said. ‘You could read his letters, if you want, when you’re older.’

‘Where’s Thomas Jefferson buried?’ Elliot said.

My wife told him Monticello.

‘What’s Monticello?’ Elliot said.

‘His house,’ she said. ‘In Virginia, where he lived. He designed it.’

‘It’s supposed to be lovely,’ I said.

‘It is,’ Hadley said. ‘It is lovely. We can go there some day, if you want.’

Elliot said okay, and for a while he was quiet. We tucked the blanket around him and arranged his animals, his dog and his creature and his giraffe.

‘But, Mommy,’ he said, ‘how did they bury Thomas Jefferson?’

‘Well,’ she said, ‘they dug a hole first, and they put his body in a box, and then they put the box in the ground.’

‘But how did they fit him in a box?’ Elliot said. ‘Did they cut him into little pieces?’

‘No,’ my wife said. ‘This was a big box, honey.’

‘A wooden box,’ I said. ‘Big enough to fit him.’

Elliot thought about this. ‘But, Mommy,’ he said, ‘how did they get Thomas Jefferson down into the hole?’ He pointed at himself, at his blankets, as if he were the earth, the ground, the hole they had dug.

‘There’s men, sweetie, several men. They carried the box, and then they lowered it into the hole. They worked together.’

Elliot wasn’t through. He was a question machine, especially right before bed. ‘Is Nixon alive?’ he asked. He knew Nixon from a time, a year or so before, when he had wondered if there were any bad presidents. Nixon, we had told him, was pretty bad.

Hadley said Nixon was dead, too.

‘What about George Washington?’ Elliot said. ‘Is George Washington alive still?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘Washington was the first president. He lived a long time ago.’

'Is Obama alive?' Elliot said.

'Yes,' Hadley said, 'Obama's alive.'

Obama's the president right now.'

'Are any other presidents alive?'

She ticked them off, and I thought about each one, as if they were stepping forward in a procession, Carter and then Bush and then Clinton and Bush. Was that really all there were anymore? For a moment, I wasn't sure. It felt like someone was missing, lost to memory. My power of recollection was on the fritz and had been, I hated to say it, since Elliot had come along. I often couldn't remember whether I'd written to a friend or just thought about writing. I'd run upstairs to get something – my slippers, a glass of water, this book I had been reading for months – only to come back a few minutes later, empty-handed.

'Are all the presidents going to die?' Elliot said.

'Yes,' Hadley said.

'But what's going to happen when we run out of presidents?'

'We're not going to run out,' she said.

'We have elections. Every four years, we choose another president.'

'You know, when we go vote?' I said.

'Remember, they had doughnuts for us?'

A few nights later, Elliot asked if some people bury dead flies. I was putting him to bed by myself. Hadley was at school information night, the one evening every year when all the parental anxiety on the Hill is focused in one location, concentrated into a two-hour crush of questions, answers, pamphlets and applications.

'I guess so,' I said. 'Maybe some people do.'

'So they dig a hole,' he said, 'and put the flies down into the hole?'

'They'd do something like that,' I said.

'Sure.' I could see where the questions were leading: come spring, we'd be staging fly funerals in the backyard.

'Daddy,' Elliot said, 'we're not ever going to die, right?'

'No, we are,' I said. 'But not for a long time.'

'Mommy is going to die?'

'Yes.'

'And Daddy is going to die?'

'Yes, but, again, not for a long time, okay?' We were lying in the dark. A nightlight disguised as an oversized ladybug cast stars on the ceiling, blue stars or

red stars or green stars, depending. The stars that night were blue.

'How old is Daddy?' I said. 'Do you know?'

'Ten,' Elliot said, as if he were certain.

'Actually,' I said, 'Daddy is forty-two.'

Elliot looked at me.

'Do you know how old Great-grandaddy is?' I said.

'I do,' he said.

'How old?'

He said he didn't know.

'Great-grandaddy is ninety,' I said. I let that sink in, like the number could speak for itself. 'That's more than double how old Daddy is,' I added.

No answer.

'You remember double, right? Remember when we were talking about that? Two times two is four, yes? Well, Daddy times two,' I said, 'is not as old as ...' I was, I knew, wandering, getting lost in my logic. 'Daddy's not going to die,' I said, 'for a long, long time, that's my point.'

Elliot was quiet, mulling, pulling at his sheets.

'We just have to eat right,' I said, 'and get enough sleep and exercise our bodies, and we'll live a long time.' I almost believed that. But I couldn't shake my worries: car wrecks, aggravated assaults, missing persons. I knew a guy in school whose father got shot and was killed in a hold-up. He'd gone out to Safeway one night, to get whatever, and he was standing in line, waiting to pay, when the robbers entered, and that was it, he never came back.

'Daddy,' Elliot said, 'how did they get Thomas Jefferson under the ground?'

It was late – it had got to be almost nine, somehow – but I started from the beginning. 'When Jefferson died,' I said, 'they put him in a box.' The box was made for him, so he fitted inside. Everyone came who wanted to remember him and talk about him and reflect on his life. 'People came from all over,' I said. I had no idea if that was true, but it seemed likely. When they were done talking about Jefferson, they took his body to the cemetery. Several men carried the box, because it was quite heavy. Other men dug a hole in the ground. This was a deep hole, six feet down or more, and when they were done with that work, they lowered the box into the hole.

'But how did they lower it?' Elliot asked.

'Well,' I said, 'they probably had straps under the box.' I thought about constructing a model there, on his bed, to demonstrate the lowering. Before we had Elliot, my great fear was that I wouldn't be able to answer his questions. *What are clouds, Daddy? How do you make glass?* I had my grasp on things, a foggy sense of the basics, but I didn't want to pass that off as even shabby truth. I looked around his room, seeing what we had handy, what might work. Stuffed animals were wedged together on a bookshelf like commuters in a subway car. His Ringo Starr action figure, a prized possession, stood before them, arms upraised. Beside him was the Blue Meanie, grinning and bulboid. Ringo, I thought, could be Jefferson, and the Meanie and all the stuffed animals could attend his funeral. Then I thought better. No need to colour the kid's toys with death. I would stick to words.

'Straps,' I told him, 'are like ropes.' The ropes went under the box, and men were holding on to the ropes, and the box was over the hole, held there, and then the men each let out some rope, just a little, so the box was lowered like that, down into the hole, very slowly. At the funeral of my wife's grandfather, a machine lowered his casket into the ground. The casket rested on a platform – the bier? – and then someone turned the machine on and the casket was conveyed away, off the bier and into the grave. The machine, its motor thumping, was kept covered – I remember this – with a large square of artificial grass. At my grandmother's funeral, they fastened the lid of her casket with screws. I say *they*, but I mean my family: my father and brother and my uncle and cousins. We took turns. The funeral-home people had provided screwdrivers, one at either end of the casket. The holes were pre-drilled and threaded. I say *we*, but I just stood by, watching. I'm not sure why. It seemed, I guess, utilitarian, like we were putting the finishing touches on some home-improvement project.

'Eventually,' I said, 'the box gets to the bottom of the hole.' Then the men pulled the ropes out and shovelled dirt back into the hole. 'You know,' I said, 'they cover the box with dirt.'

Elliot said he knew. ◇

# Your Reading Life

*A questionnaire for you, the reader, to complete*

Please tick relevant boxes.

*How old are you?*

- Under 2
- This many
- Totally old enough to go to India for a month with that guy
- Writing my memoir
- 35-35. I'm 35 basically
- None of your business
- Still got it going on
- Don't have it going on anymore, really, at all

*What is your gender?*

- Come on, *Five Dials*, don't be so reductive and essentialist
- Male

*What do you do for a living?*

- Student
- Academic
- Novelist
- Editor
- Proofreader
- Cultural Critic
- Journalist
- Poet
- Epic poet
- Lyricist
- Screenwriter
- Dyspeptic Essayist
- Historian
- Pundit
- Other

How many books do you read every year?

- One
- 10-20
- A book a day. More short books please!
- All the books in the history of the world in publication order. Currently hacking through Langland.
- 35-35 books a year. I read 35 books a year basically.
- More than 50
- The Booker shortlist
- The Booker shortlist excepting the winner
- Exactly 43, even if I finish the forty-third in mid-November
- Less than one

*Where do you generally read?*

- Bed
- Bed during sex
- Toilet
- Toilet while using the toilet
- Shower
- Library, while pretending to check Facebook
- Furtively in dark corners of pubs
- Atop craggy peaks
- Queues
- Nightclubs
- Traffic jams
- In a comfortable chair by the fire with a cup of chamomile tea

*What do you generally read?*

- Comic books
- Classics I've downloaded on the old tablet (great retina display)

- Facial expressions, which help with my ability to express empathy
- Palms for a living
- Palms on the side; it's not my only job
- Palms when my mother is providing psychic services on the phone and the person in the front room is like: 'I've got half an hour, seriously.'
- Paperbacks only
- Leather bound books only.
- Each situation differently. Eg. how many exits? Three in this restaurant.
- My teenage diary in a spiteful, unfor-giving manner, laughing ruefully at what's to come, unable to warn myself
- Anything by Terry Pratchett
- Novels in their original language as the standard of translation in this country is atrocious, simply abominable
- Mostly tweets from writers who used to write novels
- Garbage
- The Guardian* online for free
- Her subtle signs, the way she laughs and strokes her hair after we've finished our entrees at Zizzi, just a great place to get a good meal
- The first draft of my screenplay, *Chocolate Times*, which would be a wonderful Tobey Maguire /Rene Russo vehicle
- Poetry, or at least poems
- Facebook

The free book I'd like most from Hamish Hamilton is:

(No promises; no guarantees. Post finished questionnaire to Hamish Hamilton, 80 The Strand, London, WC2R 0RL.)

# All Chic and Elegance Are Over

By Jan Brandt, translated by Katy Derbyshire

In Germany's kitchens and living rooms, bars and cafés, at the country's stations, airports and motorway service stations, on national television and newspaper opinion pages, there's a gruelling discussion that's been going on for ever. It's all about which German city is the best place to live in and why so many clever people persist, against their better judgement, in staying in the country's worst, most uninhabitable city, as if it were paradise on earth, and defying all the arguments against it – from unemployment and air pollution to record debts and Mayor Klaus Wowereit.

It's an ideological issue, a fateful issue, an issue that ends relationships, splits up marriages and destroys friendships, tears families hundreds of kilometres apart and terminates long-held jobs. Berlin or not Berlin is a life-and-death issue.

On 16 May 1898, Rosa Luxemburg arrived in Berlin by train from Zurich, via Munich. Her arrival in the German capital marked the beginning of a lifelong feud. She wrote in a letter, 'Berlin makes the most unfavourable impression on me in general: cold, tasteless, stolid. [...] I already hate Berlin and the Germans so much that I could kill them.'

The Germans, or the Berliners to be precise, beat her to it. On 15 January 1919, in the turmoil of the revolution that followed shortly after she had co-founded the German Communist Party, members of a local vigilante group shot Rosa Luxemburg and dumped her body in the Landwehr Canal. She was not the first intellectual who couldn't stand the city from the outset, but she was one of its most famous victims.

Others survived, despite having publicly expressed their dislike. The French author Honoré de Balzac predicted as early as 1843, 'It may one day become the German capital, but it will always be the capital of boredom,' an assessment that his Russian counterpart Fyodor M. Dostoyevsky confirmed in 1874 after a visit to the city, in the meantime declared capital of the German Reich. Berlin-bashing – the act of eloquently battering the poor city on the wrong side of the Elbe which rose almost unnoticed from the

swamps of a glacial valley – has a long tradition. And its roots go back to the nineteenth century; to what was called the German Question and was eventually answered with great violence: Lesser or Greater Germany? With or without Austria? Vienna or Berlin?

Germany's belated nation-building went hand in hand with a belated capital-building. Before the German Reich was founded in 1871, every provincial prince had his own residential seat, and every one of them found it tough to relinquish centuries of privileges to Protestant Prussia and accept the Hohenzollerns' dominant role. With centralization, the establishment of compulsory institutions, the incorporation of nearby towns and villages, with the economic upturn manifested in the capital city's architecture and its concentration of industry and culture, Berlin attracted haters.

Above and beyond these intrigues, the old aristocracy and the new opinion-leaders – the middle class – established a discourse with a passion, severity and determination unknown to other European countries such as England and France, simply because the latter were already nations at a time when the German-speaking territories still consisted of more than 300 states, because London and Paris were already capital cities by the twelfth century, when Berlin was barely on the map – and because their size and importance have never been contested by either journalists or politicians.

Theodor Fontane, a participant in Berlin's 1848 Barricade Uprising, who first came to public attention with his sedate rambling guides by the name of *Wanderings Through the March of Brandenburg*, made a show of horror in 1894 at the city's development: 'All there is in Berlin is imitation, decent ordinariness, respectable mediocrity, and all Berliners feel so as soon as they get out of Berlin. Human life outside the city is freer, more natural, less self-conscious, and therefore the non-Berlin world seems more attractive.' And shortly before Fontane died in 1898 he gave the place another kicking: 'The moment one enters Berlin all chic and elegance are over.' His devastating aesthetic dictum set the tone for one of the most

enduring German debates of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Up to the end of the First World War, a kind of verbal ceasefire was upheld on the matter, with very few exceptions. The Germans were busy with their external enemies. Yet the battles were barely over before the tradition of Berlin-bashing was rekindled, achieving a severity in the course of the 1920s that makes the current attacks look mild in comparison. The Greater Berlin Act incorporated more rural communities, with the grandiloquent Greater Berliners presumably terribly annoyed that this era went down in history as the Weimar Republic rather than the Berlin Republic – as the next civil war raging in Berlin meant the constitutional convention had to relocate to the birthplace of German Classicism.

The left, the right, the upper crust and the lower classes treated Berlin to regular beatings from then on. The city was ridiculed, rejected, reviled by inhabitants and visitors alike. Built upon, spat upon, written upon in a never-ending stream of graffiti. It was not only politically motivated agitation that was expressed in the morning and evening newspapers and on the walls of the city's buildings. And it was not only authors from the south, north, east and west who brought along their resentments and saw them confirmed. It was also the Berliners themselves who were constantly abusing their birthplace. First and foremost the journalist and writer Kurt Tucholsky, who in all of his writing – polemical texts, observations, chansons, poems, short stories, criticism or essays – deals with his hometown and dissects the common or garden Berliner. 'His atrocious bad temper and his permanent glut of nervousness let no sound reach its end – with trembling nerves he waits for his first impression, and once he's got it he won't budge from it,' Tucholsky wrote under the pseudonym Peter Panter on 19 January 1926 in the magazine *Die Weltbühne*. He divided the Berliners into two types: the "'Aven't you got a bigger one?'" Berliner' and the "'Just greaaat'" Berliner'. Both types, he wrote, were equally unbearable. The complaining Berliner had an inherent lack of enthusiasm and was 'far too nervous to let anything unfamiliar take effect on him in peace'. And the praising Berliner, wrote Tucholsky, distinguished himself by the fact that his recognition always came across as 'reproach twisted into the realms of friendliness, a rebuke not applicable on this occa-



sion', like 'a medal awarded to himself'.

And so we might have to regard the writings of the Stuttgart-born arts editor of the *Berliner Tageblatt* newspaper, Fred Hildenbrandt, published in 1928 under the title *Big Beautiful Berlin*, as cleverly packaged self-praise rather than a hymn to the city. As he correctly noted, 'Many South Germans who live here love Berlin under constant protest. But they can't get away.' Hildebrandt was not a protester, instead praising the Berliners' extremely dry sense of humour and their untiring diligence in the highest tones, and claiming the city had the prettiest girls in Europe. Rather than losing his temper over the permanent demonstrations, the public transport system's unpunctuality and unreliability, the noise, the dirt, all the city's misery, he wrote with empathy about weeping bus drivers, shoelace salesmen with the gift of the gab and enthusiastic do-Berlin-gooders carrying placards with the word 'dedication' around the streets, coming to the conclusion: 'It is certainly possible that anyone who looks upon this city may be enchanted by it.'

It goes without saying that words like this could not go unpunished. In his 1930 media novel *Done with Berlin?* the young Munich-born Peter de Mendelssohn, a junior reporter for the *Berliner Tageblatt*, made his boss Hildenbrandt into 'a partly original, partly monstrous character': talented but with odd manners, 'a terrible sycophant and penny-a-liner' who writes page-long sentimental tracts and prefers to spend the muggy summer months on the Riviera than in the office. At the very beginning of the novel, Mendelssohn gets his own alter ego entangled in a heated discussion about 'Berlin as the intellectual centre of the new Germany'. 'Berlin,' says an elderly gentleman, 'is a bloated monster, a fearfully fast-growing, highly unnatural entity', which harbours 'the greatest dangers for the education and development of a young writer or journalist who knowingly foregoes a university career'. The young man ignores his warning, moves out of his progressive boarding school in provincial Heiligenstadt to the Prussian 'hellish city', and commutes to and fro – always low on cash but rich in ideas – between the Romanisches Café, the Kempinski and the Schwanneke Wine Restaurant, eavesdropping on arrogant gents in horn-rimmed glasses, getting high on the city's only golden era, on the newspaper city, the advertising city, the city of lusts

and vices, writing and loving and smoking and drinking as much as he can before he is done with Berlin and the Berliners and absconds to Italy with his best friend's mother.

The Berlin-bashing phenomenon came to a climax with Mendelssohn and with Heinrich Hauser's trilogy of Berlin reportage in the national-conservative culture magazine *Die Tat*: 'Scraps of greatness, undertakings beyond its own ability, patchwork, mired down along the way. [...] Eternal face of Berlin: a building-site fence, a torn-open street, the bent arrow of the "diversion". [...] Berlin lives on what New York throws away as trash.' Under the headline 'Berlin is Germany' – the ultimate impertinence and provocation for all non-Berliners – the cosmopolitan Hauser dealt the city a sucker punch.

For twelve years, the aspirations of Greater Berlin coincided with those of Greater Germany. The Nazis' world war destroyed the organic urban structures and put an end to the writerly discussions, for the time being. The only attacks came out of exile now, from a man of whom no one would have expected them. Alfred Döblin, the author of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, fled from the Nazis to Paris, where he wrote his opulent and lengthy novel *November 1918* about the collapse of the German empire, setting it in the Alsace, where he had been stationed as an army doctor. In the book he contrasts the 'sweet old city' of Strasbourg with Berlin: 'a growth of buildings spreading low and dark across the sands of the March', 'a paltry trickle, the Spree, flowed through it'.

Berlin's loss of significance in post-war West Germany led to a federalization of city-bashing. From 1945 on, German writers transferred their disaffection to other places: Franz Xaver Kroetz complained about Bavaria, Hubert Fichte about Hamburg and Rolf Dieter Brinkmann about Cologne, Vechta and Hanover. West Berlin mutated into a publicly funded prison island in a sea of pragmatic socialism, a refuge for refuseniks of national service, gainful employment and rent payments. East Berlin became half a capital, about which – along with many other things – the East Germans were not allowed to say or write openly what they liked. And Bonn was far too small to get het up about.

It took two generations before Berlin once again drew the rage of journalists and

writers. Since the early 1990s, however, since the Bundestag declared Berlin the capital of Germany once again and embassies and ministries began moving from the Rhine to the Spree, resistance has been growing. Now that Berlin is seen and feared as a symbol of Germany's economic, cultural and political decline, now the threat that 'Berlin is Germany' might come true, the Berlin-bashers are being heard far and wide.

On 12 October 2001, the Swiss writer Christian Kracht was a guest on Harald Schmidt's popular late-night show. Kracht was living in Bangkok at the time, Schmidt in Cologne, and the two of them were united in their hatred for Berlin.

'Is it pleasant, life in Bangkok?' asked Harald Schmidt.

'Very pleasant,' said Christian Kracht.

'What's the major advantage compared to life in Germany?'

'The people are friendlier.'

'Do you find people in Germany unfriendly?'

'Mainly, well, in Berlin especially. Berlin is really, really awful.'

'Would you say Berlin is terrible as a whole?'

'Yes. Berlin is the most awful city in the world.'

'Appalling?'

'Appalling.'

'Repulsive?'

'Yes.'

'Disgusting?'

'Yes.'

'This is literature. A literary writer is allowed to say that kind of thing. A news-reader isn't.'

'That's right.'

'But as a literary writer, you can say "I have feelings of disgust when I think of Berlin."'

'I don't want to go there ever again.'

'I do envy you.'

In 2003 Claudius Seidl, the editor of the Berlin-based arts section of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, edited an anthology by the name of *Here Speaks Berlin: Stories from a Barbaric City*, in which five non-native authors provided plenty of good reasons to leave right away. But Peter Richter also mentioned the one reason why it's worth staying. As always, he said, the dark side is unfortunately also the more entertaining. ◇

# The Hurt

*By Peter Stamm, translated by Michael Hofmann*

At the age of forty, Lucia's mother had gone mad. I think that was the thing Lucia was most afraid of for herself. I asked her what had precipitated it. Just life, Lucia said, shrugging her shoulders. She married this man who loved her more than she loved him. I came along, she raised me, and eventually she couldn't take it any more and she cut her wrists. When I found her she was unconscious. I was thirteen.

Lucia was two years younger than me. I met her one summer, when I was staying with my grandparents in the mountains. I'd finished school in the spring, and I was going to start college in the autumn. I had been hoping to go walking with my grandfather, but he had fallen ill and was slow to recover, so I had a lot of time to myself. When it rained, I read to try and prepare for college, but when the sun shone I was outside all day, wandering around, swimming in the icy lake and coming home late.

It was at the lake that I first met Lucia. We hit it off right away and spent all our time together. We went walking in the mountains, lay in the grass for hours, and when the weather was bad we put on waterproofs and went out anyway. The meadows were springy underfoot, and when the sun came out the sky was blue like you wouldn't believe.

Often Lucia asked me to tell her stories. I'd hardly experienced anything in real life, but I always came up with something to tell her about. I can't remember what, I just remember we used to laugh a lot. Lucia told me about her dreams, places she wanted to visit, things she wanted to buy. A car and clothes and a house. She had it all planned. She wanted to work in one of the hotel bars and make a lot of money in no time at all, and then she wanted a husband and two kids and a house on the edge of the village, near the lake. Then I can sit at home, she said, and look out the window and wait for the kids to come home from school.

Once Lucia got sick. She was alone at home, her mother was away in the clinic,

and her father was in the shop downstairs. He sold radios and TVs, and he was a nice, rather shy man. She's just got a bit of a cold, he said, and he sent me upstairs to her.

Lucia answered the door in pyjamas, and I followed her up to her room. It was my first time in the house, and I had a mildly alarming sense I was doing something forbidden. It was that afternoon Lucia told me about her mother. It's only in summer, she said, she sits upstairs in her room all day long, doesn't speak, doesn't do anything, and my father keeps having to go up and check how she is. He's worried she might try to do it again, said Lucia. Will you make me some tea?

She wasn't really sick, but I made her some tea anyway; it was like a game of house. Lucia told me where to find everything. When I opened the cabinets, I had a feeling I was under observation. Then Lucia walked into the kitchen and watched me and smiled when I looked at her. When she coughed, it sounded like she was pretending.

Lucia showed me photographs. We lay on the bed together; she was under the covers, I was on top. Eventually she asked me to kiss her, and I kissed her. About a week later, we slept together; it was the first time for both of us.

We thought we would go on a circular walk over two mountain passes. We would spend the night in a youth hostel in the next valley. We had been walking all day, had climbed up a long way, crossed stony landscapes, and only late in the afternoon reached our destination, which was a tiny village way up a barren valley. The youth hostel was a small stone house at the edge of the village. On the door was a sign telling you where to pick up the key.

The house was cold and empty. On the ground floor was a kitchen and a little dining room. There was a guest book on the table. The last entry was a couple of days ago. Two Australians had written something about the end of the world.

The dormitory was up in the attic. It was dark, because there were only two dormer windows and a single weak light bulb hanging from the ceiling. I dropped my backpack on one of the narrow mattresses along the wall on the floor, and Lucia took the one beside it. At the foot end of the mattresses were piles of brown woollen blankets. We went down to the kitchen, made coffee and ate provisions we'd brought with us, bread and cheese and fruit and chocolate.

The sun dipped over the mountain early and it quickly got cold, but the sky was still blue. In a little general store we bought a litre of red wine. Then we strolled up the valley out of the village. We could hear marmots whistle, but we couldn't see them. After a bit, Lucia said she was getting cold. I offered her my jacket, but she declined and we turned back.

The youth hostel was situated next to a stream we could hear even with the windows closed. It was barely warmer inside than out. I opened the wine and we got into our sleeping bags, not undressing, and drank wine out of the bottle and talked. Tell me a story, Lucia said, and I told her about things I wanted to do and films I'd seen and books I'd read.

Lucia slipped out of her sleeping bag to go to the bathroom. When she came back, she sat on my sleeping bag for a minute, then she stripped to her underwear and scooted in beside me.

Autumn came, and Lucia got a job at a hotel bar. I went home and enrolled at university. I had a good record at high school, but I had trouble making the adjustment to college. I found it hard to meet people, and spent most of my evenings alone in the little attic room my parents had found me.

I wrote regularly to Lucia, who rarely wrote back. If she did, it was a postcard that barely said anything, just that she was doing fine, that there was nothing happening in the village, the weather was good or bad or whatever. Sometimes she filled in the space with little drawings, a flower or an Alpine hut, and one time a heart with a drop of blood squeezed from it. The drawings looked like tattoos to me.

The summer after, my grandfather died. I drove out to the funeral in the village with my father. I hoped to see Lucia. She wasn't there. I left messages for her

but she didn't get in touch. When we returned to the flatland, we took Grandmother with us.

A couple of times I tried to phone Lucia. Usually her father picked up and said she had just gone out. Once it was her. I said I wanted to visit her, but she didn't seem interested. When I insisted, she said I was free to do what I liked, she couldn't tell me never to come to the village. After that I wrote to her less often, but I didn't forget her either. I had promised her that summer that I would be back, and when I'd finished at college, I applied for the job of teacher at the village school. The headmaster told me it was only on account of my grandparents that I got the job.

You won't come back, Lucia had said four years ago. Now she said, I never thought you'd be back. I had come up by train at the beginning of the week. My father promised to bring my stuff up to the valley by car that weekend, my books and the stereo and the little TV. But on Friday it snowed and the pass was shut. My father called and said did it matter if he came the following week? I was sitting in my grandparents' little house. I was sleeping in the bed my grandfather had died in, and presumably my great-grandfather before him. I lay under the heavy comforter, my arms pinned to my sides like a dead person's, and I tried to imagine what it would be like if I really couldn't move them, just to lie there and wait for death.

When the rest of my stuff comes, I'll have you around to dinner, I said to Lucia. I'd gone to the bar where she worked. She said she was still living with her parents. She was working a lot, she said, in summer she'd totalled the car, and she wanted to buy another one in the spring. I said my grandparents' garage still had the old Vol-

vo standing in it, she could always borrow that. That piece of junk? she said, and she smirked.

Work at the school was difficult. I had taken courses in education at college, but the kids here were rowdy and badly behaved and didn't make it at all easy for me. My colleagues were no help either. Most of them were local, and the talk at break was about going hunting and village gossip and the weather. Once I rang the father of one especially difficult girl. He was a hotelier, and he treated me like a schoolboy on the phone. A few days later the headmaster came into my classroom after lessons and said if I had trouble, I



should talk to him, and not blame the parents for my failures. Astrid stays up half the night watching TV, I said. And then she can't stay awake during class.

The head looked at the cut-paper shapes I'd done with the kids and that we'd hung in the windows. Snowflakes,

he said. As if we didn't have enough snow here. He took them down one after the other, slowly and without saying a word. When he was finished, he put them down in front of me and said, You ought to work on the syllabus instead of cutting fancy paper shapes.

He left. I could hear the kids yelling outside. I went to the window. They were fighting, and then, just like that, they all ran out of the yard and disappeared down the street. They all ran off together, and I was put in mind of a swarm of scruffy birds I'd seen scavenging on the rubbish dump outside the village.

The days were short and getting shorter. For a long time that year the snow held off; instead it was cold and rainy, and often I couldn't see the tops of the mountains because the clouds were so low. It's worse than in other years, said Lucia, at least when the snow comes everything gets brighter. She said she sometimes feared she might lose her mind like her mother. We had gone for a walk one afternoon when there was no school, out of the village and up the slope. It was one of the few fine days that autumn. But soon enough the sun disappeared behind the mountains, and only the upper slopes still had light on them.

If only it would snow, Lucia said, then we could at least go skiing. I asked her back for supper, but she said she had no time. On Saturday then, I said, and she said, Oh, all right. She said she could smell snow in the air, and that the old people said it was going to be a cold winter. But that was what they said every year. I tried to kiss her on the mouth, but she turned away and offered her cheek. Tell me a story, she said. You must have stories you can tell. All that time you've been away. I haven't been away, I said, I've been at home.

The next day we went walking again. We



went the same way and sat down on the same bench as the day before. From there we could see the whole village, and the ugly modern hotels on the lake. The sky was cloudy, and soon after we had sat down it started snowing, small flakes the wind blew in our faces and that settled in the folds of our clothes. The snow melted away as soon as it touched the ground. Lucia had got up. I asked her to wait, but she shook her head and ran down the steep slope, leaping from boulder to boulder like a little girl. I watched her until she was back in the village. I stayed a while longer, then I walked down the road. I got to the school just on time. The headmaster was standing in the doorway, and watched silently as I walked past him and into my classroom.

On Saturday Lucia came around. I had gone shopping that morning and cooked all afternoon. Lucia ate in silence. I asked her how she liked the food. She said, Yeah, and went on chewing. When we were finished and sitting on the sofa drinking coffee, she got up and switched on the TV. I asked if she had to do that. Not really, she said. You can tell me a story, if you like. She left the TV on, but turned the sound down a bit. I've been waiting for you, I said. I haven't kept you waiting. I mean since that time . . . since we . . . you know, since we slept together. Lucia furrowed her brow. You mean you haven't slept with any other woman? No, I said, and suddenly I felt stupid. Lucia laughed out loud. She said I was crazy. That's just weird. I said I'd often thought about her. Lucia got up and said it was time she went. I switched off the TV and put on a CD. I asked if she'd slept with a lot of guys. She said that was none of my business, and after hesitating briefly, Of course, what else was there to do up here? Then she said she had brought some condoms, but she didn't feel like it any more. She took the little pack out of her pocket and tossed it to me. Here, they're all for you, she said, and she put on her shoes and jacket.

A week later we went to the movies together. From the beginning of winter the community centre had one screening per week, and we often went to see them together. But Lucia wouldn't come back to my house again. I was allowed to walk her home, and sometimes we would

stand around chatting on the doorstep for a while. When she got cold, she gave me her hand and went inside.

Finally, early in December, it started to snow in the village, and this time the snow stayed with us. For one week it snowed almost solidly, then it stopped. It was very cold now, and the sky was clear. At night I saw loads of stars; they seemed to be much nearer than they were down in the flatland. Once, just before Christmas – we'd watched an American comedy together – Lucia said I could come in if I liked. On the landing she kissed me.

Have you had any more practice since? she asked me, laughing. And when I shook my head: Do you even remember how it's done?

She left me standing in the hallway and went into the living room. I could hear her talking to someone, then she came out again. She opened the door to her room, and I just caught her father sticking his head around the corner of the living room door to see who it might be.

When Lucia was sitting on top of me, she got a nosebleed. She leaned forward and cupped her hand under her nose, but even so some of the blood splashed on my face. She laughed. The blood felt surprisingly cool. Later I heard her father in the passage outside. I wanted to stay over, but Lucia sent me away. She said she didn't want anyone to see me. I got home very late.

The following afternoon I went by without phoning beforehand. Her father was friendly as always and told me just to go up. I'd spent the whole afternoon grading papers, and I was feeling drained. Lucia said she had to go right away, she was on shift at six. If I wanted to, I could go along with her. She would buy me a drink.

In the bar there were a couple of guys from the village, and Lucia wanted us to sit with them until it was time for her to start. I didn't feel like it myself, but she had pulled up a couple of chairs. She was on first-name terms with all of them, and sat next to one she called Elio whom I'd never seen before. Elio worked as a mountain guide in summer and a skiing instructor in winter. He talked about his climbing trips and some ski race that was taking place in January, and the foreign girls who all wanted to hop into bed with him. One came back every year, a Ger-

man woman from Munich. She books private lessons, but let me tell you, we don't do a lot of skiing. Her husband was some bigwig in a bank, and he might show up in the valley for a weekend. She parked the kids on a baby slope. Then he worked out how much he made from private lessons. He said he was in it purely for the money.

I wanted to go, but Lucia told me to stay. She put her arm through Elio's and told him to go on. By now he was on to mountaineering, relating heroic exploits about difficult ascents and dangerous rescue missions. Lucia wasn't looking at me. She beamed at Elio. In the middle of one story I got up and left. At home I didn't know what to do with myself. I turned on the TV. There was a talk show, in which, to the consternation of the audience, a man was talking about living with two women. The women were present in the studio, and they kept saying what a good relationship they had. I felt disgusted and turned the TV off.

I vacuumed the whole house, washed the dishes and took the empty bottles to the recycling centre. I felt a bit better after that. On my way home I looked in on the bar again. Lucia was working now, and the whole place was full of noisy tourists. Elio was sitting at the end of the bar. When Lucia spotted me, she went over to him and took a puff from his cigarette. Then she leaned across the bar and kissed him on the mouth. She looked at me with an evil smile.

The next day I ran into Lucia on the street. I had bought her something for Christmas. She took the parcel from me without looking at it, shrugged her shoulders and walked off.

There was no school until the new year. My parents, along with my grandmother, came up to the valley and stayed in the house. They went skiing every day; my grandmother sat downstairs knitting or dozing. She had complained because I had taken down some of her pictures, and there was a scratch in the slate surface of the dining table. I was relieved when Christmas was over and they all went away.

During the rest of my time off, I stayed in bed as long as I could, and once I got up I hardly ever left the house. In the late afternoon I turned on the TV. There

was the same talk show I'd seen before, only the subject was different. After I'd watched for a while, I turned off the TV and carted it into the garage. I stood there and stared at the thing. Then I took it around to the front of the house, left it on the street and taped a piece of paper on the screen: TAKE ME. I waited by the window and looked out. From time to time someone would stop and read the sign and look up at the house. But no one took my TV.

On New Year's Eve I called Lucia.

We didn't speak for long, she said she was busy. When I tried later, there was just the answering machine. I left a message on the tape. I said, Lucia, and I loved her and I was lonely and I wanted to spend the evening with her. I waited. At nine o'clock I gave up and went out.

The bar was packed; I could hear the music and the din of voices from out on the street. Lucia and a co-worker stood behind the bar; Elio was sitting at one end of it again. I sat down next to him and ordered a beer. Lucia didn't look at me. Sometimes she came down in our direction, leaned across the bar and shouted something in Elio's ear, or kissed him, or had a puff from his cigarette. She smoked

hurriedly, scanning the room as she did so. The smoke slid around her hand as though caressing it. I felt drunk, even though it was my first beer.

I watched Lucia at work. She laughed with the customers and moved quickly back and forth. She was wearing a skimpy top, and I saw she had a pierced

navel and wasn't as slim as I seemed to remember her. But that only made her more alluring. I so wanted to touch her and kiss her, my whole body ached. And at the same time I saw myself hunkered in my corner, a pathetic lovelorn figure.

Eventually Lucia had some time off. She came out from behind the bar and got between Elio and me. Elio stood up and threw his arm around her shoulder, then he half bent his knees and gyrated with his hips. Then he let go of Lucia to go to the toilet, stumbled, almost

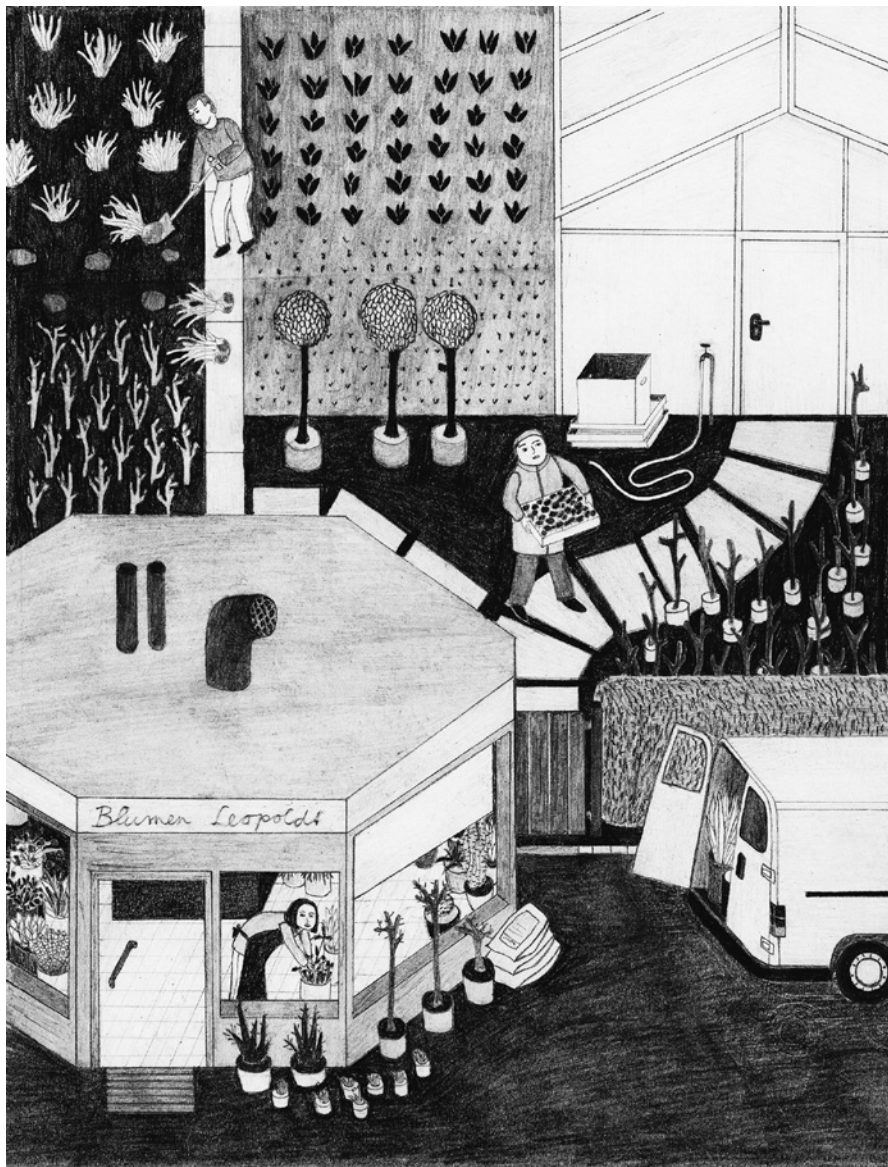
I went home. The TV was still out on the street, covered with snow. It was cold inside; I'd forgotten to fill the stove before going out. As I was on my way to the garage to pick up a few logs, my eye fell on the stack of blue exam books on the kitchen table. What I Really Want for Christmas. I flicked through them. What was it my students wanted, snowboards, Game Boys, a motor sled? And what had I expected? Justice? Love? Peace on earth?

I heard the bells chiming for midnight,

and then cars honking and fireworks going off. I stuffed the essays in the stove and lit them. I watched through the glass panel as they curled in the heat and burned, first slowly, then faster and faster. Before the flames died down, I ripped a few pages out of an education textbook on the floor, and shoved them in too. I ripped more and more pages out of it, and when there was nothing left of it but the cover, I got another one. My eyes were watering from staring so hard into the flames, and my face felt scorched.

I burned one book after another. I ripped bundles of pages out of the bindings and threw them in the flames. I was surprised how much strength it took to rip up a book. My hands hurt. In the end I went to bed.

The next day I carried on. I was more methodical now: I stacked my books next to the stove and burned them one by one. It took all morning. Then I pulled my notes out of my desk drawers, my diaries, newspaper clippings I'd never got around to reading. I burned the lot.



fell. Lucia screamed with laughter. She moved slowly to the music, ran her hands down my hips and smiled at me. She said something. I shook my head, and she put her mouth right up against my ear. Great vibe, isn't it? she yelled. Then she disappeared back behind the bar. I got up and left.



The room was full of smoke that billowed out of the open door of the stove.

That evening I went to the bar. There weren't so many people as the day before. Elio was in his corner again. When I sat down next to him, he looked at me doubtfully. Lucia came and took my order. She asked me if I'd made any good resolutions for the new year. I said I'd burned all my books. You're crazy, she said. I'll tell you a story, I said, but it was probably more for my benefit than hers. I told her about how I'd first come to the village, and how I'd met Lucia. I told her about our long hike into the next valley, and our first night.

Slowly Elio drank his beer. He was looking at the bar; he didn't seem to be listening. Lucia was, though. She was in the grip of a strange unrest, and wouldn't look me in the eye. When I was finished, she leaned across the bar and whispered something into Elio's ear. Then she kissed him on the mouth long and lingeringly. At the same time she looked at me with an expression that was at once frightened and furious. At least she wasn't indifferent to me any more. I got up and left. At home I wrote her a long letter. When I'd finished, I put it in the stove and burned it.

I didn't leave the house at all the next day. I burned everything I could find: cardboard boxes, my grandparents' photo albums, old wooden skis that were in the broom closet, a broken stool. Whatever was too big I sawed or chopped into pieces with the axe. The tools were old and hadn't been used in a long time: the saw blade was spotted with rust, and the axe was blunt.

The following day I started on the furniture. My grandparents' things were solidly built, and I had no idea how much work it was to destroy something. It was probably easier to kill someone, I thought. The application of pressure to the correct spot, a twist of the neck, a blade slipped between the ribs, the way I had seen it done in films. I thought more in terms of killing Elio than Lucia, but it wouldn't have changed anything. When the shops opened after the holidays, I bought a new axe.

Destruction had a smell. Torn paper, cardboard, ripped cloth soaked in gasoline to make it burn. Wood smelled when it splintered as if it was freshly

felled, as though the smell had been secreted inside it the whole time. And then the smells of burning: the sour smoke from paper that I pushed into the stove in great wads and that slowly turned to ash. The thick smell of burning gas, the acrid smell of varnish that bubbled and blackened before the wood underneath caught fire.

Whatever I couldn't burn I stuffed in rubbish sacks that I stowed in the Volvo, first in the trunk, then when that was full on the back seat, and finally on the front passenger seat.

School had begun again. I had become much calmer. During class, my thoughts were already on the work of destruction I would continue that evening. Thinking of it seemed to calm me. When I met the headmaster in the hallway, he gave me a friendly nod and offered me best wishes for the new year.

One weekend I drove out of the village and took a narrow road up the mountain. At the beginning of the road was a sign saying no passenger cars, only farm and forestry traffic. There were very few marks in the snow. I followed the zigzagging road up the mountain. After a couple of miles it came to a sudden stop. I left the car and walked back. When I got home I was frozen to the marrow.

After a week the village policeman phoned and said my car had been found. He was suspicious and asked various questions. He didn't seem to believe whatever cock-and-bull story I told him.

On Sunday I went to church for the first time since I had lived in the valley. I sat in the back pew. When the minister asked the congregation to come forward for the blessing, I stayed put. I saw Lucia, kneeling down with maybe a dozen other believers. The minister laid his hand on their heads, one after the other, and spoke the blessing. After the service I tried to speak to Lucia. It was the first time in ages that I'd seen her without Elio. I love you, I said. You're crazy, she said, you're imagining things. She walked off. I followed her and said it again: I love you. But she didn't react, wouldn't even look at me. I followed her back to her house, climbed the stairs after her to the back entrance. She opened the door, went in and slammed the door in my face.

At the end of January I took the bed apart and sawed and chopped it up in the garage into little pieces that I burned in the stove. That was the last of the furniture. There was only the mattress to come.

On one of the following days I walked up to the place above the village where I'd sat with Lucia. I wiped the snow off the bench and sat down. The sun had already gone over the mountains. After a while I saw Lucia coming up the road. She was walking fast and had her eyes on the ground. Once she looked up at the bench. I waved, but I wasn't sure whether she saw me or not. She walked on a bit, then she turned back and returned to the village.

The next day I was just about to give my students a dictation when I saw Lucia through the window. I told them I'd be back in a minute, and ran out of the classroom. By the time I was on the street, though, she had disappeared. I hesitated for a minute, then I went home, packed a few things and called a taxi. I knew the driver: one of his kids was in my class. He didn't ask me any questions, and didn't seem to be surprised when I told him to take me to the station.

There was half an hour until the next train, and I was suddenly worried someone might come and prevent me from leaving. The driver had parked his taxi outside the station. He had got out and was smoking and talking on the phone to someone. He laughed; I could hear him from the platform where I was standing. Sometimes he looked across at me, and in spite of the distance I thought I could make out a triumphant expression on his face.

The train arrived. A couple of skiers boarded with me, but they got off at the next station and I was alone in the carriage. I opened a window and leaned out. Cold air flowed in. The sky was overcast, and the mountains looked threatening as they passed. Not until the train turned a corner and entered a tunnel did I calm down. ◇

'The Hurt' is extracted from the story collection *We're Flying*, forthcoming from Granta in April 2013.

## Curriculum Vitae

*By Pedro Lenz, translated by Donal McLaughlin*

Almost no one knows  
that Ulrich Gwerder,  
who, dressed as a merry shepherd,  
posed in 1970 for a jazzy poster  
for Tourist Information  
in the city of Lucerne,  
was – at heart – a leftie.

Only Ulrich himself  
occasionally remembers  
his old parka jacket and  
his rebellious behaviour  
in the Mechanics class  
at the local tech.

(These days, Ulrich is a specialist  
in a state-of-the-art small business  
that produces  
a first-rate filling  
for chocolate mice.)

## Consolation

*By Pedro Lenz, translated by Donal McLaughlin*

When the schoolgirl  
in the Domino Tea Room  
suddenly started sobbing,  
an old woman,  
none of whose business it was,  
said not to take things so much to heart.  
Every hour God sends  
could hurt us, sure, she said,  
with exception of the last  
when Death comes.

From *Die Welt ist ein Taschentuch* (Verlag X-Time, 2002)

# Flamingos

*By Ulrike Almut Sandig, translated by Anthea Bell*

I am the leader. I stride at the head of the procession with measured tread. You don't run, you stride, Gunnar told me, with measured tread. Striding means walking slowly, taking big steps. Not too fast, little one, Gunnar said, but not tripping along either, so take big steps, although not so big that you're bobbing up and down as you go along, you must get it right for the occasion, understand? Besides, we have plenty of time. Striding steadily is what matters, that's what with measured tread means. There's nothing worse than a leader who goes sometimes fast, sometimes slowly, so that there are gaps in the procession, and the people at the back have to make up for it by breaking into a slight trot, while up in front the people getting their heels trodden on are taken by surprise.

I practised it first. I walked with measured tread from the landing on Armin's stairs, and then down the long corridor to the built-in cupboard. Gunnar and I go to visit Armin sometimes, but Gunnar goes more often than I do. Armin is a pastor. The door of the built-in cupboard looks like the door of a room, except that it's lower and has a key that you can't pull out. So Armin's built-in cupboard is always unlocked, and a good place for small people to hide. However, I never hide in it, because it smells of old fabric and children I don't know. The built-in cupboard is full of choirboys' cassocks. Some are short, some are longer, they are loose and black, like vestments for little pastors, and they have white collars. I took one of the smaller ones off its hanger and put it on over my anorak. It came down below my knees, but it didn't cover my dirty trousers. Try another, growled Gunnar from inside the built-in cupboard.

The cassock looks better with my dark blue corduroy trousers. I found the dusty smear on its left shoulder myself and rubbed it off; it left my fingers all sticky, and I had to wipe them on the door of Armin's house on my way to the chapel.

This is Saturday. Gunnar is often short of time on Saturdays, because that's

when funerals are held and he carries the cross. He gets two euros a funeral for that, but he doesn't spend them on anything. Gunnar says it's really profitable in summertime, when old people die in the heat of their vegetable gardens; sometimes he goes to three funerals a week with Armin. Gunnar isn't saying what he plans to spend the money on. If I ask him, he waves his arm with a grand gesture and looks seriously at me, which might mean a voyage to Asia, or a motor-bike, or, probably, getting a driving licence when I'm sixteen. Gunnar is four years older than me and a head taller, and he's already allowed to carry the heavy metal cross. It's black, with Jesus painted in gold on the front, and it looks beautiful. I'd have liked to carry that cross, but I only have the smaller one made of pale wood, varnished, no Jesus on it. After all, this is my first time, and I still have to get used to it. From now on I'll be the one carrying the cross at the head of the procession. Gunnar is around as well today, he'll give me a bit of help.

The starting point was the little chapel beside the watering cans. I didn't go in, although the door was wide open. The smell of candles, cleaning fluid and perfume wafted out into the forecourt. Cross-bearers stand outside and wait to go first when the procession sets off. I was standing right beside the pallbearers. They had yellow stains on their fingers, and they didn't talk to me. Gunnar said hi to them, he said it loud and clear, but they just gave me a funny look and didn't say anything.

The coffin lay in the dimly lit chapel. Pale wood like the cross I was carrying. Flowers in front of it, with inscriptions on white ribbons. I couldn't read them from where I was standing, but they looked lovely; I'm sure Gunnar will think so too. Papa, in his suit, kept looking round at me. Mama was sitting somewhere else. Old Cuckoo was there as well, standing behind the back row of chairs with both hands in his trouser pockets. He always comes to funerals because he

has so many warts, and Gunnar told me Cuckoo thinks they will go away if he throws a little note with something written on it into the grave with the ashes and the earth. Gunnar didn't know what the note said, but Cuckoo is always there, so it doesn't seem to have worked yet.

I go first, with Gunnar just behind me. He says: Don't forget, you're the leader now, you stride with measured tread.

The coffin must be right behind me, too: I can hear the pallbearers' heavy shoes crunching on the gravel path. If I turn round I'm sure I won't be able to hold the cross straight, so I look at a place just in front of my shoes and take care to keep going at a regular speed. The cross isn't heavy, but it sways in the air above me, and I have to hold it tight with both hands to keep it still. Don't let it bother you, Gunnar murmurs in my ear, I'm right here in your blind spot.

Gunnar is practising to take his driving test, but he still has a whole year to wait. He's already bought the book of written exercises that comes with a piece of cardboard with holes in it. You put the cardboard over the page of answers, and then you can see the right box through the pattern of holes, while the others are covered up. A blind spot is the space between the wing mirror and the rear-view mirror that the driver of the car can't see for himself. If a pedestrian gets into the blind spot of a heavy vehicle he can't be seen at all. Now Gunnar is in my blind spot, and I'm watching my shoes.

From the chapel it's about four hundred paces down the main path. Every hundred paces there's a rubbish bin for dead flowers and weeds; I counted them once when I was imitating Gunnar carrying his cross, it was some time ago, but I remembered. The second rubbish bin comes up beside my right shoe. Armin is walking beside me in his black cassock, his hand on my back. I'd like to shake it off, but I'm afraid of making the cross wobble, so I leave it where it is and concentrate. Let him, says Gunnar, he's only leaning on you for support. Another two hundred paces.

Gunnar got in the way on purpose on Monday. A caravan is a kind of heavy vehicle, right? It has two wing mirrors and a rear-view mirror, so the blind spot must be very small, he claimed. Smaller than me, want to bet? You can see what's

on both sides in the wing mirrors, with a glance over your shoulder you check what's in the corner, and you see everything behind you in the rear-view mirror. Unless you're crouching down, but maybe even then you see it.

The caravan is still very new. It has a kitchen with a corner seat, a ceiling light and a boiler, a toilet, a shower with white taps for hot and cold water, and four empty built-in cupboards, but not like the one in Armin's corridor. What with our Volvo and the caravan there's almost nowhere left in our yard for visitors' cars, they all have to park at the roadside. And the entrance to the yard is so narrow that you can only back into it, says Papa, or you have difficulty in getting out again. He fetched the caravan on Monday and brought it in through the entrance with great verve, until he came up against Gunnar. Ha, ha! Another hundred paces. You're nuts, Gunnar, I say, that's really funny. Gunnar doesn't reply.

The caravan was Mama's idea. It takes three days to get to Spain, but if you're not in a hurry you can spend a week on the way. Strasbourg is halfway there, it's a French city, and we're going to make a side trip to the South of France and see flamingos living in the wild. They're pink because they live on small shellfish containing carotene. Carrots contain that too. If flamingos ate carrots they'd be just as pink. You can't miss seeing them. That's where we're going.

But I haven't yet asked whether all three of us are going. I haven't asked any questions at all since Monday. No one has asked any questions, although we look at each other, Papa and me and Mama, while we don't ask questions. But only from a distance. Mama isn't sitting with Papa, and I'm here at the front. At the moment everyone is looking at me. I'm the leader. My back is sweating because of Armin's hand and because of all the people behind me, watching. The last

rubbish bin. The heap of earth is lying in the middle of the main path, it's the third space along beside the hedge with the little graves for urns beyond it.

Armin's warm hand guides me left and past the earth. The hole is square and deep. My hat it has four corners, four corners has my hat, I think. Ha, ha! You never told me how it goes on, I think, but Gunnar doesn't reply. Armin's warm



hand guides me to the side of the hole and comes down on my shoulder again. Stay where you are. Now I can see everything.

The funeral procession is about two hundred paces long. I know most of the people, my cousins are among them, further off are Winter and Johne, old Wolf and others from our street; Cuckoo is right at the back, I can tell him by his beige waistcoat, the other men are all wearing black or dark blue jackets, the women wear blouses. Gunnar is nowhere in sight. The men have put the coffin down beside the hole now and are unloading the big bunches of flowers. They'll go on top of the mound of earth later. It's always like that, this mound of earth is just like all the other mounds of

earth before and after it, and there isn't a stone yet where people can read the difference between the graves. The flowers lie on the mound of earth until it shrinks. I've never seen someone shovelling the earth away from a mound or anything like that, I wonder what happens to all that earth, it can't just sink in like compost sinking into a flowerbed, there's something underneath it; after all, there's the coffin, so what happens to the mound of earth? The coffin is much bigger than Gunnar.

The thick ropes in the men's hands look like weapons. Now they put them under the coffin and lower it into the hole by the ropes. Gunnar said they let the ropes down very slowly so that the body won't slip and lie slanting in the coffin. Once bodies did lie slanting in their coffins, but that was because many of them weren't dead at all when they were buried. It's almost all just as Gunnar said. Armin is on my right and has let go of me. He is reading something from the Bible. It's about someone who has taken the wings of the morning and flown to the uttermost parts of the sea, but even there thy right hand will hold him. When I try my backwards glance over my shoulder, the upright of the cross slips out of my hand and describes a semicircle in the air above my head; the cross falls

past Armin's suddenly outstretched arm, lands on the mound of earth and then slips slowly, head first, into the hole and on to the wooden lid of the coffin, making a hollow sound, and then there's a loud clack of varnished wood on metal fittings.

No one says anything, and no one takes a step forward to get a better view. The graveyard is a crowd of people in black and dark blue gathered on the gravel, their clothes rubbing against each other. I turn away from the hole, I try my backwards glance over my shoulder again, and take a deep breath: Gunnar, are you still there? ◇

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# The Expansion of Literary Language

Ulrich Blumenbach translates *Infinite Jest*, Translated by Ross Benjamin

When, in 2002, Helga Frese-Resch offered me the opportunity to translate *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace into German for the publisher Kiepenheuer & Witsch, I was excited – at last, something that would be more than a flash in the pan, forgotten by the time the book fair after next rolled around, if not before then.

As the saying goes, success is ninety-nine per cent perspiration, and over the years various stylistic peculiarities of the novel made me sweat. A central challenge I had to confront in the translation was the aesthetic of the author: Wallace seeks to overcome playful postmodernism and grapple with real societal problems, without dispensing with irony. The stylistic expression of that aim is a sort of double coding: in the novel, one and the same narrator can move back and forth between different idioms, suddenly lapsing from an expository mode to the offhand colloquialism of a petty criminal and ex-junkie: ‘A substance even just the accidental-synthesis of which sent the Sandoz chemist into early retirement and serious unblinking wall-watching, the incredibly potent DMZ has a popular-lay-chemical-underground reputation as the single grimmest thing ever conceived in a tube. It is also now the hardest recreational compound to acquire in North America after raw Vietnamese opium, which forget it.’

For this passage I had to recreate the comic contrast between the theoretical explanation and the sudden breaking-off of the sentence, the linguistic equivalent of a dismissive gesture. The narrator, traditionally the direct cable from the navel of the fable, is in Wallace’s work a fibre-optic cable and conveys several messages simultaneously. This oscillating writing is reminiscent of the conversations we have with ourselves. When we speak in public, we pin ourselves down to the stylistic register appropriate to a given situation (during a scholarly lecture I don’t tell dirty jokes; at the gym I don’t pontificate). When we have conversations with

ourselves, however, we give rein to exuberant anarchy, an equivalence between technical lingo and slang, erudite seriousness and childlike jest.

Wallace perfectly balances engagement and distance. It would be hard to find another author of contemporary literature who creates characters so full of life and shows them so much compassion, solidarity and even love, while at the same time dissecting contemporary American society with the clinical coldness of an autopsy report. Faced with this ambiguity while translating, I repeatedly had to ask myself: How strange is Wallace’s syntax for Americans? How strange will my sentences be for German readers? Where have I gone too far, and where have I not gone far enough? Where is strangeness beautiful in the original but only jarring in the translation?

In *Infinite Jest* it’s often not only characters and events but also words and sentences that seem strange. Wallace portrays complex social issues through nested sentence construction and a wide vocabulary. There aren’t many writers in the German language who dare to transform the world into literature with such an encyclopedic abundance of subject matter – with the exception of Uwe Tellkamp perhaps, who in his novel *Der Turm* [*The Tower*] adapts his style to the characters and situations in a similarly many-voiced way. In the accumulation of specialist knowledge *Infinite Jest* is a ‘fight . . . for the return to the full use of the language’, as Hemingway once wrote, and I hope that the translation expands the expressive possibilities of the German tongue; to that end, I had to consult the German dictionary compiled by the brothers Grimm as well as lexicons of historical argot in order to enrich the German version with unusual words like *bucklig* (‘gibbous’, an astronomical term for one of the eight phases of the moon) or *kobern* (for ‘petaled ass’ in the original; the orthographic errors and malapropisms of this passage I worked in elsewhere in my translation, and here chose instead to

use a cant term meaning ‘to turn tricks’).

Another challenge I had to contend with was the inconspicuousness of Wallace’s deviations from the standard language. At times understanding was more difficult than translating, as when it didn’t sink in at first that a word missing from the dictionary, ‘underdue’, amounted to the simple opposite of ‘overdue’: a urologist has shown up earlier than expected to take urine samples from tennis players for a drug test; he is underdue, or *unterfällig*, a made-up word that inverts the German *überfällig* in a parallel fashion. Then there was the problem of awkward sentences, which at first glance prompt the reader to call for the editor, but at second glance have to be carefully mimicked. Right on the first page of the novel is the sentence: ‘the others sit, stand and stand, respectively, at the periphery of my focus.’ Did someone forget to delete the duplicate word during the editorial process?

No, Hal Incandenza, the narrator of the passage, is a fastidiously precise observer, who notes the position of each of the three people in the room with its own verb. Or a tennis coach says, ‘I went daily to there, to be with the tree.’ Here too it’s not that the author, translator, editor, typesetter or copy-editor screwed up; rather, the character produces a so-called aposiopesis: The initially planned sentence (‘I went daily to the tree’) is abandoned in the course of speaking and replaced with a new approach.

Such difficulties pale in comparison to the pleasure of translating *Infinite Jest*. ‘The limits of my language mean the limits of my world,’ Wittgenstein writes, and at times when I wasn’t translating *Infinite Jest* over the past several years, I often felt like the Jedi Knight Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia Organa and the wily spaceship pilot Han Solo in *Star Wars* when they suddenly find themselves in the trash compactor of the *Death Star*: the adulterated language of the mass media, the linguistic junkyard of the Internet and the heaps of empty phrases pouring out of the TV made me claustrophobic, for I had the impression that the walls of my language, and with them – in Wittgenstein’s sense – the limits of my world, were closing in on me.

For me, Wallace is the Han Solo of literature. He has an ‘allergy to the confining realities of the present’, as he writes at



one point in *Infinite Jest*. He presses back against the constrictions of catchphrase and cliché. His novel achieves an almost inconceivable expansion of literary language, for Wallace ignites in the trash compactor of the *Death Star* a supernova that explodes the space of language so that the heart and brain too burst their bounds.

In this treasure chest I found words I will never read again in my life, and I was occasionally able to substitute for them words that the German dictionary indicates were last used in 1702, such as *unrünftig* (for ‘malefic’), or words that were never even recorded by the brothers Grimm, such as *Schaller* (for ‘sallet’, a medieval helmet). I invented words such as *Halluzinogenivore* (for ‘ingester’) or *thalassofiziert* – the latter, which comes from the Greek root *thalasso-*, meaning ‘sea’, and would therefore mean, roughly, ‘oceanified’, is actually an addition to the original, where Wallace writes only ‘plowing at high knottage through time

itself’. I introduced such innovations of my own as compensation for those of Wallace’s elsewhere in the novel for which I was unable to come up with equivalents. His writing abounds with neologisms: ‘Byzantinalia’, ‘fitviavi’, ‘Momentumizers’, ‘contuded’, ‘Nordicular’, and so on. Because this inventiveness is a feature of his style, I myself thus hammered a few dents into the walls of the trash compactor and sounded and expanded the linguistic and lexical possibilities of German.

I also encountered numerous characters whose use of language Wallace lovingly depicts. A mathematics freak speaks in formulas. An underprivileged young African American woman speaks the notorious Black American English. A young man has devoured the whole *Oxford English Dictionary* – an autobiographical element – and commits ‘a sort of lexical rape’ of the reader. A French-Canadian confronted me with the question of how to render in German the fact

that the English of that character partly follows French grammar. A cocaine addict lives linguistically beyond his means and produces one malapropism after another.

Some characters emerge from the wings only briefly; others are in the spotlight throughout the novel. Over the years I grew fond of them. When I sat down at the keyboard in the morning, I was happy to see old friends again. I was eager to find out what facet of their personality or event from their life they would now present to me. Every day Wallace offered me a new gem, even if it was only sentences written in children’s speech or a description of photos in a headmaster’s waiting room. All told, I have spent years immersed in an almost unbelievably varied and sensuous experience of pure word material, and I have had the chance to draw as never before from the abundance of my native language to reproduce that experience. ◇

## FICTION

# Promised Land

by Simon Urban, translated by Katy Derbyshire

Writers are odd fellows, thought Moll. They seemed to him like vampires, what with all their leeching on everything that crossed their paths. There was no biography uninteresting enough not to squeeze a motif out of it for the great canon of human flaws. I wonder how I’ll find myself, in the stories, Moll thought, scribbling the date and time on his notebook. Across the table, Vassiler ran a hand through his straggly hair and told Moll to shout if he went too fast with his story; he usually gave journalists a written piece in advance. He hadn’t got round to it this time, though, because he’d had to urgently take care of some new material. Today’s writers, he complained, were condemned to get hold of everything themselves, even their stories, which life was actually supposed to come up with. But they’d all been written

already, by life. So if you wanted to deliver something original you had to muck in for yourself. That, said Vassiler, had become the writer’s real job: helping life out so that it was worth writing about. Rewriting reality, into originality.

As Moll no doubt knew, said Vassiler, the novel that was coming out next week had been a kind of demand made of him, being a former GDR writer and all that. People in the West had expected someone who’d been silenced for so long, over here, to be gagging for a payback now. But that only went to show that the West still had no idea how people felt when they were bricked in. Even the greatest rage wore down over time if you were behind bars for 28 years. So that was the reason for the story of Emmely Brüske, which was now coming out under the title of *Lady Liar*, because his publishers thought

it would sell better than if the book had simply been called *Promised Land*, which had always been his working title. Well anyway, the text was still called that for him, and what title other people had on the front cover was of no interest to him.

Moll asked if he could have another cup of coffee, and Vassiler sloped wordlessly into the kitchen and came back with his whole gurgling coffee machine. He plugged it in underneath the sticky coffee table and said that the entire GDR issue usually got quite drawn out and he couldn’t be bothered to keep going in the kitchen. The machine gradually calmed down and Moll carefully extracted the jug from it. So to get back to Emmely Brüske, said Vassiler, she’d turned up in the summer of 1985, here in this flat, because she’d heard the writer Gregor Vasil was looking for a typist. And the

fact that this Emmely Brüske obviously didn't know his name properly had made him like her straight away, because names didn't matter at all, as you could tell by the awful novel title.

So from then on it was Brüske who typed up his manuscripts, in the kitchen, for ten East German marks an hour, on an old Torpedo. Just the prose to start with, because that was strictly apolitical with a writer like Vassiler, as Mr Moll was presumably aware. And then of course he'd grown to trust this woman, said Vassiler, who'd spent hours deciphering his scribblings over in the kitchen. And then it had just happened one time, spontaneously, on the kitchen sink. When they'd just got the last part of his *Leptosom* finished. Emmely Brüske had squealed like a stuck pig all the way through. And told him afterwards that was the only form of protest that Erich Mielke hadn't yet banned. That was why, she'd said, she always used a good old proletarian copulation to shout out her pent-up rage against that wall-builder Mielke. You had to let it out somehow, she'd said. From then on, said Vassiler, he'd let Emmely Brüske type up his poetry too.

They'd gone from love-thy-neighbour to an affair, of course, said Vassiler. That meant he'd not only been a writer with a secretary, but been having an affair with his secretary on top, and that had made him feel like a whole bourgeoisie rolled into one. Even though Emmely Brüske was only ever operative in the kitchen. In any case, said Vassiler, it was via this whole kitchen affair that he'd met Konrad at some point, Emmely Brüske's son from her first marriage to an officer in the border brigade. Konrad had just turned twenty-one and was a mathematical genius. They'd been at Alexanderplatz and the boy had worked out in his head what the twelve years' waiting time for a Trabant was in minutes. And after that how many hairs Honecker would have left on his balls, assuming average East German balls-hair frequency, if one hair had fallen out for every refugee, on his central organ. And what with Konrad's result being pretty bald balls, they'd had to leave the café pretty damn quick. And so it was here in the kitchen, a few hours later, that Vassiler had found out what Konrad was actually planning: a pretty decent escape. His mother must

have read him one too many Vassiler poems, and that had apparently sufficed to make him spill the beans right here, over liverwurst sandwiches and advocaat.

But Konrad hadn't wanted to reveal how he planned to do it, said Vassiler. Only that he was absolutely certain he'd find a way out of this cancerous utopia. And that way would be found by mathematics alone. Because according to him, it was all a question of calculations. Probability and improbability, mass and velocity, space and time. This world, Konrad said – said Vassiler – was nothing more than a salad of numbers and all you had to do was go out and pick a few nice leaves out of the salad and pour the right dressing over it and serve it up nice and neat and fresh, and Bob's your uncle: the perfect break-out. A bit of mental arithmetic and you were free. That was something only humans were capable of: pulling their head out of the noose by using their noggins. And that very capability obliged them to do so.

The only thing Konrad was worried about, said Vassiler, was that he'd need human help for his flight from paradise. At least in the planning phase. He'd have to get hold of a few empirical values, he'd need a minimum of material, access to certain places: a few figures for his calculation. And that forced him to make contact with certain people. In these cases, however, he had to assume they were being watched. And so, he said, before he could start his calculation, he was in search of a disguise. And who better to ask than a writer, who had to disguise his political poetry, and who also possessed the only thing that a mathematician didn't need, thank God: a lively imagination. And that was why a young man like Konrad Brüske was confiding in a thinker like Vassiler the writer: to get hold of the necessary figures for his calculation.

So now the ball was in his court, said Vassiler, and that had made him think that calculating Konrad and his typing mother weren't sitting around in a sticky writer's kitchen drinking pale yellow advocaat for no reason. So he'd asked Konrad how much calculation it had taken to find a man with an imagination equal to his sexual frustration, and how much addition and division had been required to talk his own mother

into performing a presumably planned number of shags with that horny intellectual in his sticky kitchen, and whether he'd included the kitchen-sink measurements in his equation, because that was where she got shafted once a week and it certainly wasn't regulation height.

Emmely Brüske had simply stared out of the window at that, as if Erich Honecker was out there counting the remaining hairs on his balls live on stage. It had suddenly gone very silent in the kitchen, said Vassiler. Even Konrad had been lost for words to begin with. Then he'd given Vassiler a cold look and said, intercourse for ideas, it had come out as zero on paper so it must be an equal exchange. And the fact that Vassiler had seen through the plan then and there was part of the equation too, Konrad had said. It was proof of the absolute correctness of all previous steps. Now Vassiler had the opportunity to use his kitchen sink for washing up as usual, or for a good scrubbing. The latter was surely the more pleasant option for all parties and wouldn't give him dishpan hands. So if that much was clear they could finally raise their glasses. Advocaat, said Konrad – said Vassiler – was better in the West as well.

Moll put his notepad down on the table and took the jug out of the wheezing coffee machine. Vassiler lit a cigarillo in slow motion, blowing the smoke over to the sideboard in messy curls. The rings of smoke dragged themselves across the semi-dark living room like billowing spaceships running out of gas. They got larger and thinner, puffing up before they touched the sideboard, where their thin circles tore. The coffee machine hissed in the background. Moll reached for his notepad with a cough.

So the kitchen sink had stayed in use on Sundays, said Vassiler, sending another ring out on its journey. Except that Konrad had always turned up later on. In the evening, with a few bottles of beer and half a pound of raw sausage. Then the three of them had stuck to the kitchen table and examined Vassiler's ideas and in the end decided on the first concept he'd come up with. Once Vassiler had made a number of enquiries of a journalist friend on certain matters, he retired to the strategic side of the planning and carried on working at home.

Emmely Brüske introduced herself to the comrades at the local Stasi office and told them she couldn't look on idly any longer while her socialist brothers and sisters worked hard for the sake of the state; she had to take an active role herself at long last. Perhaps it was to do with her approaching menopause, she told them. In any case it was high time for her to up the ante for the sake of the party. She could imagine her country needed her.

So the local Stasi head's secretary wrote down an address on a form and advised her to send her written application and motivations to Central Department VIII of the Ministry for State Security. But she added right away that the operative tasks that Comrade Brüske had in mind were only possible, if at all, on the basis of a long-standing and trusting relationship between the institution and the individual. At which Vassiler wrote a letter inventing an uncle for Emmely Brüske. This imaginary uncle had been imprisoned under Hitler and sentenced to death for distributing pamphlets containing socialist ideas. It was terribly regrettable that the file on the Bertolt Brüske case had been lost in the bombings. Yet the niece of this forgotten spearhead of socialism was all the more glad to be able to provide Colonel Dr jur. Wolfgang Weissbach with names of suspicious individuals of her acquaintance who might be considering leaving the republic illegally and thus robbing the fatherland of the necessary labour force for building socialism. A week later, Emmely Brüske received a letter signed by Weissbach's deputy Colonel Stetefeld, congratulating Comrade Brüske both on her biography and on her courageous intent to work against unconscionable enemies of the state. Stetefeld wrote that his ministry had to guarantee the protection of the GDR's social development and state security reliably and comprehensively under all conditions and depended on responsible pillars of society such as Comrade Brüske to do so. Vassiler noticed that Emmely grew a little quieter on his kitchen sink.

Every Sunday, Konrad reported over beer and sausage on the progress of his calculations, actually producing sheets of paper out of his jacket pocket that were covered in graphs and endless

columns of numbers. The fact that the local Stasi office occasionally gave his mother contact names for the fulfilment of her citizenly duties, which contacts in turn possessed material, or figures, or access to certain places, helped Konrad to remove further unknown factors from his equation. Despite her heroic uncle, the officials continued to treat Comrade Brüske with suspicion, however. Konrad therefore calculated that Vassiler would have to provide a few specific ideas for Emmely, to advance her standing sufficiently with the Stasi. His mother had now become a disguise, Konrad said – said Vassiler – but not yet to perfection. And a helm of invisibility could never be good enough.

Vassiler therefore came up with a weekly coffee morning for trustworthy employees and partners of various local Stasi offices, with the purpose of exchanging methods and experiences in order to combat the class enemy more efficiently. Emmely Brüske presented this plan as her own invention to the local Stasi head, but it tripped up on the strict confidentiality stipulations. Vassiler's suggestion to separate arrested suspects immediately in police custody and imply to each party that the other was just about to betray them, however, was accepted under Regulation 1/76 (Covert Demoralization). Above all, the Stasi was impressed by the idea of discrediting consistent opponents of the party by means of carefully spread rumours about alleged secret collaboration with the government. Only five months later, the police and Stasi success with these absolutely non-violent methods earned Emmely Brüske an invitation to the central headquarters on Normannenstrasse and a meal with Major General Hans Carlsohn from Central Department VIII.

That evening at the sticky kitchen table, Emmely told Vassiler and Konrad she'd been in a cold sweat at first over all her barefaced lies to Carlsohn, patriotism and all that, but then it had all come flowing out of her. You heard all those speeches on the radio and TV, she'd said, and you read them in the papers too. And then she'd just started talking like the telly and Carlsohn had been totally enthusiastic about her televised address, so she'd praised the GDR more and more, to high heaven, even

her steak had gone cold for all her exultations, and the Major General had had tears in his eyes by the end and looked like he'd really cried a bit. And that speech of hers, she'd said, had shown her how the country worked. How the whole of socialism worked. She'd invented socialism then and there, over lunch. Although she hadn't been the first. But it was easy enough to invent socialism, said Emmely Brüske: all you had to do was sing its praises for so long that you started believing what you said. That's all there was to it. Idealistic politics were as easy as that. The best singers of praises were on the government benches. They were a whole gang who'd simply spent so long talking about socialism that they were all convinced of it themselves.

Konrad had gathered up his papers from the kitchen table, watching Emmely thoughtfully. She'd gone bright red from all her inventing of socialism. In the hall, Konrad had taken Vassiler aside and said he didn't want him to go thinking up any more executed uncles or idiotic Stasi systems for the sake of his mother's ego, there was to be no more of it. Vassiler was to lie back and think of the kitchen sink the next time he came up with a Stasi method. He was perfectly welcome to go on reinforcing the errand boys of this dictatorship with his evil schemes, but that would mean he'd soon have to drill a hole in the wall to get his rocks off. Then Konrad had slammed the door without even looking at Vassiler again.

The next Sunday, Emmely Brüske had brought along a bottle of French wine. The wine came from the local Stasi office, she'd said. They'd offered her a position there that day. All official, in the administrative section. Unofficially, however, she was supposed to spy on the local Stasi office. There were certain suspicions, she said, from above. Dr Weissbach himself had called her and said they needed her help in this case – as a new informer, he'd told her, Emmely was not yet embroiled in the possible bureaucratic corruption. It was her big chance, she'd said, Vassiler had to understand that. You could have a career in this country if you wanted. It just had to be a socialist career. And a socialist career, she'd said, always began

with the intelligence services. So if Vassiler wanted to continue his activities on the kitchen sink he'd have to provide more ideas, because now she was dealing with the inner enemy, and that was the worst kind, as everyone knew. She was involved in the protection of social security and state development, and the fact that she shagged on a sticky kitchen sink for the success of her work was doubtlessly the best proof of how dedicated she was not to drive even more potential socialists into the arms of the West.

Vassiler thought for a minute and then agreed. Once Emmely had made herself available in the kitchen for the defence of the fatherland and subsequently opened the Stasi wine, Vassiler suggested investigating the local Stasi head's relationship to his secretary more closely. Every man had a thing with his typist nowadays, and if he was right she could soon be grilling her boss about the intrigues in his own office. Emmely buttoned up her blouse and said Vassiler needn't expect to see Konrad any more. Having tried in vain to convince him of his duty to the fatherland she'd had no other option but to put the young man out on the street. She'd burned every one of his calculations before talking to him, of course. You learned that kind of thing at the Stasi, she'd said. A mathematician was nothing without paper. And now Konrad would finally have a chance to reflect on his tasks within socialist society.

Moll saw that Vassiler's cigarillo was nearing its end. He took another big puff at the smoking stump and pressed it out in the ashtray. Then Vassiler got up, went over to a shelf in the corner and picked up a bottle of advocaat. He put two glasses on the table and filled them. He spilt half a glassful. He wasn't really used to telling stories all the way to the end in person, said Vassiler. He'd written the whole thing down especially so he didn't have to keep telling it. But he couldn't very well send a journalist home without an ending. Otherwise Moll would leave thinking it had all ended up as usual.

So three weeks after Emmely Brüske had started typing up forms and spying on her boss in the local Stasi office, a postcard had arrived. From Konrad. On the front was an aerial view of Berlin.

And all it had said on the back was that Honecker would have one less hair on his balls that coming Sunday, maybe even his last. The Honecker-testicles calculation was the only one he hadn't kept a backup copy of, so he had no precise figures any more. One thing was for sure though: there'd be a bit of a sting.

That afternoon, Emmely had turned up in a sombre office outfit and said her appearance in Vassiler's flat was not out of gratitude that she'd got her boss firmly in her grip since the day before, but to announce with great gratification the end of the kitchen-sink affair. For one thing, she'd always had an incredibly sticky bum after all that rustic humping; and for another, a writer who wrote about sex couldn't help but be a lousy lover. Why else would he write about sex? From then on, Vassiler could go right back to using his ideas for helpless protest poetry and he'd no doubt find someone else for his kitchen sink. The likes of Emmely Brüske were perfectly capable of taking fate into their own hands, at any rate. Now she was sleeping with the local Stasi head, in a proper bed and everything, just imagine. And what he had to say afterwards was worth a great deal more than the scheming excesses of a sticky provincial poet.

After that visit, said Vassiler, he'd sat down at his desk and drafted a letter to Major General Carlsohn. Vassiler wrote that, being a writer, he was necessarily a man of imagination. And as he wrote about people, and therefore had to think about people all day long, he had also become a man of psychology. And anyone who was an imaginative psychologist, and a convinced socialist on top of that, had the odd idea every now and then that was perhaps of more use to his state than to himself. He therefore wanted to inform Major General Carlsohn how one might be able to curb the tide of illegal flight from the republic a little in future. It was a simple matter: merely reinstate the ancient but therefore all the more effective method of liability for next of kin. Thus, when a wayward soul sought their way to the West, there was little more effective than arresting the refugee's next of kin in his lieu. It was morally reprehensible, admittedly, but nevertheless enormously helpful – who

would wish to envisage their mother and father imprisoned while gallivanting in the midst of sinful capitalism? And if someone came back voluntarily his parents or siblings could be released immediately. As Vassiler was also an expert on public relations, being a writer, he urged Major General Carlsohn to link the introduction of this socialist self-defence mechanism to a spectacular example of illegal escape, so that a widely reported precedent would be set, thus nipping further family tragedies in the bud. Vassiler was only making these suggestions out of love for his fatherland, he wrote – as he said – and not because he would like to see himself as an originator of tighter criminal law. Ultimately, he would always remain a poet. And a poet was always apolitical, as everyone knew.

Three days later, both the West and East German media reported in detail on a 21-year-old Berliner and his dramatic escape in a People's Army hot-air balloon used for special surveillance flights above densely forested border regions. The man had previously posed as a young writer and approached the border brigades in search of new stories. He had thus tricked his way into the barracks and prepared his escape over a number of weeks. In West Berlin, however, he had crashed the balloon into the Academy of Arts due to thick fog and sustained multiple fractures of his arms and legs on falling out of the basket.

Vassiler leaned back in his chair and drank a sip of advocaat. Moll asked him a few more things and at some point said thanks for the coffee and the novel plot, and that the story was very original. And was he right in thinking that Vassiler himself had occasionally toyed with the idea of leaving the GDR? Vassiler, who had already opened the front door for Moll, laughed and said he'd be lying if he said he had. Believe it or not, he'd always felt stuck firmly to the GDR, knowing full well that socialism would one day collapse under its own weightlessness. And an escape would have done him no good anyway. The stories were no newer in the West either. Moll said his goodbyes and walked down the worn-down stairs to the ground floor. His shoes stuck to the dark wood at every step. Moll was certain he'd just been made part of a story. ◇



# Self-Portrait as a White Lady

*By Marion Poschmann, translated by Iain Galbraith*

wayward, thin-walled, aloof:  
I began to appear, bitterly  
striving for the impossible body  
a huge hole in the hollow of the bus stop, an interior  
stadium

I shone

an igloo lit from within, in the spray zone  
of star clusters, the cold extracts  
of former community centres,

streets soused in alcohol, slow, gentle:  
I made halls,  
phantasms of origin; things based

the child that I was, in seal-skin boots,  
shy of being seen, waits in the seedy light  
of nervous exhaustion for buses and trams like some  
after-effect of wrongly prescribed medicine, a sylph-like  
umbra, sweat-stains under its arms,

expecting  
electric baths, the puzzles that a contact leaves:  
the sophisticated lighting of the terrain, hypersensitivity,  
ruins of the gaze;  
mist that forms at the touch

From *Geistersehen* (Suhrkamp, 2010)

# Ecosystems

By *Judith Schallansky*, translated by *Shaun Whiteside*

‘Sit down,’ said Inge Lohmark, and the class sat down. She said, ‘Open the book at page seven,’ and they opened the book at page seven, and then they started on ecological balances, ecosystems, the interdependencies and interrelations between species, between living creatures and their environment, the effective organization of community and space. From the food web of mixed woodland they moved to the food chain of the field, from the rivers to the seas, and finally to the desert and the tidal flats. ‘You see, no one – no animal, no human being – can live entirely for himself alone. Competition prevails between living creatures. And sometimes, too, something like cooperation. But that is rather rare. The most significant forms of coexistence are competition and the relationship between predator and prey.’

While Inge Lohmark drew arrows on the board, from the mosses, lichens and fungi to the earthworms and stag beetles, hedgehogs and shrews, then to the great tit, to the roe deer and the hawk, and finally one last arrow to the wolf, a pyramid gradually formed, with man at its tip alongside a few beasts of prey.

‘The fact is that there is no animal that eats eagles or lions.’

She took a step back to consider the broad chalk drawing. The arrow diagram linked producers with primary, secondary and tertiary consumers as well as the inevitable decomposing micro-organisms, all connected by respiration, heat loss and increase in biomass. In nature everything had its place, and if perhaps not every creature had a purpose, then at least every species did: eating and being eaten. It was wonderful.

‘Copy that down in your notebook.’

As she said, so it was done.

This was when the year began. The unease of June was long past, the time of sultry heat and bare upper arms. The sun burned through the glass façade, turning the classroom into a greenhouse. The expectation of summer germinated somewhere in the back of empty minds.

The mere prospect of wasting their days in utter futility robbed the children of all their concentration. With swimming-pool eyes, greasy skin and a sweaty urge for freedom they slumped on their chairs and dozed their way towards the holidays. Some became erratic and insane. Others, because of the coming report, feigned submissiveness and deposited their biology assessments on the teacher’s desk like cats laying dead mice on the sitting-room carpet. Only to ask, at the next class, for their marks, calculators at the ready, eager to work out the improvement in their average to three decimal points.

But Inge Lohmark wasn’t one of those teachers who caved in at the end of the school year just because they were about to lose their adversaries. She wasn’t worried about slipping into insignificance as she was thrown back entirely on her own devices. Some of her colleagues, the closer the summer break approached, were afflicted with almost tender pliancy. Their teaching degenerated into a hollow form of audience participation. A dreamy glance here, a pat on the back there, wistful encouragement, hours of miserable film-watching. An inflation of good marks, a grievous betrayal of the A grade. And then there was the nuisance of rounding up end-of-year marks to heave a few hopeless cases up into the next class. As if that helped anybody at all. Her colleagues simply didn’t understand that they were just damaging their own health by showing any interest in their pupils. After all, they were nothing but bloodsuckers who drained you of all your vital energy. Who fed on the teaching body, on its authority and its fear, doing harm to its responsibility. They constantly ambushed one. With nonsensical questions, meagre suggestions and distasteful familiarities. The purest vampirism.

Inge Lohmark wasn’t going to be sucked dry any more. She was well known for her ability to maintain a tight rein and a short leash, without flying

into rages or throwing bunches of keys. And she was proud of it. One could still show weakness. The occasional carrot, out of the blue.

The important thing was to set the pupils in the right direction, put blinkers on them in order to sharpen their concentration. And if chaos really did prevail, you just had to scrape your fingernails down the board or tell them about the canine tapeworm. In any case the best thing was to make the pupils constantly aware that they were at her mercy. Rather than allowing them to think they had anything to say. Her pupils had no right to speak and no opportunity to choose. No one had a choice. There were natural breeding choices and that was that.

The year started now. Even though it had begun a long time ago. For her it started today, on the first of September, which this year fell on a Monday. And it was now, in the dried-up tail-end of summer, that Inge Lohmark made her resolutions, not on gaudy New Year’s Eve. She was always glad that her school planner carried her safely over the turn of the calendar year. A simple flick of the page, with no countdown or chinking of glasses.

Inge Lohmark looked across the three rows of desks and didn’t move her head so much as an inch. She had perfected that in all those years: the omnipotent, motionless gaze. According to statistics, there were always at least two in the class who were really interested in the subject. But those statistics seemed to be in jeopardy. Regardless of the rules of Gaussian distribution. How on earth had they managed to get this far? You could tell they’d been doing nothing but loaf around for six weeks. None of them had opened a single book. The big holidays. Not quite as big as they used to be. But still far too long! It would take at least a month to get them used to the school’s biorhythm again. At least she didn’t have to listen to their stories. They could tell those to Mrs Schwanneke, who organized an icebreaking game with each new class. After half an hour all the participants were entangled in skeins from a red ball of wool, and could each rattle off the names and hobbies of the child sitting next to them.

Only a few scattered seats were occu-

ped. It was clear now how few they were. A sparse audience in her theatre of nature: twelve pupils – five boys, seven girls. The thirteenth had gone back to technical school, even though Mrs Schwanneke had intervened forcefully on his behalf. With repeated private lessons, home visits and psychological reports. Some sort of concentration problem. The things they kept coming up with! These developmental problems they'd read about somewhere or other. First there was dyslexia, then dyscalculia. What would be next? An allergy to biology? Back in the old days there were just pupils who were bad at sport or music. And they had to play and sing along with everyone else anyway. It was just a matter of willpower.

It simply wasn't worth it, dragging the weak ones along with you. They were nothing but ballast that held the rest back. Born recidivists. Parasites on the healthy body of the class. Sooner or later the dimmer bulbs would be left behind anyway. It was advisable to confront them with the truth as early as possible, rather than giving them another chance after each failure. With the truth that they simply didn't provide the conditions required to become a fully fledged member of society. What was the point of being hypocritical? Not everyone could do it. And why should they? There were duds in every year. With some of them, you could be happy if you managed to instil a few fundamental virtues in them. Politeness, punctuality, cleanliness. It was a shame they'd stopped giving out citizenship grades. Hard work. Cooperation. Contribution. Proof of the shortcomings of the present educational system.

The later you left getting rid of a failure, the more dangerous he became. He started harassing his fellows and making unjustified demands: for decent school-end grades, a positive assessment, possibly even a well-paid job and a happy life. The result of many years of intense support, short-sighted benevolence and reckless generosity. Nobody who gulled the hopeless cases into believing they belonged should be surprised if they eventually came marching into school with pipe bombs and small-calibre firearms to avenge themselves for all the things that had been promised them

and repeatedly withheld. And then the candle-lit processions.

Lately everyone had started insisting on self-realization. It was ridiculous. Nothing and no one was fair. Certainly no society. Only nature, perhaps. Not for nothing had the principle of selection made us what we were today: the creature with the most deeply furrowed cerebrum.

But Schwanneke, with her rage for integration, hadn't been able to leave well alone. What could you expect from someone who formed letters out of rows of desks, and semicircles out of chairs; for a long time a big U had embraced her desk. Recently it had even been an angular O, so that she was connected with everybody and there was no longer a beginning or an end, just the circular moment, as she once announced in the staffroom. She let the year eights call her by her first name. We're to call her Karola, Inge Lohmark had heard one girl pupil say. Karola! My goodness – they weren't at the hairdresser's!

Inge Lohmark addressed her pupils formally from year nine onwards. It was a habit dating back to the days when that was the age that children were officially consecrated as young adults. With a copy of *Universe, Earth, Mankind*, and a bunch of socialist carnations. There was no more effective way of reminding them of their own immaturity, and keeping them at arm's length.

The professional relationship didn't involve intimacy or understanding. It was pitiful, if understandable, for pupils to tout for their teachers' favours. Truckling to the powerful. What was unforgivable, though, was the way teachers threw themselves at adolescents. Backsides perched on their desks. Borrowed fashions, borrowed words. Bright scarves around their necks. Dyed blonde strands. Just in order to chum up with the children. Undignified. They relinquished the last scraps of respectability for the brief illusion of fellowship. Leading the way, of course, was Schwanneke with her darlings: cocky little minxes who roped her into break-time conversations, and broken-voiced youths, for whom she performed the cheapest kind of goggle-eyed, lipsticked sign-stimulus display. Probably hadn't looked in the mirror for years.

Inge Lohmark had no darlings, and never would. Having crushes was an immature, misguided kind of emotional excitement, a hormonally influenced effusiveness that afflicted adolescents. Having escaped their mothers' apron strings, but not yet quite a match for the charms of the opposite sex. By way of surrogacy, a helpless member of the same sex or an unattainable adult became the target for half-formed emotions. Blotchy cheeks. Sticky eyes. Inflamed nerves. An embarrassing lapse which, in normal cases, resolved itself once the gonads had attained maturity. But of course: people without professional competence would only be able to offload their educational material by means of sexual signals. Ingratiating trainees. So-called 'favourite teachers'. Schwanneke. The way she defended her commitment to the year-eight idiots at the teachers' conference. Her brow in wrinkles, shouting at the assembled staff with her red-painted mouth: In the end, we need all our pupils! The icing on the cake would have been if she of all people, childless Schwanneke, who had recently been dumped by her husband, had started saying that children are our future. Future indeed. These children weren't the future. Strictly speaking they were the past: the year-nine class was sitting in front of her. They were the last one there would be at Charles Darwin Gymnasium, who would be doing their school-leaving exam in four years. And Inge Lohmark was to act as their form teacher. Just Class Nine. They no longer needed the letters they used to have, from A to G. When year groups had been as strong as a wartime battalion – in terms of numbers at least. This time they'd only just managed to scrape a class together. Almost a miracle, given that it was the year with the lowest birth-rate in the region. There hadn't been enough of them for the classes below. Not even when word started going around that this meant the end for the Darwin, and the teachers at the three regional schools had got together to make generous recommendations for the senior classes at the Gymnasium. The consequence was that any half-way literate child was elevated to Gymnasium status.

There had always been parents who

were convinced that their child belonged to the Gymnasium in spite of all advice to the contrary. But by now there weren't even enough parents in the town.

No, these children really didn't strike her as jewels in evolution's crown. Development was something quite different from growth. This was an impressively shocking demonstration of the fact that qualitative and quantitative change occurred quite independently. Nature wasn't exactly lovely to gaze upon at this undecided threshold between childhood and adolescence. A developmental phase. Adolescent tetrapods. School an enclosure. Now came the bad time, the airing of the classrooms against the smell of this age group, musk and liberated pheromones, confinement, bodies on their way to their final shape, sweat behind the knees, suety skin, dull eyes, unstoppable, burgeoning growth. It was much easier to teach them things before they were sexually mature. And a real challenge to fathom what was going on behind their blank façades: whether they were out of reach, far ahead; or whether their fundamental inner refurbishments had left them hobbling along behind.

They lacked any awareness of their condition, let alone the discipline to overcome it. They stared straight ahead. Apathetic, overtaxed, preoccupied exclusively with themselves. They yielded unresistingly to their own inertia. The power of gravity seemed to act upon them with threefold force. Everything was a massive effort. Every spark of energy at the disposal of these bodies was used up by an excruciating metamorphosis no less extreme than the elaborate transformation of a caterpillar in the chrysalis. Only in the rarest of cases did a butterfly emerge. Becoming an adult was demanding for these misshapen transitional forms, on which secondary sexual characteristics flourished like tumours. Here, the laborious process of becoming human was played out before you in slow motion. It wasn't only ontogenesis that recapitulated phylogenesis; puberty did, too. They grew. Day in, day out. In spurts and over the summer, so that you had your work cut out even to recognize them again. Compliant girls turned into hysterical beasts, and eager boys into phlegmatic

proles. And then there was the awkward rehearsal of partner selection. No, nature wasn't original. But it was fair. It was a condition like an illness. You just had to wait for it to pass. The bigger and older an animal became, the longer its youth dragged on. A human being required a third of its whole lifetime to reach maturity. On average it was eighteen years before a young human being was able to fend for itself. Wolfgang even had to go on paying for the children from his first marriage until they were twenty-seven.

So there they sat, life's absolute beginners. Sharpening pencils and copying down the pyramid on the board, raising and lowering their heads at five-second intervals. Not yet fully formed, but boldly self-evident with a claim to absoluteness that was both shameless and presumptuous. They were no longer children who always had to follow, and who disregarded personal space on the most threadbare of pretexts, who extorted physical contact and stared at you brazenly like hooligans on the cross-country bus. They were young adults, already capable of procreation, but still immature, like prematurely harvested fruit. To them, Inge Lohmark was certainly ageless. It was more likely, in fact, that she just struck them as old. A state that would never change as far as her pupils were concerned. Everyone young grew older. Old stayed old. She was long past the halfway mark. Luckily. At least that meant she would be spared the indignity of changing noticeably in front of their eyes. And that knowledge made her powerful. They were still all interchangeable, a swarm in pursuit of the minimum standard. But within a very short time they would become perfidiously autonomous, they would pick up the scent and start finding accomplices. And she herself would start ignoring the lame old nags and secretly back one of the thoroughbreds. Once or twice she had been on the right track. There had been a pilot, a marine biologist. Not a bad haul for a small provincial town.

Right at the front crouched a terrified vicar's child who had grown up with wooden angels, wax stains and recorder lessons. In the back row sat two dolled-up minxes. One was chewing gum, the other was obsessed with her coarse black

hair, which she constantly smoothed and examined, strand by strand. Next to her, a tow-headed, primary-school-sized squirt. A tragedy, the way nature was presenting the uneven development of the sexes here. To the right by the big windows, a small primate rocked back and forth, open-mouthed, waiting only to mark his territory with some vulgar remark. It was just short of drumming on its chest. It needed to be kept busy. In front of her was the sheet of paper on which the pupils had written their names, scribbles on the way to a legally valid signature. *Kevin*. Of course. Who else.

'Kevin!'

Kevin started upright.

'Name a few ecosystems in our region!'

The boy in front of him smirked.

Wait a second.

'Paul, what sort of tree is that outside?'

Paul looked out of the window.

'Erm.' A pathetic throat-clearing.

Almost pitiful.

'Thank you.' That was him taken care of.

'We haven't done that,' Kevin claimed. Nothing better had occurred to him. A brain like a hollow organ.

'Oh, really?' Now to the whole class. Frontal attack.

'Think about it again, everybody.'

Silence. At last the ponytail in the front row spoke up, and Inge Lohmark obliged. Of course she knew. There was always one of those. A little ponytail pony that hauled the class cart out of the mire. It was for these girls that schoolbooks were written. Greedy for prepacked knowledge. Mnemonic verses that they wrote down in their books with glitter pens. They could still be intimidated by the teacher's red pen. A stupid instrument of apparently boundless power.

She knew them all. She spotted them immediately. She'd had pupils like this by the cart-load, by the class-load. Year after year. They didn't need to flatter themselves that they were special. There were no surprises. Only the cast changed. Who was playing this time? A glance at the seating plan was enough. Naming was all. Every organism had a first name and a surname: type, species. Order. Class. But for now she just wanted to consider their first names.



*Jennifer* Dyed blonde hair. Thin lips. Precocious. Selfish from birth. No prospect of improvement. Unscrupulously ample, prize-winning bosom.

*Saskia* Without make-up possibly even pretty. Regular features, high forehead, plucked eyebrows and dozy expression. Obsessive grooming.

*Ferdinand* Friendly but erratic creature. Hollow eyes. Whorly as an Abyssinian guinea pig. Sent to school too young. Decidedly late-maturing.

*Kevin* Unclean and braggartly. Uneven fluff on upper lip, sebaceous complexion. Stupid but demanding – the worst possible combination. Only to be calmed by continuous feeding. Craves an attachment figure. Moderately disturbed. A pain.

*Laura* Outgrown, colourless fringe over saggy eyelids. Teary expression. Pimply skin. Lacking in ambition and interest. Unnoticeable as weeds.

*Tabea* Wolf child in tattered trousers and holey jumpers. Childlike face. Feral eyes. Back bent from left-handed writing. Not very promising otherwise.

*Erika* The heather plant. Nurtured sadness in sloping posture. Freckles on milky skin. Chewed fingernails. Stringy brown hair. Squint. Firm, slanting gaze. Simultaneously weary and alert.

*Paul* Kevin's bull-necked adversary. Fast-growing and muscular. Expressive creature. Mane-like shock of red hair. Permanent grin on bee-sting lips. The classic: intelligent, but lazy. Hardy and risk-taking.

*Tom* Disagreeably ponderous bodily presence. Tiny eyes in fat face. Vacuous expression: still thoroughly stunned by nocturnal emission. A cave salamander would be more attractive. Little hope that the unfortunate proportions can be corrected by further growth.

*Ellen* Dull, patient beast. Arched brow and rabbit eyes. Face teary from break-time teasing. Superfluous as a spinster even now. Lifetime victim.

*Annika* Brown ponytail, boring face. Over-ambitious. Joyless and industrious as an ant. Desperately keen to read out papers. Class representative from birth. Wearing.

*Jakob* Vicar's child. Typical front-row student. Narrow-chested. Squint-eyed in spite of glasses. Nervous fingers. Hair thick as mole-fur. Almost attractively transparent skin. At least three siblings. Harmless.

That was it. As always: no major surprises. Ponytail was already finished. Hands flat on the table. Eyes fixed mesmerized on the board.

Inge Lohmark stepped over to the window. Into the soft morning sun. How good that felt. The trees had already started to change colour. Decomposed chlorophyll made way for bright leaf pigments. Carotenoids and xanthophylls. The long-stemmed leaves of the chestnut, devoured by leaf-miner moths, were yellow-edged. Strange that the trees worked so hard with leaves from which they would soon be parted anyway. Just like her as a teacher. Same every year. For over thirty years. Always starting over again.

They were too young to value the significance of the knowledge they had acquired together. Gratitude was not to be expected.

All that counted here was damage limitation. At best. Pupils were thoughtless creatures. They would all go one day. And she alone would remain behind, hands dry with chalk dust. In this room, here, between the collection of rolled-up wall charts and the case of visual aids: a skeleton with broken bones, greasy dummy organs with cracks in their plastic skin, and the stuffed badger with burn-holes in its fur, which stared dead-eyed through the panes. Soon they could do that with her. Like that English scholar who wanted to stay connected with his university even after his death. Take part as a mummy at weekly meetings. His last wish was fulfilled. They put clothes on his skeleton. Stuffed it with straw. Embalmed his skull. But something went wrong in the process, so that in the end they put a wax head on his remains.

She had seen it when she was in London. Sitting there, in his huge wooden case behind glass. With walking stick, straw hat and green suede gloves that looked exactly like the pair she had bought in Exquisit in the spring of 1987. For eighty-seven marks. At least Vladimir Ilyich was asleep and could dream of communism. But that Englishman was still in office. Daily he eyed the students on their way to the auditoria. The display case was his grave. He himself his own memorial. Eternal life. Better than organ donation. ◇

'Ecosystems' is extracted from the novel *The Giraffe's Neck* by Judith Schalan-sky, translated from the German by Shaun Whiteside, forthcoming from Bloomsbury in 2014.

## A Translator's View

Anthea Bell

After its writer, no one experiences a book as intensely as its translator, who goes through the text several times. Not surprisingly, then, I approached Max Sebald's novel *Austerlitz* with pleasure at being asked to translate it, but also with some trepidation. W.G. Sebald, always called Max by his friends, was known by then as one of the finest writers of the late twentieth century. After thirty years teaching at the University of East Anglia, he could easily have written in English, but he preferred to write in his native language and be translated. How closely would I be able to reproduce his unique voice in English? That is always the translator's aim. The process itself, I've found, cannot be described without the use of metaphor, so we speak figuratively of finding the right voice, or of translation as a performance art like acting, or of trying to get inside the author's mind.

Of course I had read Max Sebald's other prose narratives, *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants* and *The Rings of Saturn*, written in the 1990s in his period of creative flowering. I was particularly fascinated by *The Rings of Saturn*, which I had read both in German and in Michael Hulse's fine English translation, because I am a native of the East Anglian coastal area described in that book, and it was intriguing to see scenes of my childhood in the new light cast on them by Max Sebald's keen, melancholy Central European mind. I say 'prose narratives' because there's a good case for describing them thus rather than as novels – up to but not including *Austerlitz*, which is essentially two novels in one, with a framework story told by a typically Sebaldian narrator much like the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn*, and a core story told by the central figure, Jacques Austerlitz himself.

When *Austerlitz* first came my way, it was not yet finished. Max had just acquired a new agent, Andrew Wylie, who in the first place wanted a sample of some thirty pages to submit to publishers. It included the passage that I think of as the Welsh idyll, when the boy

Austerlitz goes to stay with his school friend Gerald's amiably eccentric family in their house near Barmouth. He finds it a wonderfully liberating experience after the stern atmosphere of life with his adoptive parents. As readers of the book will know, the child's early upbringing by the couple has suppressed all recollection of his arrival from Prague on one of the Kindertransport trains, and only as the book progresses does he recover his early childhood memories and trace the fate of his birth parents.

On the strength of that sample, rights to publication of the book in English went to Hamish Hamilton in the United Kingdom and Random House in the United States. I had already provided a sample translation from Max's book entitled in German *Lufkrieg und Literatur*. It is based on lectures that he gave in Zurich in 1997, in which his main thesis was what he saw as the reluctance of German literature to confront the horrors of the Second World War directly after it. There were some indignant responses to that proposition, and he adds an account of them. The book had already been published in German when Max began working on *Austerlitz*, and I worked on and off on drafting its translation while he was finishing the new novel, to which I then turned entirely. These days a translator usually corresponds with an author by email, but Max Sebald did not like computer technology, and indeed claimed, with a humorous glint in his eye, that when a computer was delivered to his room at the University of East Anglia it stayed in its box, still packed. So we corresponded by old-fashioned snail mail, Max in his beautiful handwriting, I typing my letters because it is unkind to ask anyone to read my writing, as we discussed various points of translation back and forth. Some of these points ran to several exchanges in our correspondence, and it was interesting to be working with an author whose own English was so good. Because of that very fact, I think, if occasionally I insisted that one phrase

sounded better in English than another, he would accept it; I recollect explaining that the word 'tome' for a book always suggests a large size in English, so that to speak of a 'little tome' sounds like a contradiction in terms. Some authors ask a translator why a certain phrase can't be used in English, as if the translator were to blame, but not Max; he knew that language develops of its own accord, and his account of Austerlitz's nervous breakdown, when language itself fails him, is eloquently moving. I quote: 'If language may be regarded as an old city full of streets and squares, nooks and crannies, with some quarters dating from far back in time, while others have been torn down, cleaned up and rebuilt . . . then I was like a man who has been abroad a long time and cannot find his way through this urban sprawl any more, no longer knows what a bus stop is for, or what a back yard is. The entire structure of language [was] enveloped in impenetrable fog.'

With a translator's extra pleasure in a text, I enjoyed the way his mind dwelt on all manner of subjects, from vainglorious architectural styles in vast public buildings, which he hated, to botany and entomology. Max knew a lot about natural history. I think he was amused to find that, while I appreciated his descriptions of moth species on the printed page, in real life I would run from them in panic, being a lepidopterophobe – a phobia akin to arachnophobia if not so widespread. He told me that Graham Greene was phobic about birds, which I hadn't known before. We shared a common interest in botany, and I was pleased when occasionally I could tell him some plant name that he didn't know in English, for instance traveller's joy as a name for the wild clematis, *Clematis vitalba*. He wrote in 'What a lovely name' on my first draft of *Austerlitz*.

Max inserted pictures and photographs into his prose narratives, not so much illustrations as glosses on the text. Fitting them into the right places in *Austerlitz* must have been tricky for the Hamish Hamilton designers. Max picked these pictures up here and there as they took his fancy, and many linger in the reader's mind as well: the picture of the boy in fancy dress on the cover of *Austerlitz*, the little girl with a dog on her lap in the vil-

lage later drowned to make way for Lake Vyrnwy. I had marked the approximate positions in the English typescript, but I could tell that it was not going to be easy, particularly in the long, nine-page sentence describing the concentration camp at Theresienstadt. An English translator's instinctive reaction to such a lengthy sentence is to break it up, but as soon as I had done that once in my first draft, adding a full stop two pages in, I knew it was wrong and took it out. The convolutions of that mighty sentence are there on purpose to convey the busy, pointless activity of the Nazi authorities preparing for a visit to the camp by a Red Cross delegation. But Max bore his English-language readers in mind, and made a few changes especially for them.

When *Austerlitz* had been delivered, I turned back to *Lufkrieg und Literatur*, the other book by Max on which I had already been working. The question of the title arose; *Air War and Literature*, the literal English for *Lufkrieg und Literatur*, was clearly not such a good title in English, lacking the alliteration of the original. Ultimately, it became *On the Natural History of Destruction*. A little while ago I heard from an academic, let's call him Academic A, who had read a denunciation of the title by Academic B; surely, said Academic B, wording so different from the original had been disgracefully foisted on Max by a publisher taking advantage of his death. Academic A was not so sure, and reasonably thought that I could settle the question, as indeed I could. Neither Hamish Hamilton as publisher, nor I as translator, I added, would have taken such a liberty on our own initiative.

At the time of his death, Max Sebald had been through all the Zurich chapters with me. An essay on the writer Alfred Andersch was also part of the book, and a few weeks later his notes on the translation of the Andersch essay were found on his desk. It was a strange sensation to receive them, like getting a letter from beyond the grave, and I spent a long, elegiac January Sunday incorporating the changes. For the English edition of the book, Max had chosen to add two other essays, one on the essayist and Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry, one on the dramatist Peter Weiss. Revising those in

translation I was on my own, and I kept weighing up every sentence, wondering what Max would have thought of this or that phrasing.

The Améry and Weiss essays were then printed in the German edition of *Campo Santo*, a posthumous collection of pieces by Max Sebald never before published in book form – fortunately the English version was still long enough for a complete volume without the Améry and Weiss essays. *Campo Santo* also contains fragments of a book that Max had begun to write about Corsica; he then set it aside to concentrate on *Austerlitz*. Its title refers to a graveyard in a chapter describing Corsican funerary customs. I can't help, greedily, wishing that we could have the Corsican book as well as *Austerlitz*, which also meditates on time, death and continuity – I quote, 'If Newton thought, said



Austerlitz [...] that time was a river like the Thames, then where is its source and into what sea does it finally flow?' There are similar ideas in the Corsican fragments, along with curious facts like Kafka's mention of a military custom whereby, said Kafka's informant, Napoleon's tomb was opened once a year to let old soldiers file pass the embalmed Emperor, until the imperial face began to look rather green and bloated. The Campo Santo graveyard features ghosts who haunt the living and are – I quote again – 'about a foot shorter than they were in life, they went around in bands and groups' and 'were heard talk-

ing and whispering in their strange piping voices, but nothing they said to each other could be understood except for the name of whoever they intended to come for next'. These figures of Corsican folklore have made an easy transition to Wales in *Austerlitz*, appearing in the ghost stories told to the child Austerlitz by Evan the cobbler, whose Welsh ghosts have faces that would – I quote once more – 'blur or flicker slightly at the edges. And they were usually a little shorter than they had been in life, for the experience of death, said Evan, diminishes us, just as a piece of linen shrinks when you first wash it.' They are surely echoed in the 'little company of some ten or a dozen small people' seen by Austerlitz and his friend Marie at Marienbad, 'the sort of visitors sent to the spa because of their failing health' by the Iron Curtain countries. 'They were strikingly short, almost dwarfish figures, slightly bent, moving along in single file.' Diminished in their case, perhaps, by the political system rather than death.

It's ten years since his death, but we are celebrating the life and work of Max Sebald this year, not just mourning him. And it cannot be said that death has diminished *his* reputation. If anything, the passage of ten years has enhanced it, as more and more readers come to enjoy his poetry and his astonishing narrative works, which are unlike anything else I can think of in literature. He was the founder of the British Centre for Literary Translation, and the annual lecture that the Centre organizes, given when the various translation prizes are presented, has been named the Sebald Lecture in his memory. My own abiding memory of him is of the last time we were together, on stage at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London for the forerunner of that event; we gave parallel readings from *Austerlitz*, which had only just appeared. His warmth and quiet humour were very much in evidence, and are still to be found in his books, countering the general impression of austerity that readers may have of him. ◇

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# A History of Memory or a Memory of History?

Amanda Hopkinson

Leaf through any of W.G. Sebald's core works of fiction – *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz* – and you will find indistinct and frequently indecipherable photographs inserted into the text. None bear captions although some are numbered, apparently at random. Their contents are similarly mysterious, often even when taken in context. In other words it is as difficult to conjecture their relationship to the writing as it is to conjure up what they actually describe. What does an image of a window showing only sky have in common with an image of a diary dated 1913, or of a tumbledown tower at a popular Victorian seaside resort? How does a picture postcard of a dyke beside a ruined windmill, a reproduction of a medieval woodcut depicting souls in torment, or a portrait of a young boy with a spade in a manipulated mock-up of Pisa's Campo Santo, connect with the text, or with one another?

Historically, photography has had two fundamental characteristics. One is its link with reality and the other with memory. In this sense photographers are always witnesses and their photographs are their testament to the fact that 'I was here, in this place, with that person you see, at a particular moment in time.' Yet Sebald, who wrote in all his works about history and memory, used photos for the opposite purpose, to fracture and fragment those links. In the words of his long-standing friend and colleague Clive Scott: 'Sebald's photos don't fill holes, they create them, and his histories (of herrings, or Chinese emperors, or Edward Fitzgerald) make us feel less sure of ourselves.' As do, of course, his books. For, whether ostensibly about reality (through travelogue, in *The Rings of Saturn*, *Vertigo*), biography (*The Emigrants*, *Austerlitz*) or history (*On the Natural History of Destruction*), along with many literary essays and academic papers, Sebald's technique was to subvert not only established genres but also the possibility of conclusively dividing one from

the next. He was an author of fiction that read like fact – and, sometimes, of history that read like fiction. He included photographs as a further form of allusion that, like his writing, evoke recollections in the reader, true or not. And whether or not as records of actual events, or as integral to the stories we all tell ourselves.

'I am a history, a memory inventing itself.' Not a phrase of Sebald's, in fact, but of the Mexican writer Octavio Paz. And we have all learnt, if not to doubt, at least to question our memories. Is this a memory or a recollection of the act of remembering? Is it my personal memory or that of something someone once told me, or I read in a book or saw in a film? How is it that memories can have the qualities of dreams, with the preposterous appearing unexpectedly but unsurprisingly in the midst of everyday remembrance?

A snapshot: my first memory of seeing Max Sebald is banal enough – at a party held in his honour at the home of his then publisher. The drawing room is on the first floor and I am standing near the doorway. A parting of the waters as Susan Sontag enters, dressed entirely in black, her characteristic white bang amid the long black hair like the crest of an exotic bird. She pauses beside me, and I wonder if she has picked up something of our conversation about Central America that interests her. Not at all: casing the crowded room, she immediately asks me to direct her to Max. Having only just arrived myself, I glance randomly around until I see the innocuous pink-cheeked, white-haired gentleman seated in the corner of a sofa in a corner of the room, avoiding social conversation by peering intently at an adjacent bookshelf, and I direct her to him. Sontag crosses the room and literally sits down at his feet.

Sebald deploys photographs to continually subvert his readers' expectations. Carefully selected and laid out (by himself: this was too important a task to leave to the designer or publisher) Sebald seeks, often playfully, to insert the exotic

into the everyday. In *Vertigo* he describes a climb up Burg Greifenstein, overlooking the Danube, where, he writes, 'I had first visited the castle in the late 1960s.' Accompanying the account is the image of a giant cactus sprouting over the walls of a whitewashed villa typical of Latin America. Does any dwelling less resemble an Austrian castle than a Mexican hacienda? Why is the description of the one accompanied by an image of the latter? The photograph, it would seem, has nothing to say regarding the story; the effort becomes the reader's to discover what it 'really' has to tell us. Its irrelevance to the 'reality' of the story is only the start.

The way to the castle/hacienda has already been paved by the immediately preceding story of Sebald's visit to a long-term inmate of a mental asylum, Ernst Herbeck: 'He was wearing a glen-check suit with a hiking badge on the lapel,' Sebald writes. 'On his head he wore a narrow-brimmed hat, a kind of trilby, which he later took off and carried beside him, just as my grandfather often used to do on summer walks.' The grandfather roots the asylum visit in reality: Sebald preferred to spend his childhood free time with his maternal grandfather, his chosen father substitute. The grandfather is the most 'real' – in terms of being the most present – of Sebald's family members in his books, perhaps also in his memory. Despite the detailed physical description, the portrait shows the torso of a suited man, his head – hatted or not – cropped from the frame.

In looking for a head in a trilby – or a trilby in the hand of a suitably dressed hiker – we find instead a hand nervously clenched to a man's side, clothed in an unchecked three-piece suit and tie. The great Hungarian photographer Robert Capa defined a good photograph as one that leaves the viewer yearning to learn what is taking place just outside the frame. Here the message is that the camera doesn't lie; it simply doesn't reveal.

Perhaps the association with the



grandfather at least provides a clue. According to the obituary in the *Guardian*, as a young boy Sebald came across his father's photo-album at home. In it '... he found pictures taken during the Polish campaign in 1939, and he sensed that something in the grinning German soldiers and boy scout atmosphere of the campaign, ending with the torching of villages not unlike his own Bavarian home in Wertach im Allgäu, hinted at the meaning of the destroyed buildings, silences and absence of memory around him'. His father, a career soldier who enthusiastically rallied to the Nazi cause, did not discuss the war with his family. As an adult Sebald was to research, discover and infill some of the missing memories through a laborious process of reconstruction and rewriting.

It was the first photo-album Sebald had ever encountered, and he began a postcard collection. When he moved to England in the 1960s, he became an avid collector of found photos and a deliberate amateur in taking his own pictures: by eschewing the well-known artist and their iconic images, he was placing himself firmly on the side of the snapshot, the caught moment and the family album. The use Sebald made of them is more ambiguous but deeply deliberate.

Another snapshot: the first time I met Max was at a summer school at the University of East Anglia. He had been in earnest and dynamic conversation with the translator Anthea Bell about her ongoing translation of Sebald's *On the Natural History of Destruction*. It was extremely clear he took a fastidious interest in the possible variants almost on a word-by-word basis, and that every association merited serious consideration. Anthea welcomed and engaged with each suggestion without getting into an argument. Her consummate diplomacy rendered it a discussion of equals; more, even, a meeting of minds. Over lunch I asked Max why he persisted in writing in German, a language he otherwise had had no cause to use in his working life for some 35 years. With humour, he acknowledged that his German must indeed have become a little arcane but that it *was his German* for all that. He had a sense that the language needed cleansing of some of its former associations and reclaiming as that of the great liter-

ary figures who had peopled his earlier studies and publications. Yet his archaic style has repeatedly been advanced as the reason why his books sell less in German-speaking countries than in England: 'Nobody writes like that in Germany any more nowadays.'

As if by contrast, there was nothing precious, or even professional, about Sebald's own photography. He used the cheapest colour film, shooting book plates alongside holiday snapshots, to be converted into black-and-white prints by the photographer Michael Brandon-Jones. Max instructed him in how to crop or manipulate them, or took a pair of nail scissors to them himself, famously removing a row of parked cars between the bed-and-breakfast hostels and the sea at Lowestoft. Sebald was meticulous in his intentions, arriving at the UEA darkroom with a text neatly typed on A4, and with spaces carefully inserted for a vertical or horizontal, square or strip image, all done to scale for book-sized reproduction. Brandon-Jones could not understand Sebald's German original so at the time could not tell whether the visual matched the verbal narrative. He gave his opinion on what the photos were doing: 'They were there both as clues and also to confuse the reader. Max was the first writer, I believe, ever to use photos to deceive in that way.'

Already in *The Emigrants*, his earliest work of fiction, Sebald is cutting and pasting photos, some of which we assume to be portraits – naturally enough of the four exiles who are the subjects of the book. Sebald wrote to his first translator, Michael Hulse, saying: 'I can assure you that all four stories are, almost entirely, grounded in fact ...' but there is little in the photo-images to endorse this. There is an end-of-civilization aspect to the postcard of the idyllically named Hotel Eden at Montreux, as there is to the aerial view of a bombed British city, Manchester. Here, however, each image relates, if not to the lives of actual emigrants, at least to actual post-war places.

Two years later in *The Rings of Saturn* – Sebald's pseudo-realistic account of his long walk around the East Anglian coast – photographs are deployed differently. Not a train in the chapter on the Princess of China's steam locomotive, for example, any more than a merman in that

on the Orford Ness dungeon where the poor creature was incarcerated. Instead we have wintry expanses of marshland and estuary, a stretch of shoreline which may or may not be at the place under discussion (Dunwich), plus a picture of some hatted gentlemen who may – or may not – have been standing around Eccles Church Tower (they weren't) as it crumbled to sand and was consumed by the invading tides. Whatever these oddly cropped, poorly reproduced and fogged reproductions are doing, they are not visually documenting the text.

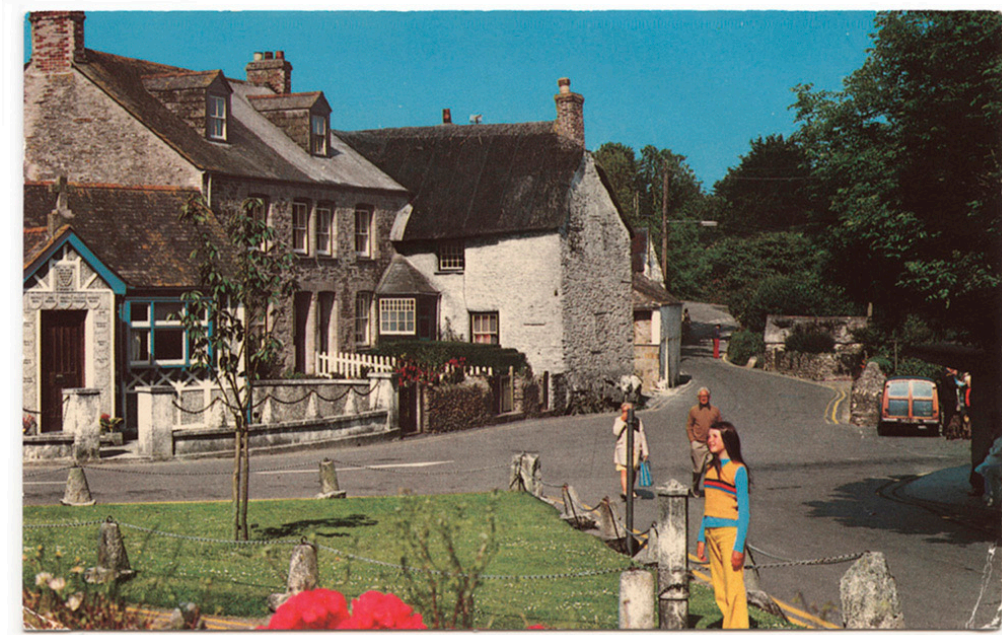
Another snapshot: the year after W.G. Sebald's death, I become director of the British Centre for Literary Translation, founded by him in 1989. Before I can move my books on to the racks in his former room, a colleague knocks on the door and introduces herself. She is looking over my shoulder as she speaks and finally spots something of interest. 'Ah,' she says. 'The sherry glasses. I'll have those.' So saying, she removes a box from the top shelf. As she departs she announces, 'They belonged to Max so I am taking them with me.' The homage continues.

Sebald believed the legacy of the great nineteenth-century novel to be dead. Following a century of horrific violence, literature was bound to reflect fragmentation, and photographs could hint at a synthesis between truths *and* fictions. Rather than the set-pieces of epic Napoleonic battles reprised at the start of *Vertigo*, the scrapbook accumulation of images in Sebald's work offers us something more approaching a Kurt Schwitters collage. There is no history that does not incorporate (auto)biography, and photography can no longer be used as reliable evidence. Without history, or a common collective memory, then indeed we are left with Octavio Paz's statement of the individual: *I am a history, a memory inventing itself*. Max would have been amused at the story of the glasses. After all, as I was shortly informed: 'They were left not by the first but the last director of the BCLT, years after Max.' One person's memory becomes another's invention and we all believe what we desire. ◇

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# Correspondence

*A series by Paul Greenleaf*



We are having a most enjoyable week. We went to Helford Passage & visited Emmie at Manac-can. She is very well apart from the arthritis. We have been lucky with the weather, rather breezy some days but no rain.

*Crantock Village, Nr Newqua*





This is where we go in the water you would love it the sun shines all day, hope you are feeling better.

*The Blue Pool in natural colour, Cavendish Hotel, Torquay, Devon*





Now this is what I call work – sun sea sand a bit of cooking & washing up & keeping an eye on a v. well behaved 6yr old girl. This place is absolute heaven. The cottage we're in is just opposite the Y.H. here and just to the right of the bench about 20 metres in from the cliff edge and a minute to the beach!

*Treyarnon Bay, Padstow*





The weather is wonderful. The drive down was good. The children (all four!) are having a lovely time playing with their friends and their computers!

*The Beach Looking Towards The Harbour, Margate*



I am enjoying every minute of our holiday & am a good girl. We have had lots of sunshine but today is cloudy. We went to Lyme Regis on Monday.

*Lyme Regis from the Tea Gardens, Dorset*



# Teaching by Example

by Uwe Schütte

It was in the autumn of 1992 that I arrived in Norwich at the University of East Anglia, or UEA as it was generally known. Having moved from Munich, where I had studied German and English literature, I hardly knew what to expect of the one-year MA course that lay ahead of me.

At least regarding my supervisor, I had some idea of what to expect: W.G. Sebald was known in academic circles for his two essay collections on twentieth-century Austrian literature. Intriguingly, he was also a literary writer. Or sort of. A somewhat strange collection of prose pieces called *Schwindel. Gefühle. (Vertigo)* had appeared in Germany in 1990 in the prestigious Andere Bibliothek series. Copies of the first edition, which now fetch prices far in excess of £500, were still readily available in German book shops when I arrived in Norwich. As a writer, Sebald had made little impact in his home country at the time.

When I met Professor Sebald for our first tutorial, I was immediately struck by how different he was from the mostly aloof, self-important professors that I was used to at Munich University – a helpful, kind person, who was often funny and occasionally even slightly shy. My new teaching environment was also quite different: rather than being cramped into classrooms with fifty other students, I enjoyed one-to-one tutorials with Sebald in his small office.

We would meet every week, discussing individual books from a list that we had agreed on at the start of the course. The tutorials usually adhered to the same pattern: I would give a short informal presentation following the model I was trained to adopt in Munich – providing a plot summary, reflecting on the critical texts, then aiming to arrive at an interpretation based on the secondary literature available.

Sebald would sit patiently, listening to me, normally with a wry smile, until I was finished. Then he would embark on an impromptu lecture that ignored all

other critics' opinions. Rather, he would come up with an overall assessment of a writer that hugely differed from the generally approved opinion. Or he would identify a certain flaw or easily overlooked detail in a book and base his disregard or approval of the text on this.

In short, his idiosyncratic approach and heretical methods were miles away from the official ways of literary criticism. And in that one year I learned more about literature than during the previous four years in Munich. For this reason, I decided to hang on and also do my PhD with him. When I told Sebald about my plan, he strongly advised against it. 'Try your hand at gardening or land surveying,' he suggested – spending one's working days out in the open air would be so much more preferable to slaving away at time-wasting paperwork in a stuffy office. That was meant as a joke, of course, albeit a serious one.

The lure of gardening, however, wasn't strong enough, and when I embarked on my first year of PhD research, Sebald's fortunes as a writer had already changed: *Die Ausgewanderten (The Emigrants)* had appeared in Germany in the autumn of 1992 and was discussed on the leading German TV book programme a few months later. It became his breakthrough. While my PhD thesis progressed over the course of the next few years, my unpretentious supervisor not only became a successful writer in our home country but also gained recognition in the anglophone world.

While I worked on my study of the Austrian writer Gerhard Roth, he wrote his masterpiece *Die Ringe des Saturn (The Rings of Saturn)*, which was met with unanimous applause in Germany in 1995. The following year saw his immediate success both in this country and the US when *The Emigrants* appeared in English. Sebald became less inclined to spend time in his office, located in the rather gloomy basement of the School of European History and Modern Languages. Our supervisory meetings were now mostly

conducted at his Victorian vicarage on the outskirts of Norwich.

Depending on the time of day, we would be sitting in the kitchen while Sebald was preparing a vegetarian meal or drinking sherry in the study. In the summer we were often sitting in the garden taking tea and once we even undertook a trip in Sebald's red Peugeot 205 to a nearby hotel bar. Not only were our meetings characterized by their informality, but we chatted mostly about personal affairs or recent literary developments. About the progress of my thesis, we usually talked only little.

Sebald was never the kind of supervisor who would try to steer me towards a certain direction. Rather, he preferred to support me in doing whatever I felt worked best. As his student, I gained in self-confidence and sharpened my independent thinking. But predominantly, I felt encouraged by the fact that he was so evidently different from all senior academics I had met before – and those I have met since. What I learned from him was more than a thing or two about literature. I also learned what it means to be upright and detached in the bonfire of literary as well as academic vanities. And I learned the probably somewhat un-British lesson of speaking one's mind in situations where it is necessary to do so.

When I dropped in on him at home one late afternoon, he had just finished burning parts from an emerging book he was unhappy with. He told me that he had recently been to Corsica. There, he had made notes about local history and archaic customs that had survived the onslaught of modernity. These 'scribbles', as he called them, were no good, in his scrupulous opinion. After his death, I learned that at least some parts of the manuscript had survived; they are now known as the 'Corsica Project', the book he had planned to write after *The Rings of Saturn*.

His auto-da-fé led us to a discussion of Kafka's rejected instruction to have all his papers burned, and Elias Canetti's very same habit of destroying his writings in the fireplace. Sebald knew Canetti personally, having originally met him when, by chance, the two were seated next to each other on a flight from Zurich to London. Not that he believed in chance. 'Meetings like this are fate, not coinci-

dence,' he assured me.

After all, Sebald believed that there was more to this world than what the sciences were able to explain.

Still, it would be wrong to assume that Sebald was a kind of aloof esoteric. On the contrary. He took great pleasure in telling jokes and relating funny episodes from his recent experiences as a beguiled literary star – about the vanities of leading literary critics or the arrogance of fellow professors, which he liked to expose and ridicule. After all, he was their exact opposite: unassuming, modest, empathetic.

Fame had its consequences, though: journalists from Germany now flocked to his home to interview him. He was also often away from the university. When asked why, he would tell me that he had been to Germany to pick up one of the prizes that were awarded to him with increasing frequency. He saw these trips as a burden. Particularly as he detested the formal ceremonies at which he had to wear a suit and tie and was expected to shake the hands of dignitaries who had no clue about his books.

While I slowly worked my way into academia, Sebald increasingly transformed from literary critic into a literary writer. A crucial factor for this change had to do with what, at the beginning of *The Rings of Saturn*, he called 'the increasingly adverse conditions' prevailing at British universities.

Sebald had spent his entire career as an academic in the UK. First, at Manchester University, where he arrived in the autumn of 1966 and worked as a *Lektor* (a language teaching assistant). In 1970 he moved to UEA in Norwich. There he spent nearly thirty years, rising from PhD student and lecturer to Professor of European Literature. 'Conditions in British universities were absolutely ideal in the sixties and seventies,' Sebald explained in an interview with the *Observer* in 1996. 'Then the so-called reforms began and life became extremely unpleasant. I was looking for a way to re-establish myself in a different form simply as a counterweight to the daily bother in the institution.'

The writing of literature for Sebald became more and more a place of escape in the face of bureaucracy and a constantly increasing administrative work-

load. From the mid 1990s onwards, the number of languages offered at UEA was gradually reduced and the Department of European Languages eventually dissolved. Sebald accepted the changes and retreated to his vicarage whenever he could. It was telling that he was the only academic in the whole university who refused to have a computer in his office. In his entire life, Sebald never wrote an email, preferring to write letters in his elegant handwriting. His books were written on an old typewriter that was so worn out from use that it didn't even produce a straight line any more.

Establishing himself as an internationally known literary star had its trappings. As his books often dealt with the fate of exiles of Jewish extraction, some critics were quick to pigeonhole him as a 'Holocaust author' – a label he resolutely detested. Alongside this one-sided perception, he sometimes also became the object of an irrational reverence. Sebald *sanctus*. Max the messiah. The apogee of this was expressed in the words of the US critic Richard Eder, who declared in *The New York Times Book Review*: 'Sebald stands with Primo Levi as the prime speaker of the Holocaust.'

In his 2010 Sebald Memorial Lecture, Will Self was right to remind the English literary establishment that 'In England, Sebald's one-time presence among us [...] is registered as further confirmation that we won, and won because of our righteousness, our liberality, our inclusiveness and our tolerance. Where else could the Good German have sprouted so readily?' The Good German . . . a label Sebald hated. Being co-opted as the shining representative of his native country, towards which he felt a deep ambivalence, was a development that could only cause him further unease.

W.G. Sebald died far too prematurely, in December 2001, at the very height of his literary career. It happened shortly after publication of the novel *Austerlitz* in German and English, and so this, his last – though by no means best – book came to be seen as his literary legacy. Comparisons to the deaths of writers such as Kleist, Kafka, Celan and Levi were quick at hand by those who saw a kind of literary redeemer in him. In the English-speaking world, those mere five years from 1996 to 2001 – which saw the publication of

his books in translation – were enough to provide him with an unassailable standing in the canon of contemporary literature.

In Germany, however, the situation is not as clear-cut. This has mostly to do with Sebald's contentious critical essays. Some critics are confused by his ambivalent positions. Some opponents tried to discredit his literary writings on the basis of his critical essays. Sebald always had vocal adversaries, particularly among fellow writers, such as the Nobel laureate Günter Grass. Maybe, without admitting it, what these opponents are up against is less the indisputable quality of his writings, but the monument that his many admirers have erected for their Saint Sebald.

These iconoclasts won't stand a chance though – the hagiographs are far too numerous. At the recent world meeting of Germanists, Sebald was the most popular subject of papers presented. To keep track of all research articles, critical essays and PhD theses on him has become an impossible task. Conferences keep being organized, books on Sebald keep being published, Sebald events draw capacity audiences. He has attained cult status even in popular culture, with musicians such as David Byrne or Patti Smith referencing him.

It is difficult to say what he would have made of all this adoration. Most of it would have appalled him; some praise might have pleased him. It is probably fair to say, however, that he would have preferred the status of a controversial misfit to the unreserved idolization he mostly received in the English-speaking world.

Writing, he once observed, 'is a strange behavioural disorder that forces one to transfer every emotion into words and that manages to miss reality with astounding precision [...] but [...] those pitiful writers imprisoned in their world of words sometimes succeed to open up views of such beauty and intensity as life itself rarely delivers'. Opening up views: it's what W.G. Sebald did as a writer and, for me at least, it's what he did as a teacher too. ◇

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By Raoul Schrott, translated by Iain Galbraith

## Physical Optics XI

luff · the pirogue in the shadow dips one arm  
shallow in the swell · five strokes to the land  
the horizon a tendon on the back of a splayed hand  
shore · algae with their knotted script · a swarm  
of flies on a jellyfish · behind it the holds  
of hulks as rusty quarters for dockers · a barge  
in the harbour · its derrick unloading night off the clouds  
that turns on the branches of the macadamia to a blue wax  
in which the sun scratches a few lines · its meridian  
inches over the hotel roof-timbers veined with cracks  
then the surf · the fricative of waves on the sand  
and the sea flowing over the earth and its end

*hotel générations, tamatavé, 8.12.97*

## Figures V

even the palms here are not real a feather  
boa on top of white-painted trunks and  
no less melancholy than the violinist  
and gold-leaf on the bar · smoke trails  
over the dark green in front of the  
window and the Nile is reflected only by  
the sky · nothing else · but a mere hand's  
breadth from the edge of the fields the  
rock is burning · on the parapet two half-  
empty glasses in their so dissimilar  
bodily exactitude · the N of your legs as  
you lie on your side stretching an arm to  
the bed's edge like the glyphs on the  
headed notepaper · a dancer's profile and  
what script is · geometrical papyrus  
flowers and the dashes of these blinds  
through the sun · it remains only to  
colour you in with tongue and mouth

*luxor, old winter palace, 6.2.96*

# To Hell with Authenticity

By Juli Zeh, translated by Sally-Ann Spencer

The fictional story of me started on the back seat of a Renault 4 packed to the roof with leisure equipment and prospective holidaymakers. The year predated air conditioning, it was thirty-four degrees in the shade, and we were travelling at 120 km/h. For a seven-year-old with a predilection for car sickness, escapism wasn't a sign of mental affliction but a necessary form of self-defence. Gazing out of the window at the countryside of the South of France, I flipped a lever in my head, switching from daily function to daydreaming mode. The stories I concocted were dominated by a heroine who, quite coincidentally, shared my name and physical appearance, and was endowed with the very qualities that I wished for myself. The supporting roles were filled by all manner of imaginary creatures, plus my mother and father – usually as parents who, forced to see the error of their ways, ended up begging their child for forgiveness. The cast also featured an assortment of my classmates, divided into 'good' and 'bad'. The plot was Aristotelian in structure; the end was always happy. Owing to the unity of author and recipient, there were never any misapprehensions about the real-life content of narrative prose.

Twenty years later I am seated on a hard plastic chair behind a plastic table with a glass of water to my right and the glare of a spotlight on my face. Lurking behind the dazzling brightness are countless pairs of eyes, waiting for questions to be answered. Is my novel autobiographical – and if so, to what degree? Is the first-person narrator (male, thirty-five years old, addicted to coke) an alter ego of me (female, twenty-seven years old at the time, not addicted to coke), given that he and I are both qualified lawyers with a specialism in international law? How can I know the things that I wrote about in the book? What are the actual, real events behind the plot? Which other characters exist in real life?

This is my first novel, and I am evidently underprepared. The truth is, I had

never asked myself these questions. Ever since my authorial beginnings in the back seat, the fabrication of fiction had been a matter of course. Take a handful of ingredients – namely, events, people, ideas and thoughts that have made an impression on the mind – blend until the mixture resembles reality, place over maximum imaginary heat, leave to cool, and then sieve. Coat in language, season to taste with humour, melancholy or defeatism, and serve at once.

The life of a writer, I tell the audience, is like a quarry from which the material for stories is mined. Some characters and places have prototypes in so-called reality, some don't, and others are mosaics of splintered reality and invention put together at will. The degree of alienation follows no law other than that of the will to create and shape content and form, and varies from case to case. The method has nothing in common with autobiography. From my perspective, writing a story with one-to-one correspondence with reality would be pure tedium; but making up stories with no connection to my own life seems somehow absurd.

The question as to which parts of my fiction are 'true' is impossible to answer – because it isn't the right question.

Ever since Plato accused literature of 'lying', writers and readers have been bound by the secret compact of fictionality, under which terms literature suspends its claim to truthfulness. Which is to say, if you don't claim you're telling the truth, you can't be lying. My first novel makes no claim whatsoever to be rooted in empirical events. For readers, this means a moratorium on checking the facts.

But, says someone in the audience, isn't it true that you own a dog, just like your protagonist?

My dog, I explain lamely, looks nothing like the dog in the story, and has a different name.

Do you mean you disguised him? shouts someone from the back.

Not 'fiction'; a 'disguise'. How can challenges that rest on such fundamental

misunderstandings possibly be countered?

In the world of books, it is standard practice now to talk about texts in a way that has more to do with voyeurism and criminal forensics than with literary reception. Instead of considering formal features, the use of language or the dramaturgy of the work, critics and historians of contemporary literature proceed by examining the biographies of writers. Entire classes of school kids, furnished with encyclopedias, street maps and newspaper archives, are currently examining contemporary fiction for mistakes – for deviations from 'reality'. Recently an editor stated that she would simply 'edit out' streets that couldn't be found in cities in which the novels in question were set. Increasingly, readers are spotting themselves as well as the author in works of fiction, and feeling flattered or insulted in corresponding measure.

We could call these various phenomena 'metrofictionality' to indicate a mode of reading in which mistaking fiction for reality is not a critical blunder but *de rigueur*. What has become of the secret compact between writer and reader? What remains of the mortar that holds together the many-storied artifice of literary works, the fictional *As If* ...?

Authenticity is available on all channels. TV reality shows (real!), documentary soaps (even realer!) and *Big Brother* series (realer than real!) achieve phenomenal ratings. In cinemas every second set of opening or closing credits announces that the film is based on real events. The music industry advertises by publicizing the life stories of its figureheads – of questionable interest but genuinely real.

Everywhere the public's nose is being rubbed in the alluring aroma of authenticity so that everyone can experience the intoxication of watching as it happens and Being There. It seems that the age of communication with its wealth of possibilities for presenting and transmitting content, for reproducing and retelling, has led to a hunger for unmediated experience, which is to be supplied by that most artificial of expressive forms – art. At the same time, the perception that people's lives – easily exploitable and fast-burning – have become the staple fuel that keeps the media engines running and running has led to calls for stricter privacy control.

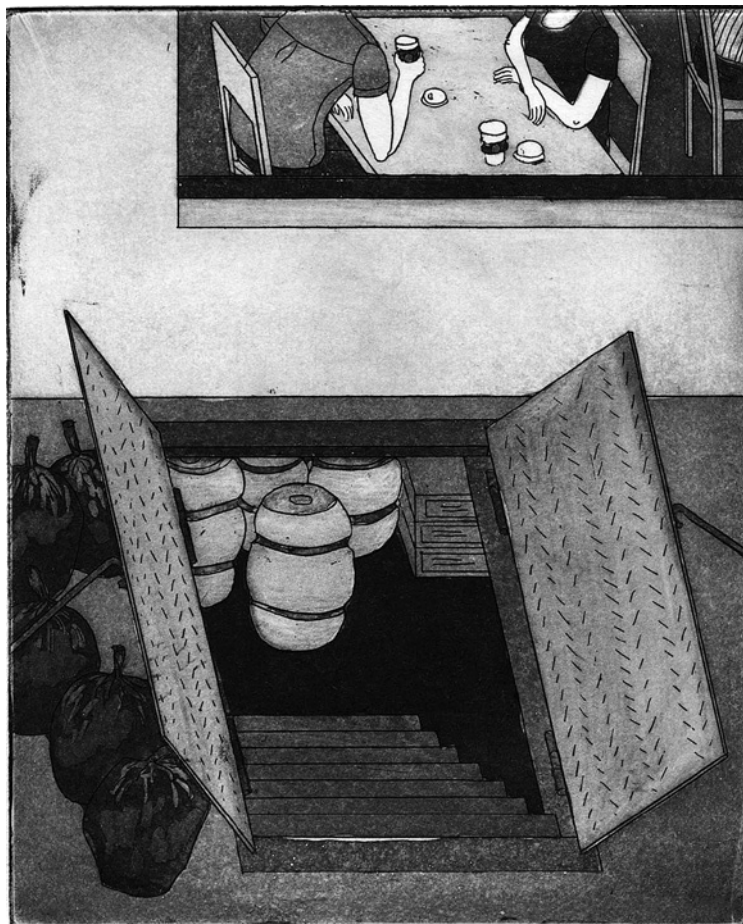
In the case of literature, which does not have recourse to images and sounds but must operate with black symbols on white paper, these developments seem particularly absurd. Nonetheless, a number of recent novels have sought to simulate this kind of immediate experience with the help of first-person narrators bearing considerable resemblance to their creators and through everyday portrayals of modern life. And so novelists are knocking holes in the wall painstakingly constructed by schoolteachers across the country to separate author and narrator, form and content, *discours* and *histoire*. Too true to be good?

Mimesis, not mimicry: Aristotle also wrote of literature as mimesis, but not in Plato's terms of the lie. Aristotle's understanding of literature as the representation of reality hinges on imitation, but not as a means of deceiving one's predators or rivals. For Aristotle, mimesis describes the attempt to interpret reality through literary representation. By nature, this notion of mimesis, which continues to govern the Western approach to literature, gives rise to the expectation that literary texts should possess a certain amount of realism. Equally naturally, it raises the question as to how much historical accuracy is necessary, desirable and permissible in a literary work. Doubtless any writer would assert his or her right to make these decisions with maximum artistic freedom.

On terrain that consists almost entirely of grey zones there can be no means of setting objective standards or establishing legal parameters, and it is futile to try. Writers, though, who seek to barricade themselves and their work behind the protective shield of 'fiction' are at least as naive as readers who think authors and their narrators wear the same colour socks.

Speaking from my own experience, I would say: subjectively, there *is* a difference, a tangible distinction. When I help

myself from the quarry of biographical experience, I no longer act as a child who sacrifices herself, her friends and her relatives to her imagination. It is the desire to make things my own rather than legal prudence that leads me to endow my characters with names of my invention, to clad them in custom-made physical suits (which might nonetheless be borrowed from reality), and to place them in situations of my making and see how they come through. This desire to appropriate stems from a characteristically literary preoccupation. Literature, unlike journalism or history writing, is not



concerned with describing the particular, with reporting an individual, unique and contingent case. It deals in the general, seeking to bring it to life and summon it into the consciousness of the reader through a concrete example. The work of literature consists in assessing the material for its suitability to serve as a metaphor, motif or symbol, and it obeys the laws of intratextual necessity, which differ from the rules of selection and representation applicable to empirically anchored reports.

Was my parents' car really a Renault 4? Exactly how old was I when I concocted my first story? Were we really holidaying in the South of France? Fictional passages can even insert themselves into essayistic texts such as this one, and if readers are honest, they won't seriously insist on factual accuracy or feel that the text is somehow specifically, maliciously, about them. Deliberate sabotage aside, the Aristotelian compact is still in force: readers continue to recognize signals that point to a wider situation beyond the apparently concrete circumstances described, and experienced writers know whether

their texts draw on the classic notion of fictionality or whether they seek to satisfy the contemporary passion for voyeurism.

This isn't a question of literary quality or even of legality *per se*; at most it's a topic for debate and a moral dilemma. Nonetheless, if authors, rather than creating a fictional 'I', choose to feature themselves as real people in their texts, the collapse of the wall between (real) external reality and (literary) interior world isn't an unexpected consequence but a fundamental component of the chosen literary form.

Of course no one is prepared to renounce the comfortable *tout-va* that guarantees the luxury of artistic freedom with regard to content and form. But wouldn't we do well to ask ourselves whether the reality mania of the media and

entertainment industry should be granted full access to literature's most delicate parts? Perhaps the dogma of always seeking authenticity will turn out to be just as restrictive as (self-)censorship based on privacy concerns. On this note, and for highly personal poetic reasons, I make the following appeal. We have the words, we have the ideas, and we have the privilege not to claim that we're telling the truth. *Mon dieu*, stay fictional, and to hell with authenticity! ◇

# The Language of Ravens

By *Marjana Gaponenko*, translated by *Arabella Spencer*

Love is cold. Love is cold. But in the Grave we burn and melt to Gold . . . Lewadski waited for the tears. The tears didn't come. In spite of this he wiped his face. Disgusting!

With a fixed stare he had just put the receiver on its cradle. What else, if not impatience, had he sensed in the breathing of his family doctor? Impatience and the buzzing of thoughts that had nothing to do with him: Mustn't forget the baking powder . . . moth repellent, furniture polish, what else . . . he could smell his own tiresomeness through the receiver. Breathe in, breathe out. Hang up, old man, hang up . . .

Lewadski went into the bathroom and threw up. He was overcome by tears. Whimpering, he realised that it was the first time he had vomited in ages. The last time it had happened to him, he had still been wearing knickerbockers. What had the girl's name been? Maria? Sophia? The young girl had allowed her hand to be kissed by a man with a moustache. In front of her a slice of cake.

Jealousy had grabbed the schoolboy Lewadski by the throat. He had stopped in front of the window of the café, taken a bow and spilled the contents of his stomach on to the pavement. Touching his chest, he had slowly assumed an upright position again. The girl had looked straight through him, her dilated eyes filled with a delight that was not intended for him or the man with the moustache, solely for the slice of chocolate cake . . .

What made me touch my chest back then? In the mirror, Lewadski was clinging on to a glass of water. If my heart had dropped to the pavement when I was throwing up, if my arms and legs had failed me, I would have noticed that something was missing!

Lewadski rinsed out his mouth, took the showerhead and aimed it at the dentures he had spat out into the bath while throwing up and which now reminded him of a capsized boat, in the sick. The jet of water jerkily inched the out-

geously expensive and highly impractical press-stud dentures in the direction of the plughole.

Sceptically, he leant forward and picked them up – a dead thing, from which a last laugh was to be expected.

No, he did not want to encounter this girl again. If she were still alive she would either be blind or demented or tied to a wheelchair. What was her name again? Maria? Aida? Tamara? After Lewadski's performance in front of the window, had she finished her cake? It didn't matter.

A tablet dropped into the glass of water. After a brief deliberation it started to fizz and circle; a drunken bee. Carefully Lewadski let the dentures fall into the glass after it. Plop . . . since he had acquired artificial teeth he found this sound soothing. Perhaps it was connected to the fact that it invariably accompanied the arrival of the Sandman. That must have been where its magical sweetness came from. Plop . . . and Lewadski's eyes would already be falling closed. Plop . . . and he was already whirring into the sunset on the scintillating wings of a rose beetle. What is sweeter than your chocolate cake, girl? Only sleep. And what is sweeter than sleep? Only death.

On the short and laborious journey to the living room, Lewadski was annoyed to see his telephone glowing, as if nothing had happened, as if he, Luka Lewadski, Professor Emeritus of Zoology, hadn't just had his death sentence pronounced down the receiver. 'We need to talk about your results – at the hospital, right away.' Lewadski had understood. There was nothing left to discuss. Talk about what? If the results were OK then you didn't call on a Sunday around lunchtime when old patients were possibly enjoying their deepest sleep. You also didn't call if the results were bad. If you had any manners, you would knock on the door personally in order to convey the news of someone's death.

In two scraping steps he reached the middle of the living room. Lewadski's books sat stiffly on the branches and

twigs of an impressive library. In the dusty sunlight they seemed to await a small spectacle; the books literally held their breath. Not today, Lewadski thought. A rainbow-coloured drop glistened on the tip of his nose before exploding on the parquet floor. Another shuffle and Lewadski was already sitting in his rocking chair by the window.

He closed his eyes and was certain: he looked imposing like this, genuine and alive just as he had been in front of the window of the café.

The way he was sitting there with the strip of sunlight on his chest. Or perhaps the strip wasn't a strip, but a spear driving through an old dragon's body? He smiled. If someone had observed his face at this moment they might have believed that a wafer-thin slice of lemon had dissolved beneath the old man's tongue. But there was nobody who could have seen Lewadski's face. Since he had started ageing, he had always been alone.

Done, damn it! Lewadski feebly tapped his scrawny thigh. So, the suspicion that he had carcinoma of the lung had been confirmed! The patient and pseudo-respectful whispering of his doctor at the other end of the line said as much. It hit Lewadski harder than it would have if the diagnosis had been roared down the receiver.

He would have liked to have said a prayer, something sublime, but everything venerable seemed either unspeakable or defiled by mortal fear and self-pity. Impure, simply impure. Ultimately everything in this world referred to man, to him alone. Even in the purportedly most altruistic stirring of the soul yapped a little ! ! !, and a tiny actor stood whistling in the wings of the most deceptively genuine feelings. Disgusting, thought Lewadski, you can't even face a stroke of fate candidly. He thought this, and knew that another Lewadski, as if to confirm his thought, hovered the width of a hat above him, amusing himself at this sight: an old man with lung cancer sitting in a rocking chair, with a pretentious strip of sunlight on his pigeon-chest and, how strange, all the particles of dust, how they danced in the ray of light allowing it to be seen in the first place.

Lewadski pursed his lips and, in his mind, spat on the carpet. What was he still supposed to think, when what he



knew of human beings filled him with disgust? This scrap of knowledge ruined his pleasure in the unknown, in the mysteries of nature that were yet to be revealed. That he would no longer come to discover them made him livid. May youth figure out the secrets of creation – the thought triggered a dull pain. It was not that he begrudged the others, those left behind, the revelation, no. Lewadski just thought that mankind, if anything, had a simulated reverence for the simple and the great. It was the simple and the great that he felt sorry for, because it was purely curiosity that led man to pursue the wonders of nature, with every solemn gesture pure hypocrisy; every action, even if a self-experiment with a deadly outcome or involving years of sacrifice in the name of science, nothing but egoistical defiance, nothing but pure self-assertion.

Lewadski rose trembling from the rocking chair. Even now he had lied: regardless of mankind, it was not the simple or the great that he felt sorry for, but that he would be denied coming one step closer to this mystery. He was envious and jealous and he begrudged the others, knowing at heart that all effort was in vain – the mystery of life would just grow further out of reach, for as long as this world still existed.

I have trampled around on this globe for long enough, Lewadski thought. He opened the balcony door and sat back down in the rocking chair. The dusty curtain enveloped the figure of its guest for a moment, the street air. The road itself entered Lewadski's library, filled it with the bothersome yet welcome signs of life, the noise of klaxons, the shouting of children and the perpetual hurry of women's heels. He could also hear snatches of a conversation between ravens: I love you, I love you too, feed me! 'Antonida! Put your trousers on! Now!' a mother's voice ordered. Lewadski raised an eyebrow; when he was Antonida's age, girl's names like hers didn't exist, and girls still wore skirts.

'Oh dear,' Lewadski sighed. Why the intimation of his imminent demise hadn't allowed him to die on the spot, but had instead stirred up a lot of dust, was an enigma. His chin dropped to his chest

like an empty drawer on to a table; there is nothing to be had here, thieves, leave me alone. He opened his mouth. The ray of sunlight now rummaged in his mouth. Lewadski stuck out his tongue and rolled it back in. Birds are better than we are, he thought, not least because they are able to open their beaks properly, unlike human beings, whose mouths only open through their bottom jaw dropping; birds simultaneously raise their upper beak slightly!

Slowly Lewadski shut his mouth again.

The thought that his body had been at the mercy of a parasite, that his lung had been thrown to a sea creature as food, made Lewadski peevishly swing back and forth a couple of times in his rocking chair. I am at the mercy not only of



that bloodsucker but also of a cocktail of chemicals if I let myself in for chemotherapy, thought Lewadski, and clenched his fists.

He noticed that after the telephone conversation he far too frequently used indecent vocabulary, words that he had always avoided in his life, 'bloodsucker' or 'damn it'. That he had even been sick was outrageous and a certain sign of his decay. Who cares, Lewadski thought, if I kick the bucket soon. He tore his eyes open. There you have it, kick the bucket, that's the kind of language I hear myself using! I should just die! Die and rot! Lewadski

gestured dismissively, rose from the rocking chair with a groan and shuffled to the shelf with the medical books.

Cyclophosphamide, sounds like a bandit... checks the multiplication of rapidly dividing cells. Side effects: nausea, vomiting, hair loss. May damage the nerves and kidneys and lead to loss of hearing, also an irreparable loss of motor function, suppresses bone marrow, can cause anaemia and blindness. Well, bon appétit.

'Adieu,' said Lewadski to the medical dictionary in his hand, before he shut it. He looked around his flat, not sure what he should do. Instead of watering flowers, making himself some porridge or dusting, he took a walk around the four corners of his library to calm his nerves.

The only thing that really belongs to man is the genuine. And the only genuine thing about man, Lewadski thought, breathing on his magnifying glass, is his pride! He was proud of the bookshelves that filled the walls. This trait may have belonged to the department of deadly sins, but how could it be bad and depraved if it was purer, more sincere, than the love that man imagined himself capable of? Only pride had no foundation and needed no admirers to sustain itself. It may be that it poisons the soul. But it also elevated the humble species of man a little, be it to dubious spheres, from where it became aware of the flicker of an immeasurably greater providence. It was a most beautiful thing that a single surge of pride eliminated any kind of basis for loneliness.

So why shouldn't man commit this sin?

'So what if I was never capable of love?' Lewadski asked the back of a slim volume with the tight gold lettering *Manual for the Domestication of Extremely Reluctant Parrots*. 'At least I was capable of being proud, I was proud of you, little book. Just as love allegedly pulls the lovers' rug from under their feet, my pride pulled the rug from under my feet. I floated neither high nor for long, so didn't land on my snout, but softly and in my element – in my library. I was never disappointed...'

Lewadski would have liked to have cried, but he suspected that these tears

would have been because of his doctor's call rather than the solemnity of the moment, and so forbade himself to. My decorum will be the death of me, thought Lewadski, for even the most natural thing suddenly seemed inappropriate to him. Honesty, he said to his books, is a slippery customer, it always slips away when we think we are surrounded by it. Lewadski breathed on the magnifying glass again and polished it on his shirt-sleeve. Think on it! How am I expressing myself! That he had a long time ago thought of winning over the opposite sex with this pathetic affected behaviour, when his head had been filled with nothing but the mating dances and brooding habits of birds, was something he did not want to think about. But he did think about it, he thought about it with a hint of bitterness.

Lewadski took a book from the shelf and blew away the dust. *Dictionnaire of the Language of Ravens* by Dupont de Nemours, incomplete edition. A French ornithologist colleague had hidden the facsimile in a cake, smuggled it through the Iron Curtain in time for Lewadski's seventieth birthday. Lewadski's delight in it had overcome his reason to such an extent that he had kissed the Frenchman on his moustache, in front of the entire professorship.

Somebody had raised their glass, he could remember that, and said, 'A kiss without a moustache is like an egg without salt!' Everybody drank to international friendship and Raven Research, the words 'May the day come, in which ...' and 'with a clear conscience there should not be a utopia' rang out. People chinked glasses and patted each other on the back. 'From the primeval fish to the bird: a stone's throw!' 'From the lungfish to the human: the bat of an eyelid!' They hoped that he would gain many years of pleasure from this unique and scientifically totally uninteresting book. His anniversary was at the same time a farewell. He left the university and the students – everything that he had never really been attached to – with the thought that he would not live much longer. 'Adieu, mon ami!' Lewadski had tried to joke when he stood opposite the Frenchman at the airport. The Frenchman had nodded hastily and withdrew from Lewadski's brotherly kiss on the pretext of a coughing fit. In the aeroplane the man with the moustache

had suffered a heart attack. For a time, Lewadski was under the illusion that he had brought about the demise of his French colleague with his collegial kiss.

'Such a beautiful book,' said Lewadski. He said it loud enough for the other books to hear. 'This is how the destiny of a man, children, fulfils itself,' Lewadski continued ceremoniously, 'a stranger arrives, makes a present to a stranger and gives up the ghost!' The books listened as if Lewadski hadn't already told this story twenty times. 'And you won't believe that what I was thinking of on that day was that I would have to die soon! Such a beautiful gift ...'

Lewadski's knuckles cracked as he opened the book. He turned the pages with pleasure.

Kra, Kre, Kro, Kron, Kronoj  
Gra, Gres, Gros, Grons, Gronones  
Krae, Krea, Kraa, Krona, Grones

It is a blessing that I know French, thought Lewadski, otherwise I would have had to learn it at the age of seventy in order to be able to read this gem of a book. Simply and unassumingly the content of the language of ravens had been scraped together and distributed over twenty-seven pages, silent and powerful. Lewadski remembered the bad mood he had fallen into every time he had read the dictionary. Every time he stumbled over the word that suggested that man, in his search for enlightenment, had possibly overlooked the decisive junction – a word from the language of ravens. Which one was it? Lewadski turned the pages and felt a surge of heat creeping up his hunched back.

Kra (quietly, deliberately, talking to himself) I aKra (quietly, drawn out) – I am fine; or I am ready  
Kra (short staccato) – leave me  
Kra (tenderly, coquettishly) – hello; or wake up; or excuse the tomfoolery  
Kra (questioningly, long) – is somebody there?

Which word was it then?

Krao (loud and demanding) – hunge  
Kroa (chokingly) – thank you, thank

you so much, such a pleasure  
Karr (resolutely) – adieu!  
Kro—

Kronos! Kronos was the word! 'Let us fly' in the language of ravens, *chronos* in Greek. Lewadski shut the book. It was this junction that mankind had rushed past, past its own kinsfolk – past its brother animal. Along with it the thought of the existence of a common primeval language had been buried! 'Dear books,' Lewadski said to his library, 'that contemporary animal psychology stubbornly refuses to credit the higher vertebrates with a power of abstraction and a speech centre is not only a scandal. It is a disaster! The existence of a common primeval language is perfectly obvious. Tell me, does the animal give the impression of being apathetic? On the contrary, the animal looks lively and inquisitive, not because it has just laid an egg, but because it possesses language. Language ...' raved Lewadski, craning his neck and shuffling, moist-eyed, along the bookshelves. Lewadski spoke to his books as if to his most gifted students.

'A common primeval language appears to be physiologically and philologically undisputed. But from where is philology meant to take the means to prove the language ability of animals and to explore their grammar?' The approving silence of the books spurred Lewadski's eloquence on. 'The day will come,' he continued, 'when the dictionaries of animal language will no longer cause their authors to be taunted and ridiculed, but bring them fame and honour. The authors will demurely lower their gaze.' Slightly embarrassed, Lewadski stared at the floor on which balls of dust were being driven back and forth by the draft. 'Despondent because they had arrived too late at the thought of recognizing in the animal an equal neighbour, a friend that can be confidently ascribed a language and an immortal soul again, after such a long time ...'

The books kept up their silence. Let us hope that it is not too late to create this bond of friendship, Lewadski wanted to say, but he only thought it to himself in silence. ◇

From *Wer ist Martha* (Suhrkamp, 2012)

# Gentlemen, We Are Living on the Edge

By Thomas Pletzinger, translated by Ross Benjamin

Heavy silence on the bus to Bamberg. Everyone is in their seats, everything is the same as always: Big Micha at the wheel, Baldi and Demirel and Coach Katzurin are sitting behind him, all of them are working and talking on the phone. Konsti is reading Handke, Bobby is snoring. My seat is next to the water crates. The players are riding on the top level of the double-decker, strewn among the seats, Yassin Idbihi surrounded by newspapers and magazines, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Der Spiegel*, *The New York Times*, next to him Schaffartzik with a book. Schultze and Femerling are arguing, Taylor Rochestie is singing to himself, Beach Boys, Rochestie is always singing to himself. Staiger is sleeping in the aisle, the 6-foot-11 man Miro Raduljica is sitting bolt upright, wedged between the reclining seats, staring stoically ahead, Tadija can't keep still. Bryce Taylor is sitting where Hollis Price used to sit. Julius Jenkins wearing headphones on the rear bench, Derrick Allen with the scouting papers, Immanuel McElroy wrapped in his pillow. Up front the physio, Tommy, and Hi-Un, the doc. Everything is the same as always, and yet everything is different. Today is a perfect day for a last bus ride, clear and pure, the sun shining down on everything. The route is the same as always: Brandenburg Gate, Victory Column, the old AVUS race track, the highway junction Schkeuditzer Kreuz, pit stop on the autobahn, uphill, downhill, Bamberg. There's melancholy in the air, but no one would admit it. In the morning a few players cleaned out their lockers in the training centre, shower gel and pictures of their kids, amulets and socks with holes in them. Big Micha loaded up the bags and greeted his passengers one by one. 'The very last time today,' he said. 'After this I'm not driving you anywhere.'

The season was long, the longest in the history of the Alba Berlin basketball team. We've been travelling for more than ten months. Ever since the training camp in Kranjska Gora in the Slovenian Alps, we've been sitting in buses, planes and

locker rooms, we've stood at Italian buffets, at luggage conveyor belts in Moscow, we've sat in Quakenbrück conference rooms, on Hagen locker-room benches, in cafés on the outskirts of Seville, we've checked in, we've checked out. We've been mired in snow and in crisis. We've been at a hundred autobahn rest stops, thirty midnight McDonald's, Burger Kings and Subways. I say 'we' because I have been accompanying the Alba Berlin team since last August. The players lifted weights, watched videos, gave interviews, had their ankles taped, signed autographs and licked wounds. I sat in my seat in the locker room, I watched, listened and took notes. I ate what the team ate, I gave up my objectivity bit by bit. I was there.

In these ten months the team has played almost seventy games, in the European competition, in the Bundesliga – the German national league, made up of eighteen teams – and in the German Cup, a mid-season side competition. There were terrible defeats, tears were shed, noses bloodied and tendons torn. This season was a long journey through a rough landscape: the early elimination in the Eurocup, the dashed expectations, bitter losses, disgruntled faces among fans and journalists. The low point was the worst defeat in club history: a 52–103 barrage, in the Bamberg arena, of all places. We were run out of town, taunts and jeers, dishonour and disgrace. Muli Katzurin replaced Luka Pavićević as coach, two players were fired, three new ones hired. We kept losing, there were strings of defeats, things kept going downhill. We failed in the German Cup. Then there were some convincing wins, things were finally going uphill again.

But above all, things kept going: Alba Berlin made it to the play-offs. And tomorrow is Saturday 18th June, and the Alba Berlin team is still here, *we* are still here – much longer than the journalists wrote and most people assumed, much longer than assistant coach Bobby predicted. Perhaps there were times when even the team itself was not convinced.

This 18th June was for months an abstract date, an unreal, far-off day: the very last game day of the season. To make it to this day, improbable and incredible things had to happen: two gruelling and nerve-racking play-off series against the Oldenburg Baskets and Frankfurt Skyliners had to be won, the finals had to go into the fifth and decisive round.

And now we're sitting on the bus and heading to Bamberg, for the final for the German championship. All this sounds as if it were contrived for sport romantics, as if it were material for a novel, perhaps a screenplay, with a showdown on the dusty main street of a town and Ennio Morricone providing the soundtrack. 'Another chapter for your book?' Yassin Idbihi asked after each win, as if I had made up this season in order to have a story to tell. Tomorrow is Saturday 18th June, tomorrow Alba Berlin can, after a turbulent and complicated season, despite everything, still become the German champion. We're heading south-west. This season may sound like a fast-paced rollercoaster ride, but it feels like an absurdly long bus trip towards Bamberg.

The players are talking, but when twenty men sit on a bus for ten months, what they say loses more and more of its meaning. English is the language of the basketball world and the lingua franca on the bus. By the end of a season, an outsider can scarcely follow the conversations any more. Team captain Patrick Femerling and Sven Schultze, the enforcer, have been arguing since the departure this morning about something neither of the two can exactly remember. Perhaps it was originally about telephones, BlackBerry vs iPhone, it often begins with things like that, but now it's about who said what when and how. The two of them are arguing about arguing itself. For months they've been sitting next to each other on team buses, for months they've been sharing hotel rooms. Femerling is Waldorf and Schultze is Statler, they're Estragon and Vladimir.

A professional basketball team is a strange family, in which everything has already been said, but which keeps talking anyway. The language of a basketball team is rough and raw, it's full of disses, superlatives, sexist remarks and national prejudices. There's mimicry, there's raucousness, there are inside jokes and ironic



comments, there's mockery. There's cursing in three languages – *Alter, what's wrong with you, brate!* – things get silly, childish, clever, grandiose, there's sound poetry, 'Nonono,' says Femerling, 'Yesyesyes,' says Schultze. And when it matters, a good basketball team communicates with no words at all.

We're leaving Berlin for the last time this season. Outside the bus windows the old autobahn rest stops and border installations of the once-divided city rush by. The Berlin bear, the city's heraldic animal, gives us a melancholy nod.

I must have been about nine years old when, at some point in autumn 1984, shortly after my first communion, in a 1950s gymnasium in my hometown of Hagen, I first held a basketball in my hands. On the bus to Bamberg I remember the glass blocks and wall bars, the dark smell of the equipment room, the rips in the blue gym mats, the other kids who had long known what a lay-up was, right, left, up, get it? My cousin Andreas had taken me with him, my first coach was named Martin Grof, in my memory he wears green and white Converse sneakers and faded jeans. On the wall of his apartment hung a poster of Larry Bird and Magic Johnson. In Germany at the time basketball was considered a sport for college students. Martin drove an old Opel, I think, he must have been a college student. He taught me that you snap your wrist when shooting, that the ball should spin backwards, that a high trajectory is the most important thing, he showed us again and again how the ball was supposed to soar through the air, he made one shot after another, he set the rhythm for lay-ups, tak-tak-tak, again and again, right, left, up, a sort of dance, tak-tak-tak.

In my first summer as a basketball player, I took city bus 512 to practice, sometimes Andreas and I got to watch a basketball video from America in Martin's tiny apartment, the television on an overturned beer crate, an imported video cassette with the fifth game of the finals, Boston Celtics versus Los Angeles Lakers in the old Boston Garden, 8th June 1984, known as the Heat Game. There weren't any others. Game five again and again, Boston always won, 121–103.

'Martin's brother is a pro,' said the other kids, and eventually I saw my first Bundesliga game, between the cross-

town rivals *SSV Hagen* and *TSV Hagen* in the smoky and completely packed Ischelandhalle; I covered my ears to block out the noise and my eyes to block out the suspense. To be a basketball pro in Germany meant that someone paid for your apartment and your car, plus a salary that was enough to live on. I was astonished that people could jump as high as the black point guard Keith Gray, the former Detroit Mercy Titan, who stayed in the air for a few seconds before he shot. I was amazed and frightened by the wild enthusiasm of adults, by their drumming, their chanting, by the smell of beer and cigarette smoke. In those days you were still allowed to smoke in German sports arenas. In an essay about what the world would be like in the year 2000 I wrote that I would be a basketball pro in America or, to be precise, in Boston (without having the slightest idea where Boston exactly was). I would play against Magic Johnson, I would win, 121–103. My teacher Frau Elsner commented on my report card that my thoughts had a 'tendency to wander almost poetically'.

I spent my youth in gymnasiums, I remember every single one, the locker rooms, runs through the woods, weights rooms, I remember the bus connections to get there. We hitchhiked to the Europe League games of Bayer Leverkusen, I remember Oklahoma State's 'Sly' Kincheon, German and international star player Mike Koch and Hall of Famer Arvydas Sabonis. I remember the brightly coloured Kronos shoes worn by Rimas Kurtinaitis, who was known as the 'three-point czar' because he was the first player from the USSR in the West. I know the squeaking on the linoleum in gymnasiums from Thessaloniki to Soest. I've been promoted and relegated, I've seen flags waving and jerseys burning, I memorize stats to this day. I had the jersey number 7 like Toni Kukoč and long hair like the German legend Henning Harnisch. Once I stood at the graveside of the Croatian sensation Dražen Petrović, who played for the New Jersey Nets and was killed in a car crash on the German autobahn in 1993, and was deeply moved.

I watched my teammates become Bundesliga players, even members of the German national team. Eventually I had to acknowledge that I wasn't good enough to become a basketball pro, I wasn't tal-

ented and cool-headed enough, at decisive moments my hand shook. At some point in the summer of 1994 I folded up my jerseys and put them in the closet. There they remain to this day.

Still, I couldn't get basketball off my mind. I know all Dirk Nowitzki's stats by heart, in my first novel there's a basketball scene on the outdoor court on West 4th Street in Manhattan, and once, on some court in Jackson Heights, Queens, a kid I had just won \$2 off told me I got game. I'm an enthusiast, but a fan only at rare moments. It's hard for me to give my unqualified support to a team. I love the game, but at the same time there's always nostalgia and melancholy when I watch the players during training, in the locker room, during the game. It's my old dream that doesn't release me. The clear daily routines and precisely set goals, the wide horizon of physical possibilities. It's the almost complete improbability of the fulfilment of an old idea. It's the unattainability of a physical condition, an ease, speed, flexibility. The jumping power that wanes. It's the gradual loss of these possibilities. A life's path not taken. It's the dwindling of time. I spent a season sitting on the team bus of Alba Berlin, a season observing what I had as a kid wanted to be. My seat was in the middle, right next to the water crates. ◇

Extracted from: *Gentlemen, wir leben am Abgrund* by Thomas Pletzinger (c) 2012 by Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co.KG, Cologne

# By Tilman Rammstedt

*Translated by Katy Derbyshire*

The time has come at last. It's time to throw a party. It's time to celebrate. It's time to play the music. It's time to comb our hair. It's time for the guests to turn up. I declare this party open. It's high time to celebrate. We've got plenty of reasons. Bring outside clothes along. Bring swimming suits along. We'll drive you home afterwards, no need to worry. It's time to celebrate. Theme: roaring 20s. Theme: rocking 50s, theme: swinging 60s, theme: raging 80s, theme: outer space, theme: Mafia. All that counts is that you come along. Come with your most embarrassing piece of clothing, come with your first 7-inch single, come with your ex-boyfriend or -girlfriend. Come on, it's time to party. A beach party if you like, a foam party if you like, a

school's-out party, a record-release party, a pyjama party, if you like, a reclaim-the-streets party, reclaim-your-feet party, a masked ball for all I care. It's really time to party. Tonight's New Year's Eve after all, tonight's Walpurgis night, tonight's St Nick's and Halloween and carnival and everybody's birthday. Garlands everywhere and lanterns everywhere and evening dress as well. It's time to throw a party. It's a glorious gala night. It's the night of all nights, it's prom night, it's the opera ball, it's a coming-out party, it's an awards ceremony. An orchestra to play the waltz, a band to play light jazz and swing, salmon sandwiches and champagne-glass pyramids, we've got it all, well-tailored cocktail dresses, well-tailored tuxedos, that parquet floor won't

shine all night you know. We've got it all. Gala night, the night of all nights, a band to play the samba, we've got mojitos, we've got it all, we've got caipirinhas, and we've got sweat-drenched hair, sweat-drenched shoulders, we've got sweat dripping from the ceiling. It's gala night. Drum & Bass & Rhythm & Blues & French & House & Big & Beats & Break & Beats & Latindub & Datapop & Rare Grooves & Common Grooves & Charts & Hip-hop & Mega-hits from three decades, at least three decades. At the bottom are our sneakers, that's what we've got, in the middle our bare midriffs and at the top not a word to be made out. We've got it all.

It's time to party. It's time to celebrate at last. We have to party in our flat, we have to party in the park, we have to party



on the roof, on the beach, if we can, in the church hall, if we're allowed, in the summerhouse, if we want, and we certainly have to party up the hill and down the road. It's time to party in the basements, in the old officer's mess, it's time to party in the backyard, in the abandoned villa, it's high time to party in the garden, by the lake, in the empty outdoor pool, we have to party on the stage, we have to party in the stalls, in the crypt and in the forest too. It's high time now.

Bring a bottle, bring a friend, bring good vibes if you like, 'cause this is the school disco, 'cause this is the after-exam party, this is the topping-out ceremony, this is hen night and stag night and wedding night. It's bloody well time to party.

And yes, I want glossy invitations, and yes, I want precise directions, I definitely want to see the guest list, I want to order the taxis, I want to form car-sharing pools. I want to have tried on the shirts, the skirts, the dresses and the trousers, in front of the mirror, to loud music, I want my friends on my bed as judges, shaking their heads and shaking their heads and shaking their heads and covering their eyes, and then I want thumbs up, best of all both thumbs up, I want air guitars and deodorant microphones. I want gel in my hair, spray in my hair, glitter on my cheeks. I want lipstick, I want eyeliner, I want mascara. I want shaving foam.

And of course I want you all to come, I want everyone to be here already, I want to hear laughter from the stairwell, from the street, if possible, I want the hugs, I want the kisses just missing my cheek, I want to be introduced. I hardly need mention I want dancing. I hardly need mention I want singing along. With eyes closed, with eyes open, with arms akimbo. I want snogging on the sofas, in the hall, in the kitchen. I want entangled bodies. I want to hear screams from the bathroom. And I want close dancing too. I want red wine stains on the floor, I want broken glass and paper cups and paper plates and

plastic forks. I want pasta salad. I want tomato salad. I want potato salad. I want chilli con carne, chilli sin carne, I want pizza and quiche and fat sausages in a saucepan. I want beer in the bathtub, beer on the balcony. I want to see names written on CD covers in black marker pen. I want midi hifi systems, and I want a queue outside the bathroom. Stubbed-out fag-ends – I want them on half-empty plates, in beer bottles, on saucers. I want to see notes for the neighbours in the hallway. It might get a bit noisy, they'll say. Come and join us, they'll say. I want it to get noisy. I want them to really come and join us. I want everyone to come.

'Cause now it's time to party, I tell Hannes. You mustn't leave the celebrating up to the wrong people, I tell Hannes. It's high time to party, 'cause nothing else is any use, 'cause we need to draw a line, a caesura, we need to take a break, forgive and forget, see what comes next, I tell Hannes, and Hannes nods and lights up a cigarette. And now it's high time to party, I tell him, 'cause otherwise it'll all fizzle out, I tell him, 'cause otherwise it'll all stay open-ended, 'cause we'll have to look up phone numbers, 'cause we'll go for coffee, 'cause we'll arrange to meet up Tuesday week for an afternoon, for an evening, 'cause we'll meet up for breakfast, for those long, hard breakfasts, 'cause we'll give back borrowed books, 'cause we'll leave our outdoor shoes on, 'cause we'll wonder if the trains are still running. It's time to party or else everything's adjourned, or else everything's decided, or else the ground is neutral, or else we're asking questions, or else we're giving answers, or else we'll say: It's been lovely to see you; we'll say: I've got to go now; we'll say: No, I can still get home; we'll say: Say hi to Andreas from me. It's high time to party 'cause that's good enough reason, 'cause this whole lack of reason's a reason, and Hannes nods and says: Right.

It's high time to celebrate, and everyone's invited, I explain to him, everyone

we've ever met, yes, I know, we'll have to find out phone numbers, we'll need to check addresses, we'll end up asking friends of friends of friends, but they'll all be invited along too, the acquaintances, and the acquaintances of the acquaintances, and the acquaintances of the acquaintances of the acquaintances, and that's a great incentive, isn't it? And we'll invite everyone's brothers and sisters, and their parents, and their grandparents, and their grandparents' bridge partners and carers and doctors and nurses, and the boyfriends and girlfriends of the doctors and nurses can come along too if they like. And Hannes says: We should un-invite the boyfriends and girlfriends or else it'll get too crowded; and I insist on the boyfriends and girlfriends, and Hannes suggests renting a ship so no one can leave early, and we argue briefly over whether that's a deprivation of liberty but agree in the end that the ship has to dock every three hours to let people off. Hannes wants nametags; I say: Right. Hannes wants a tombola, and I say: Right. Hannes says: We can discuss the details later, let's just get started, and I say: What, right now? Hannes shrugs. He hasn't got anything else on right now; have I? And I say: No, not really.

Finding solutions isn't particularly difficult. There are plenty of solutions, perhaps there are even more solutions than problems, probably in fact. The only dumb thing is that solutions aren't much use. The dumb thing is that solutions just remind you of the problem. The dumb thing is that the real problem only starts with the solutions.

Hannes looks at me. What's the matter now, he asks. OK, I say. OK. Let's start with the invitations, let's start with the lists, let's start coming up with names. I get up to find something to write on. Have you got enough paper, asks Hannes. I think so, I say. ◇

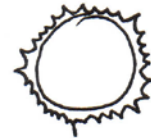
From *Erledigungen vor der Feier* (DuMont, 2003)




# The Back Section

This Particular Back Section May Include  
The Following Elements:

- I Knew Nothing
- The Serial
- The Best Bit
- Food and Drink
- On Something
- Five Minutes to Midnight



 - Mercury



the  
hip hop  
capital of  
the  
universe

# Eating's Cheating

*Paul Ewen takes his enormous appetite to the Abergavenny Food Festival*

Standing on the concourse of Paddington Station, I observe a man rubbing a woman's protruding belly in a circular motion. The woman is clearly pregnant, but still, the action makes me think of the food event I am about to attend. It's slightly inappropriate, this link, but it sums up how I feel about speaking at the Abergavenny Food Festival. I feel it too is somehow inappropriate.

My train seat is one of four, set around a table, as if for dinner. I don't know any of my fellow diners, so it's a bit like that show *Come Dine with Me*, except we're belting through the countryside, and we don't talk, and eat little. A young man opposite me is demolishing a pack of crisps like the Cookie Monster, his eyeballs spinning round, while the teenage girl beside me carefully peels a banana, as if expecting to find an explosive device inside. The young man gives his trousers a loud walloping, to rid them of the crisp crumbs, before starting on a very quiet yoghurt. The teenage girl has now spread her fingers on a tissue and is painting her nails avocado green. Dinner's over, that's it. My final meal before the Food Festival, and I didn't even eat. I'm facing backwards in the train.

The whole premise of my being invited to a food festival is really rather farcical. It's absurd. I eat little, I rarely cook, and I tend to regard food as a waste of money and eating as a waste of time. The fine dining experience is lost on me, partly because it means dressing up, and that isn't something I care for either.

My invitation was on the basis of a book I wrote about pubs. Some of the pubs in my book might have served food of some description, but if they did, it was probably cooked in microwaves or sealed in crinkly packets. I wouldn't know, because I simply wasn't interested.

The link between a revered Welsh food festival and my book gets even more tenuous, however. Because *London Pub Reviews* is a work of fiction. The pubs and the descriptions of the pubs are real, because I've actually visited them, but

after that it goes off into fairyland. One review of the book likened it to 'a cross between *Bladerunner* and *Coronation Street*'. The central character, after losing touch with reality, gets thrown out of every pub he visits, and he certainly never eats anything. Still, the organizers of the Abergavenny Food Festival are putting me up in a flash B&B tonight, and I'm also getting picked up at the station, so I'd better forget about my stupid bloody book and try to get my head around fancy food, quick smart.

I think my driver's name is Ian. His sign doesn't have my name on it, but it mentions something about a Festival Courtesy Car, and when I approach him he seems to know who I am. Ian's sign is a laminated bit of paper, and maybe when it's not being used for incoming arrivals it doubles up as a place mat, to catch all of Ian's wayward dinner.

My bag, which I put on the back seat, is full of copies of my book, which I am hoping to flog. But in all likelihood, I shall be run out of Abergavenny with my unpaid-for books striking me from behind. Ian perks up when he hears I've written a book. But he wouldn't be so keen if he knew the whole story: that it's a small-time work by a nobody, lest of all in gourmet circles. And that's why I'm sitting in the front with him, rather than lounging back there, making important calls to experts in the food trade. I might be a total fraud, but I'm not taking the piss.

My wife, I think, finds the whole premise deeply suspicious. She, more than anyone, knows my aversion to food and the fact that I don't eat dinner. She's the one who misses out on all those fancy restaurant meals and is never pleasantly surprised by something I 'just threw together'. What's more, she knows my pub book only too well and is the first to point out the discrepancies between its contents and the expectations of the Food Festival delegates. Unsurprisingly, she's less than enthusiastic about my fine food

jolly in a charming Welsh village.

It's a fair cop. But still, I present a defence for my trip. Ale is the new wine, I say. Now available in a plethora of tastes to complement your lovely meal! Pubs have changed, I cry. They have proper chefs now, some of them! Lovely pub meals, I plead. But at this point I'm talking quietly to myself because my wife has left the room.

Ian is a nice man, but he struggles to find my B&B. We're still inside his car, like that couple at the start of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, driving around lost. Ian's the man, the driver, and I suppose I'm the woman character. All the knowledgeable local drivers are no doubt busy picking up the proper food writers.

Beth is the person who runs my B&B, but she's not waiting for me, nor am I welcomed inside her home. Apparently it's all full up, so she's offloaded me on to another house, further up the road. The owners of the other house, Lynnette and Graham, are waiting outside Beth's. 'Come with us,' they say. It's all very mysterious. It's also dark because it's night-time. We walk up a path, down an alley, along a road. But they don't knife me in the guts or murder me, and instead we chat about the lovely room that awaits me, and Lynne's chest infection.

Lynne and Graham live in a modern and bright house, and Lynne leads me upstairs to my room, promising that I will be very happy here. It looks extremely comfortable, luxurious even, in a slightly New Age way.

'There's no lock for your door,' says Lynne, 'but just sing out if you need anything.' With this, she shuts the door and pads off down the stairs. It's only 9.20 p.m. Having been bumped from my original lodgings, I start to get suspicious, and this flows down, like champagne in a champagne glass pyramid at a wedding reception, to a tepid, bitter pool of paranoia. Is the Festival committee on to me? Have they exposed a grifter in their midst? Has the tablecloth been pulled from beneath my feet, leaving me standing exposed in the middle of the kitchen table? I turn on the TV in my room and I'm half watching a drama of some description, when suddenly the channel changes by itself. Gripped with feelings of madness, I grab my coat and make for

the stairs. Tapping lightly on the living-room door, I explain to Lynne that I have to find a pub or I'll go mental.

Breakfast is at 8 a.m. sharp. But it's not downstairs. It's down the road, up the alley, along the path, back at Beth's house. I'm the first seated in the dining area, and I choose a table with a window view.

Someone on the organization committee must have told Beth I was a speaker at the Festival because she quizzes me on this.

'So, Paul, are you a chef?'

'No, I'm doing a talk about pubs.'

'Really? Pub food, you mean?'

'No, just about pubs generally.'

'Oh, I see, the history and that. Oh, I'd love to read it because I have a publican background.'

'No, you don't understand [*shaking Beth*], it's a deranged, mental interpretation of pubs! It's stupid! And pointless! I shouldn't be here! This is a huge mistake!'

'Lovely, I must read it.'

In the village, I look about for an early opening pub. The Coliseum was the only pub open after 11 p.m. last night, and its doors are open and welcoming in the early morning too. I ask for a pint of standard Abbot ale, but the bartender tries to upgrade me to an Abbot Reserve, which is 6.2%.

Why not?

Because I'm a New Zealander, I am compelled to watch the televised Rugby World Cup. I don't normally follow the All Blacks, and I don't know when they're playing, or who. But I hope my team wins the tournament, because if they don't the entire New Zealand population may well walk out to the many unspoilt beaches on our beautiful coastline, and keep walking out to sea with stones in their pockets and keep walking.

Afterwards, since I'm in Wales, I look for a Prince of Wales Feathers pub. But I can't even find a normal Prince of Wales pub, without the Feathers. However, I do happen past a sportswear shop, and in the window is a mannequin with a hockey stick leaning against its crotch, like a huge penis with a bendy end. I double over with laughter. When I straighten up, I point at it, still laughing, and turn around, trying to share the gag with other passers-by. But the Festival-goers and the local

residents all give me a wide berth.

After further wandering, I find a tremendous pub called the Station Hotel a small distance from the town centre. The landlord's name is John, and he's just opening the doors to the pub as I arrive. I ask if he was peering out from behind the curtains, waiting for me to arrive, and he says no, he wasn't doing that.

John has a jazz background, both as a performer and as the former owner of a local jazz club frequented by many of the circuit's big names. The walls in a side room of the Station Hotel are covered in John's pencil portraits of jazz greats, and various related paraphernalia decorates the surrounding shelves. John has even written a book about his jazz days, and he gives me a copy, for free. Naturally, I return the favour, warning John that my hero character sometimes smashes the things in the pubs he visits, on purpose. John smiles, but it's a jittery smile.

Ensnared within the jazz room, I attempt to construct a plan for my thirty-minute stage appearance. I can't simply read from my book for thirty minutes, because I'd probably end up skewered on a slowly turning spit. So I concoct an idea that involves tomatoes, for which I will need to buy some actual tomatoes. When I eventually leave there's no time to scour the fresh delights of the market stalls, so I buy a selection of packaged supermarket tomatoes before sitting at a bus stop, transferring all the tomatoes into a large plastic bag.

I'm on a makeshift stage in a tent called, fittingly, The Dome. White plastic chairs are provided for the audience, together with plenty of room for standing. The spacious tent has been kitted out with large papier-mâché bees and other curios, which hang down from the ceiling. It's a free event, and a good third of the tent is open, so passers-by can pop in at their leisure, and also leave quickly.

The initial introduction, I think, goes well. For an ice-breaker, I carry my bag of twenty tomatoes on stage. Explaining that my book is not food-related, I add, 'But I've brought these tomatoes along, lovely tomatoes. I'm going to put them down on the edge of the stage there, and if you don't think my talk is foody enough, or you just think it's boring or a bit shite, I want you to come up here,

grab a tomato and throw it at me.'

There is some laughter, appreciative glances and a few nods. It's all boding well for a great half-hour to come. They'll be eating out of my hand, this Food Festival crowd. But then an elderly woman (who may have been a bit pissed) comes up to the stage and takes the entire bag of tomatoes away. Shocked and confused, I half shout after her, 'Um, excuse me? Where do you think you're going? With all my tomatoes?'

There is an awkward silence around the tent as she disappears to a seat at the back. I'm not quite sure how to respond further, so I start flipping through the pages of my book. Once I start reading, the audience turns to stone. Actually, not quite stone, because many of them begin talking or looking around at other, more interesting things. Some leave entirely. It's all a bit distracting. For me, I mean. My book is supposed to be funny, but no one's laughing. A young guy near the front seems to be smiling, so he becomes my best friend in the world. You'll help me get through this, you one appreciative soul. But the next time I pick him out, he isn't smiling at all. In fact, he actually looks quite angry. I begin to feel like something you grill for thirty minutes, like sausages, but I've only just been put in the oven. Time passes incredibly slowly and I can feel my skin shrivelling, my innards boiling and popping. I'm reminded of some lyrics from a Lou Reed song, something about sticking a fork in their ass and turning them over because they're done.

After my gig, I'm busy putting my book away in my bag when the tomatoes are mysteriously returned to the stage. Some hungry student types quickly pounce on them before disappearing with the lot. The sound engineer comes over to readjust the microphone, and as I put my jumper on, he says, 'That seemed like a lot of hard work. Hey, why are you so red?'

I miss breakfast the next day, finally getting downstairs around mid-morning. Lynne plonks me in front of the TV with a coffee. I mention how the TV in my room was changing channels by itself. Lynne laughs.

'It's hooked up to this one, you see. Whatever we watch, you watch.'

'Um, why ...'



'No wonder you were going all loopy up there!'

After I've said my goodbyes, Graham drops me into town, next to the Angel Hotel, in his sporty Volvo.

I buy some chewing gum, which is kind of food, like food of the future. But it's a poor breakfast, even by my standards, so I wander around the food stalls in the marketplace, the heartland of the Festival. One stand promises duck burgers with honey and rosemary, chicken hotdogs with leek and chilli, and duck hotdogs seasoned with cranberry and orange. It all smells very nice, and the dishes sound like they've been created by Dr Seuss. Perhaps that's what these foody types are seeking: a break from the norm, a taste for something different. I've always thought of food as a means to an end, something a bit plodding, but the dishes and combinations in Abergavenny are nothing short of bonkers. It makes me wonder if it's actually *me* that's very boring. I splash out on one of those chicken hotdogs. It tastes like chicken.

With time to kill before my event, I sniff about town like a stray dog, half expecting to be shooed away with a firm clap. My ARTIST wristband should bear testament to my authentic credentials, but I don't think anyone's buying it, least of all me. My fraudulence is only exacerbated by the 'realness' of the Festival. Everything is hopelessly real. There's a REAL LEMONADE stall, a REAL BREAD CAMPAIGN, a REAL ALE AND CIDER FESTIVAL and two stands selling REAL COFFEE. I put my sunglasses on, hoping to avoid being recognized by anyone at yesterday's tomato debacle. I'm not real at all. I'm a bowl of wax fruit.

It starts raining, so I find shelter in the Patchwork & Quilting Exhibition at the United Reformed Church. It's not food-related, and I can hide there. When the rain eases, I head back to the Station Hotel. Opposite it, someone has spray-painted on a wall, '[Man's name] IS A PEDO'.

John tells me he had a good night last night, and that a few people said they'd heard me at my gig, plugging his pub, which I did. But wait a minute. No one was actually listening to me. They were all talking or looking away, or scowling. I don't accuse John of lying, but I think he is.

I don't have anything to prepare for my second event, apart from my own courage. I do this quietly in the jazz room. Eventually, cutting it fine yet again, I say my farewells to John and rush back to town. As I run, I see a mobility scooter that is encased within a large weather-proof plastic covering, sealing off the male occupant inside, as if he were an extraterrestrial undergoing fumigation. For the second time of the weekend I find myself howling with laughter.

I'd had a good feeling prior to my first stage appearance. In fact, I had pictured the large crowd afterwards, once the applause had settled, and they were throwing me up in the air on a billowing tablecloth, cheering, 'HIP HIP HOORAY!' Of course, it didn't pan out like that. Despite my optimism and careful planning, my inaugural food festival event went down like a shit sandwich.

My second and final appearance was at the Angel Hotel, in the refurbished, ultra-modern Wedgewood Room. There would be no tomato-throwing here. I was to share the limelight with fellow writers Pete Brown and Ian Marchant, and the plan was for the three of us, and the audience, to have an informal chat. How difficult could that be? This time the audience had bought tickets. They actually wanted to be there! We were sat behind a table at the front of the room, and in front of me was a single beer. I spent the next sixty minutes anxiously watching this disappear.

It wasn't long before the conversation was directed towards me and I was expected to be forthcoming with a viewpoint on the gastro-ization of lovely traditional pubs. This was a subject close to my heart, and I began strongly, outlining my disapproval and providing an example of a pub-conversion atrocity. But then I became vaguely aware that I was talking about something not even remotely connected or relevant to the flow of discussion. The more I tried to talk, to explain my point, the further I drifted off topic, as if I was actually driving away from the Wedgewood Room in a car, waving and tooting. I looked in desperation towards my glass, perhaps hoping to drown myself, but there were insufficient beer reserves to cover all my breathing holes. My ramble eventually tapered off

into awkward silence, and I sat back in my chair. I put my vegetative state down to tiredness and low energy levels, caused for the most part by a lack of food. At a food festival?

I make my escape. There are no taxis about, so, encouraged by locals, I decide to walk to the train station. It isn't *that* far, I suppose, about half an hour's clip, but there's a hill involved, and I still have most of my books.

My connecting train from Newport is cancelled, so I lose my reserved seat. When the next train comes, to save bother, I stand in the bendy bit, between two first-class carriages. As we're shooting through the countryside, a first-class passenger, a stern man without manners, comes striding into my liminal zone. He has a protruding belly, which begs to be rubbed in a circular motion.

'Where are the toilets?' he barks.

I direct him to a side door, saying, 'Just here, my lord ...'

He goes to open the door and step through. But I stop him and say, 'No, no, I'm joking. Don't step out there. You'll kill yourself!'

I get a bit drunk on buffet carriage drinks. I should have eaten more at the marketplace, but instead I spent much of the day trying to calm my nerves with booze. In fairness, I did buy some fancy olives for my wife, and some handmade chocolates, and a salami in a presentation box. I had them all packaged up in a special bag, along with a bottle of fine wine, compliments of the Festival's organization committee. But back in London, I fall asleep on the bus, and when I'm awoken at the end of the line, the special bag of treats is nowhere to be seen.

The next morning, my wife is pragmatic.

'At least they didn't steal all those unsold copies of your book.' ◇

# Five Minutes to Midnight

*A series on the ends of days. By Laurence Howarth*

23.55

It's later than she thinks. So when she catches sight of the time on her DVD player, she immediately looks at her watch. Not because she suspects the display is wrong but because she's annoyed with her wrist for failing to disport itself in front of her eyes half an hour earlier. She should be in bed by now. Light from the street lamp steals in through the blinds, while an ungainly silence lumbers into the room and plonks itself next to her on the sofa.

Her laptop catches her eye. It squats on the kitchen table, open but not switched on; an absurdly self-important posture. It strains towards her but, despite feeling a familiar twinge of duty, she refuses to drop any worms into its pleading mandibles and turns away.

Suddenly, a floorboard directly over her head doesn't creak. Then a couple more above the kitchen down tools and join in. Soon, the entire storey is conspiring in a pointed stillness: the people upstairs are giving the impression of being not merely asleep but also dead.

The low noise of the television starts to reassert itself and her attention drifts back to this film she doesn't want to watch and is watching. She's instantly soothed by the colours and clothes. Then a dreadful truth presents itself: she's too far in now just to switch it off and yet it doesn't finish till half past one, an unthinkable hour. The impossibility of her position is almost thrilling.

23.56

If she does go to bed this minute, which she may well do and won't, is that going to disturb them more or less than if she were to wait a while? The cushion considers her question carefully. Because for all it knows, they are right now falling into a blissful but still brittle sleep. Any interruption could be catastrophic! Kinder then to allow oblivion to take hold before passing through, unheard and unseen, like a considerate binman.

She notices herself eating a biscuit.

And what's wrong with this anyway? Why should it be strange for her to be sit-

ting quietly, in her own house, on her own? It is strange but why? The room comes to resemble an historical reconstruction of itself, faithful to the last detail. How on earth did they find exactly the right lamp?

Besides, she needs more time alone, if only to stop it scaring her when she gets it. She needs to relax, to reflect and to work. The realization that this is the perfect opportunity to get her work done thwacks her across the chops. She sinks down into the sofa, impressing herself on the foam.

If she wakes him now, it'll be irritating but unremarkable. Whereas if she wakes him in an hour, there will be a conversation. And a conversation will lead to the conversation. Better then to get up early tomorrow and tackle it with a fresh head. She stares at the television and fantasizes about acquiring one of those.

Liam Neeson doesn't have to write presentations in his own time. So why should she? A woodlouse careers into the skirting board next to the fireplace, rolls itself into a ball and vows to survive at all costs. She scratches her neck and wonders how many of her problems would be solved by being Liam Neeson. A faint smell of ...

23.57

Good God, this is it. This is her opportunity, the moment when it all has to happen. It's now or never. There's an advert break.

She prepares to stand up. The muscles in her legs and back begin to stiffen and there is a suggestion of tilt in the pelvic area. She sends signals to every outpost of her being, ordering them into action, or rather she thinks about sending signals but since the only way to send such signals is to think them – movement is thought – this ought to amount to the same thing.

She examines her stock-still frame, mentally frisking herself for synaptic ignition. The operation of her own body suddenly strikes her as an absolute mystery and, having had this epiphany, she briefly wonders if she will ever be able to resume her blithe command of her extremities.

Why is she still here? While the film was on, there was at least the appearance of a

reason, but now her way up off the sofa is totally clear. So what's stopping her?

The temperature in the room drops by a degree or two.

The lid of her laptop thuds shut, then slowly raises itself to its full height, then thuds shut again, raises itself again, thuds shut again. From above, a foot joins in, silently stamping out the same jeering, funereal rhythm. The cheese plant bellows at her to get a bloody move on, while the dragon tree just shakes its head. Her mother's sherry glasses rattle in the drinks cabinet. The halogen bulbs in the ceiling pulse and shudder. The beanbag threatens to capsize itself. She has got to get up right now.

Here we go. Now. Go, go, go! Now!

23.58

She watches an advert for car insurance and then another advert for a different provider of car insurance.

23.59

Judith Mitchell, forty-three years old, wife, mother of two, marketing director, sitting on the sofa in the living room of her new-build maisonette near Leicester, closes her eyes and starts to fall asleep. Nobody, not even Judith, is aware of this. The subtle changes in the pattern of her breathing are inaudible to the entire human population of the globe and she cannot be seen from space.

Her grip on the TV remote control, already loose, slackens further and the device slides nimbly out of her hand, rolls over and assumes the crash position. Her head teeters then collapses back into the cushion behind her. Her eyes roll and her jaw drops. Only her glasses remain alert.

The film returns to the TV screen and carries on as if nothing has changed. If anything, it seems happier to be going about its business unobserved. This is understandable: the graveyard slot is a place for privacy and introspection, where even films which once craved the attention of millions now just want to be left alone.

Her body sets about its nightly chores: repairing damaged muscular tissue, producing new skin cells, emptying the brain of blood and adrenalin to consolidate unconsciousness and prepare her to dream. Everywhere, something is happening. She is becoming, by increments, a different person. If only she'd—

SHOW YOUR WORK

# November, 2012

*The making of the issue*

*Photos by Emma Capps*



Charing Cross Road, London



Kentish Town, London



# The Ferris Wheel

By Clemens J. Setz, translated by Ross Benjamin

Monika had moved into the Ferris wheel in the summer of 2003, after she had dropped out of law school for good. Her parents, wealthy entrepreneurs, had declared themselves willing to keep helping her out financially, and had not even been surprised by the extraordinarily high rent for the apartment in car no. 21 of the gigantic steel construction on the outskirts of the city.

Built in the late nineties by Austrian star architect Albert Zmal and accompanied by some media hype, the blue wheel, with its cross braces and bicycle-like spokes shimmering through the fog on this September morning, had gradually become the new emblem of the city. At the same time, however, the demand for the apartments had declined steeply. That most likely had to do with the way you left your dwelling, which took some getting used to. Either you had to wait up to forty minutes until the car reached the ground, or you pressed the stop button and took one of the express elevators within the spokes to the central main tower, from which you could get outside by way of the stairs.

At the moment, Monika's apartment was at the top, the highest point of the wheel, several hundred yards above the ground. Monika was sitting at the kitchen table and warming her hand, which suffered from chronically bad circulation, on a steaming cup of tea. Darjeeling. She read the label on the little teabag for the third time. A friendly, almost tender word, like 'darling', only stretched apart in the middle by a foreign syllable.

Her day had begun dismally. First she had tried to air her rooms, but realized that someone had once again pressed the stop button, probably was even *holding it down*, which always happened when someone was moving, and that she was still hovering much too close to the noise and grime of the main street. So she had taken a bath and then painted her toenails, but that had not improved her mood.

She looked out the window. The grey exoskeleton of a vacant factory building

on the other end of the city park could be seen clearly. Next to it an ugly white church steeple. Everything else was more or less hidden in the fog.

The highlight of the day lying ahead of her was the visit from a technician. Monika was expecting him to arrive at ten o'clock. Yesterday, when she had pressed the button, the wheel had stopped for only five minutes and had then automatically started moving again, and she had fallen down in the slowly tilting elevator. That was dangerous, that sort of thing shouldn't happen. She had immediately called the doorman in the main tower and explained everything to him. He had apologized repeatedly for this error in the controls and promised to send someone to her apartment the next day.

Monika looked at her watch. It was only seven. My God, she thought, what am I going to do for three hours? A walk was out of the question, because she didn't know how much time she would idle away. Of course, there was the cafeteria in the main tower, but there she would probably run into old Frau Schuster from car 7. She often sat there early in the morning, and Monika was in no mood for a conversation about house plants, cake recipes and the literary success of the woman's grandchildren. No, she would simply stay here in her apartment and try to kill time. She took another sip of tea. Still burning hot. Morosely, she went to the sink and added a dash of ice-cold tap water to the cup, stirred it with the little silver spoon and took a sip. No difference. She put the cup back on the table and went out on to the balcony. Fresh air greeted her, foggy, oxygen-deficient city air. She folded her arms over her head and tried to take a deep breath, but then this gesture struck her as much too silly and she went back into her apartment. She sat down on the small, velvet-red yoga cushion next to the heater and turned on the television. Scrolling through the digital guide with the remote control, she found a self-massage class. It began in seven minutes. Just

the thing, thought Monika. She changed the channel to a hectic cooking show, then to m t v. A boy band was jumping around the stage. One of the young singers tore his shirt off his muscular upper body, and Monika shook her head. Then she switched back to the channel with the self-massage class and waited. Three minutes to go before the beginning of the show. She watched the end of a documentary on the life of insects. There was a shot of the multifaceted eye of a fruit fly, in which the planet earth was reflected hundreds of times.

The self-massage show was hosted by a woman. She was at most twenty years old and was wearing a skintight leotard. Huge tits, Monika noticed, giggling and holding her hand in front of her mouth. The first exercise consisted of a gentle massage of the neck muscles with the balls of the thumbs.

– This exercise is ideal if you work sitting down for a long time, straining your neck in the process, said the girl on the screen.

Monika tried to do the exercise exactly as it was demonstrated to her. The result was a slight dizziness.

– Make sure you don't press too hard, said the masseuse, as if she had guessed Monika's problem.

Monika reduced the pressure of her palms, but that didn't make it any better. The exercise seemed only to exacerbate her tension. She stopped and waited until the next exercise began. Soon she lost patience and switched back to the music channel. An interview was being conducted. Two smiling men on a black couch, holding their microphones as casually as if they were beer cans they wanted to pour over themselves. At first she couldn't tell who was the star and who the host, then she listened for a while and figured it out. Bored, she switched back to the self-massage.

When the show was over, she turned off the television and went to her CD rack. For a long time she let her forefinger wander over the band names, then she chose a CD she had had in mind anyhow. Suzanne Vega, Monika's absolute favourite singer. Many years ago she had seen her live and remembered to this day what she had been wearing on that wonderful occasion. She especially liked the a cappella version of 'Tom's Diner'. That song

could brighten any morning, however gloomy, in Monika's view. Besides, it couldn't hurt to store up a catchy tune; you never knew what silly and tormenting songs would get stuck in your head in the course of an entire day.

The simple little melody was so elegant and graceful, it almost enticed you to write your own verses, yes, she always felt like singing, or at least thinking, all linguistic expressions of the day in that melody. And the lyrics were definitely the most beautiful poem about life in a city that Monika knew. That first line about sitting in the morning at the diner on the corner. A triple specification, temporal and spatial: in, at, on. It was a completely simple image, a zoom-in from above on a solitary person sitting in a café. That was true poetry, not the difficult cryptic nonsense that was constantly presented to you everywhere. She sang along softly until the end of the song.

Monika played the song five times in a row, but stopped singing along (because the sound of her own voice always gave her a feeling of abandonment); instead, she merely moved her lips silently with the words. Then she listened to the whole album. Meanwhile she looked out the window. She thought about how great it would be if the window could be controlled by remote too, just like the stereo system or the television. Then, at especially wonderful moments, you could simply press pause, or speed up or slow down the course of the day, as needed. Fast-forward. How light-footed and uncomplicated a city always looked in time lapse: the headlights of the cars fuse into multicoloured May ribbons, which run seamlessly through the streets, the sun is a coin tossed from east to west, construction cranes do gymnastics over emerging buildings, clouds race across the sky like flocks of sheep fleeing a shepherd dog. Everything is fluid, everything merges. People can be seen for a hundredth of a second at most, flashing through the picture like impurities on old film stock.

Monika was sitting there with her eyes closed when the doorbell rang. The sound ruptured her daydream and the urban poetry of Suzanne Vega's songs. She pressed stop on the remote control, stood up and went to the intercom. On the small screen she saw a man in overalls. That had to be the technician. He was

much too early: it was just ten after nine. For a moment she hesitated, then she pushed on the stylized blue thumb under the screen, and the door opened.

– Good morning, said the technician. From the Treadmill Company, I'm here because of the control box ...?

– Yes, please, said Monika, stepping aside.

She was about to show the technician the way, but he found it on his own. All the apartments in the Ferris wheel had the same floor plan, only some were the mirror image of hers. The man had already been in many apartments and knew immediately where to go. Monika followed him silently. As she passed a mirror, she briefly checked whether she had messed up her hair during the self-massage. No, everything was fine. She looked the same as always.

The technician had found the control box and began his inspection without a word.

– Yeah, said Monika. Maybe some error in the time controls ...

– Mhm.

He removed the top cover. When that was done, he looked around with lightning speed, smiled mechanically and said:

– You have a nice apartment here.

– Thank you, Monika said with a shrug.

The technician nodded emphatically, as if she had contradicted him. Then he turned back to the control box and murmured:

– Stupid, the thing with the stop button. Poorly programmed, if you ask me. But still. You're pretty lucky.

What exactly he meant by that was unclear to Monika. She didn't ask either. Instead, she said:

– I don't even want to think about what would have happened if I'd had to get out of my apartment really fast. I mean, *really* fast.

The technician had now removed the last screw and lifted the gossamer-thin, flesh-coloured metal cover from the control module.

– Did you try pressing it again?

– What, the button?

– Yes.

– But that would have been pointless. It's not even possible. I mean, if the wheel suddenly starts turning again while I'm in the elevator, I fall down, no matter what I do, right? Besides, there's no button in

the elevator, so what's with that question, did I press it again?

– Okay, okay, said the technician. I only wanted to make sure.

He wiped his face with his hand, then felt for a particular tool on his belt. Having failed to find it, he bent over and looked in his leather bag. He rummaged and rummaged, and finally he found it: a long silver thing, which Monika could not identify to save her life. A thing like that might be used in operating rooms or torture chambers, but here—

She cleared her throat and looked elsewhere. It was so burdensome to have strangers in your apartment.

It had taken the technician over an hour to repair the malfunctioning in the time controls of the module. And yet he could not guarantee that the problem wouldn't recur at some point.

– Okay, said Monika.

– I cannot guarantee that the problem won't recur at some point, repeated the technician.

His facial expression was grim. He seemed to be angry with himself. Probably it didn't happen often that he could only half-complete a job. Monika no longer wanted him to leave. She accompanied him to the apartment door and let him out.

She looked at her watch and decided that it was not too early for a proper lunch. From one of her four shelves devoted solely to the subject of food she took a cookbook specializing in Asian dishes. She found something that looked pretty good and began to read through the recipe. Half of the ingredients listed meant nothing to her or she didn't have them at home. Disappointed, she shut the book and put it back on the shelf.

In the kitchen it was completely silent.

Monika clapped her hands a few times. Since that didn't make any change worth mentioning, she began to sing. Her voice was definitely similar to that of Suzanne Vega, not very, but a little bit. Softly singing, she got dressed, chose the lightest of her three autumn coats, put on her favourite scarf and pressed the stop button. On cue, an extremely gentle jolt passed through the apartment. If you didn't know, you could easily think it was only in your head.

She left her apartment and took the

elevator to the main tower. The café with the unimaginative name Wheel Bar was empty, despite the fact that it was lunchtime. No trace of Frau Schuster, thank God. Monika sat down at a table near the door to the kitchen. That way it wouldn't take the waitress long to bring her the order.

– Hello, Frau Stilling, said the waitress. It's nice to see you here so often.

Monika suddenly felt hot. She had forgotten to take off the scarf.

– Oh, yeah, she said, red-faced. The coffee here is really good.

– May I bring you one?

– No, I'd like to eat something. So just a small beer and ...

Though she had long known the menu by heart, she opened it and studied the selection of snacks. *For a quick bite*, was written there.

– A grilled cheese, she decided. With ketchup.

– Sure, the waitress said with a beautiful smile.

Monika watched her as she walked away. The outfit she had to wear at work was somewhat reminiscent of a tennis uniform. Over the young woman's small, compact behind the material stretched and produced a single crease. Monika closed her eyes for a moment and thought. Then she shook her head and opened them again. She touched the cool surface of the table, felt crumbs and greasy spots, which came from previous customers. Perhaps even from herself. When she ate lunch in the Wheel Bar, she almost always sat here. It was her regular table. My regular table, thought Monika, repeating it a few times until the words began to take on a strangely bleak meaning. After five minutes, the waitress brought her order. Monika avoided direct eye contact, but watched her walk away again. The crease was still there and winked with each step.

She ate slowly and deliberately. Sometimes she found herself gobbling down her food much too fast, and then she felt sick. The grilled cheese was perfect. At once crisp and juicy. The cheese was only just beginning to melt.

After she was done eating, she remained seated for another hour and looked out the window. From here the fog looked less dense. Perhaps that was because she had not washed the windows in her apartment for a long time. Or the

weather had simply changed. One or the other. The young waitress came repeatedly and asked whether she could bring anything else, and each time Monika thought about it and flipped dutifully through the menu, only to shake her head and murmur:

– Thanks.

The waitress never shed her friendly smile. Monika sat there and watched her. The afternoon began. Eventually she decided that she had been sitting here long enough, and paid. She did not forget to give the waitress a proper tip. Then she returned to her apartment. When she took off the scarf – why had she put on a scarf in the first place, when she had not gone outside at all? – tears suddenly came to her eyes. She could not help thinking about the young waitress. How old could she be? Sixteen, seventeen?

She felt like taking a bath, for the second time that day, but this time she did not fill up the tub all the way. From her dresser she took her ... but the name of this device sounded so silly, like a hero in a stupid comic for children. She felt embarrassed every time she read or heard it. But it was necessary. Or else she would burst. With desire, with ... Just a short session in the bathtub, she told herself, then she would feel better. She still needed lubricant to insert the black thing into herself. Like a teenager, she thought. In general it was very hard for her to have an orgasm when something was inside of her. From outside it was easier and faster, but the result was never as intense. She sat in the warm water, which was only up to her bellybutton, and pushed a rolled-up towel under her neck. Since the water could not reach part of the tub, she flinched from the cold surface as she leaned back, but after a few minutes she got used to it, and everything went quite easily. She thought about the young waitress. She imagined her wet, as if she had walked through the rain. The uniform, as if of its own accord, peeled off her small, supple, spirited body. My God, all the things you could do with a body like that.

The first orgasm announced itself very quickly. Before it was there, she had decided to satisfy herself three times, but then she came so intensely that she began to cry again, and she could forget about the other two times. She howled like a small child and slapped the bathwater

with the flat of her hand, spraying it everywhere. She would have liked nothing better than to get up and go down naked and wet to the Wheel Bar, to kneel down there in front of the girl and ask for her hand.

Gradually she calmed down.

With slightly trembling legs she climbed out of the tub, bent down (so that a pleasant aftershock passed through her lower body) and drained the water. With a soft towel she dried herself off, especially carefully between the legs. She was very sensitive. Easily hurt. A breath of wind could kill her.

The massage device she put back in the dresser, placing three layers of colourful underwear over it. Then she sat down in front of the television and changed the channels indiscriminately. In a sitcom, laughing people sat in a coffee shop and were served by a very old, ugly waitress. Monika had to smile, and contentedly wrapped her arms around herself.

Just as she was starting to follow the plot of the sitcom, the telephone rang.

– Hello?

– Hello, Moni. It's Elke. I just wanted to ask whether it's all right if I drop by tomorrow with the boys. You remember, we spoke about it a few weeks ago.

Elke was her sister. She was a single mother of two sons. Monika recalled Elke mentioning once on the telephone that her two boys would like to see the Ferris wheel from inside. Monika hadn't had time just then, and Elke had called at most three or four times since. They hadn't seen each other for a long time.

– Okay, said Monika, amazed at how easy it was to say that. What time tomorrow?

– Oh, I thought in the afternoon. Around three?

– Great. So how are you doing?

– Actually the same as always. It's never quiet for a second here, my two little performance artists make sure of that.

The two sisters exchanged a few more words and said goodbye. The conversation had not been especially profound, but that was quite all right in Monika's view. She returned to the sitcom, but the commercials had begun, so she changed the channel.

She watched television until evening. At one point, she warmed up a frozen pizza for herself. It tasted disgusting, far



too many mushrooms. She threw half of it away.

The bitter mushroom taste brought back her bleak thoughts, and she searched for a channel on which people were talking. She needed voices that always sounded the same, or else . . .

She searched and searched and finally found a panel discussion on modern music. She listened and concentrated, trying to understand something of what they were talking about.

– The problem of the series in itself is far from obsolete, let alone solved, said one of the men.

Monika didn't understand a thing. Nonetheless, she listened until the end of the discussion, then went to bed. It was already quite late; she hadn't noticed the time. That happened often when she sat in front of the television. The hours passed as if they were being dissolved in hot water. While brushing her teeth Monika briefly thought again about the girl in the café, and the movements of her toothbrush slowed down slightly. She gargled, spat the foamy water into the sink and watched it disappear down the drain.

The bed was cold, the pillow uncomfortable and misshapen. As if she were lying on a fully inflated balloon. Her chin was pressed against her chest, and despite the fact that she was lying down she felt like she was hanging her head. So she had to sit back up and shake the pillow and even beat it a little until it was soft enough. Then she lay still for a long time on her side and listened to herself breathe. Her left nostril was slightly louder than the right.

They're only coming over, she thought, because I live here. They don't want to visit me at all. For them I'm only a means to an end. They want to see the Ferris wheel, ride the express elevator, wander on the stairs in the main tower, have something to eat in the café. Order something from the waitress. Behave like young monkeys, soil everything and scatter food on the floor. And I, I have to play the friendly aunt the whole time, have to show them my apartment, go out on to the balcony with them and explain to them how often I sit downstairs in the café and that it is one of the few constants in my life.

And then she suddenly saw the whole

thing clearly: the visit from her younger sister and her children would be the highlight of the day tomorrow. Just as the visit from the technician had been the highlight of the day today. Highlight, the word expanded, became sticky and choked off her air. Monika felt afraid. She switched on the floor lamp next to her bed and looked at the clock. One-thirty. It was actually already too late, but she had to try anyway: with ice-cold fingers she dialled her sister's number, let it ring once and then hung up with pounding heart. Like a little kid, she chided herself. Of course, the telephone rang shortly thereafter. She picked up.

– I misdialled, Elke. Sorry.

– It's okay, said the drowsy voice of her sister.

– Did I wake you?

– What?

– Did I wake you up?

– Yes. I think so. You woke me up.

– I'm sorry.

– You woke me up. I was just dreaming . . .

The voice broke off. Something rustled. Perhaps Elke had sat up in bed. What might her bedroom look like? Monika had never been there.

– Sorry, she said, that was really stupid of me.

– I was . . . ah, wait a second . . . Okay, that's better. I was dreaming; you know what I was dreaming? Something really funny. I dreamt that it was raining fans. Rotor blades and such. Little saw blades . . .

– I'm such an idiot, said Monika, I shouldn't have woken you up. But you know, now that you're already awake, can I . . . could you maybe . . . possibly do me two favours?

– Hm?

The muffled rustling of sheets. Slow breathing, much too close to the receiver.

– First of all: could you maybe come over with the children some other time?

Silence. The breathing became somewhat softer.

– You didn't misdial at all, Moni, her sister stated quite matter-of-factly. Go ahead and say it. I know you, after all.

Monika bit her lip and thought: I'm biting my lip. The gesture was stupid and unoriginal. I definitely watch too much television.

– And second, she went on hesitantly, please don't be mad because of . . . you

know.

– Why didn't you say that before? What's different now at . . . my God, one-thirty?

Now it's night-time, came to Monika's mind. Aside from that there was actually no difference. She had thought about it a little, that was all. She preferred to be alone. At least tomorrow. At least for the next few days or weeks.

– Moni, what's going on? Elke asked after a while. Talk to me. You woke me up, so talk to me.

– I don't know what to say, Monika confessed. All I can say is that I'm sorry. It's only because of . . . Today a technician was here in my apartment.

– There in the Ferris wheel, Elke said in a somewhat sleepy voice.

– Yes, and he . . . he had to come, you know, because there was a problem with the control mechanics or something. It was pretty dangerous. What would have happened if I'd had to escape from the apartment really fast? Do you understand?

– No, I have no idea what you're talking about, Moni. But if it helps you: yes, I understand.

– Thanks.

– No problem. But I'm really tired, maybe tomorrow we can . . .?

– I didn't want to wake you up. It's just . . . maybe another time. Please.

– You really mean it, don't you? said Elke. You don't want me to come over with the boys.

– No, it's not that. It's about tomorrow. And the next few days. I'd prefer to be alone.

– But why? You're always alone anyway.

– No, I'm not.

– Yeah, I know, the technician who was there today.

– That's not what I mean.

– Did you make him up?

– No. Something really was broken.

– The control mechanics, yeah, you mentioned that.

Silence. The two sisters breathed into the receivers.

– Don't be mad at me, OK? Monika said finally. Remember favour number two.

– What?

– Favour number two, which I asked you to . . . oh, forget it.

– I'm not mad at you, I just don't

understand you. The boys have been talking about nothing else for two weeks. They want to ride around once in a complete circle. And they want to see how it is on the balcony, whether you can feel the wind from the motion and such.

– No, Monika said softly and earnestly.

– No what?

– No, you don't feel it. The wheel moves much too slowly for that.

– Moni, what's actually going on with you? Why are you calling me so late and telling me not to visit? Is something wrong, do you need help?

Monika thought about it.

– If I needed help, I'd probably let you come, wouldn't I?

– I actually doubt that. There's something you're not telling me. Have you . . . have you moved?

Monika had to laugh. She had not expected that. But it was such an elegant, crystal-clear solution to the problem – at least from her sister's point of view – that it almost cheered her up.

– No, she said with a laugh, no, I haven't moved. I'm still up here, that is, at the moment, I think, I'm pretty far down. But then it goes back up again, all day, all night. Up and down.

– Up and down, repeated her sister. Still, there's something you're not telling me.

– No, there's not. I was just lying awake for a long time and thinking. That's all.

– Hm. The boys will definitely be disappointed. It's quite possible that they won't want to visit you at all any more. Because they're insulted. You know how children can be.

Monika felt tears gathering in her eyes.

– Please, Elke, don't do that.

– What?

– The guilt trip. I've just been going through withdrawal from guilt. I quit cold turkey, so to speak.

She couldn't help thinking of a plucked turkey lying on a silver platter with its fat thighs pointing upwards. Elke yawned close to the receiver, then she said:

– But it would be a lie if I told you that

the two of them wouldn't be disappointed. They were so looking forward to it. And to be honest, so was I. How long has it been since we last saw each other?

Monika had to think about it.

– You see? said Elke. You have to think about it. Three. It's been three years. Last week at some point it was, to the day, exactly . . .

– Three years, Monika completed the sentence.

– So? What's the problem? Three years, that's a long time. And tomorrow those three years could be over.

Monika bit her lip again. This time she didn't notice it.

– But it's not about that at all. It's not that I wouldn't like to see you. You don't have to calculate for me how long we haven't seen each other.

– Yes, I do, because you don't even know any more.

– My memory was never . . ., Monika began.

But then she didn't go on. A very, very gentle jolt passed through her apartment. Someone had pressed the stop button, and in the middle of the night.

– I think I'm going to lie back down, she said. Sorry again that I woke you. I somehow have no sense of time.

– Wait, said Elke. Do you really not want us to come tomorrow? I mean, are you sure?

Monika thought about what else she could say. It seemed as if she had tried out all available sentences. There was none left that would have been appropriate.

– Don't be mad, she said finally.

Elke didn't reply. Then she cleared her throat and said:

– All right. If that's what you want. Then I'll pass that on. To the boys.

– OK.

– OK.

– Good night, Elke. I hope you can fall asleep again, after I—

– Don't worry about me, Elke said, and hung up.

Now Monika was alone again. She stretched out in bed and listened to the

wind blowing through the night outside. Like a drunk man on the run. No, that wasn't right. Basically, the wind could not be compared to anything. Especially not when you were at its mercy, somewhere between heaven and earth in a slightly rocking car containing four overpriced apartments. And one of these apartments contained her, Monika. She lay in bed, in a pitch-dark room.

Down in the Wheel Bar the lights had definitely gone out a long time ago. She imagined what it would be like to break in there at this hour. What would she find? An abandoned restaurant with tables, on which the chairs practised headstands. And in a closet the lifeless uniforms of the waitresses. The little name-tags. *Tina*.

Monika forcibly dragged her thoughts away from the name; it was difficult, like a pack of dogs attached to a single leash. But she managed it. She strapped a rocket to her back and flew over the city. The black night sky made her invisible. Down below passed the many thousand buildings that made up the city. And all of them were filled to bursting with people. No space was wasted.

The wheel continued to stand still, and Monika wrapped herself tighter in her blanket. At that moment, strangers were riding the express elevators to their apartments.

Monika rolled on to her side and stared into the darkness. I won't close my eyes, she thought, until we start turning again. But she knew that the gears of the Ferris wheel always got going again with extreme restraint and gentleness, so that you scarcely noticed it. There was nothing wrong with that in itself. The only problem was that no one deserved to be treated so tenderly. No one. At least not tonight, thought Monika. At least not by a gigantic inanimate metal structure on the outskirts of a medium-sized industrial city. ◇

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