

The rupture is the bonding

Essay for *Schlosspost* by Luke Wilkins

Recently I was sitting on a bench in a little park in Stuttgart. Not far from the bus stop on Kleiststrasse. I was just hanging around and I noticed that autumn had arrived, yellow leaves were falling from the trees. A major traffic artery roared behind me, crossed too by the no. 92 bus that I would later be catching home to my new residency in Schloss Solitude. 50 metres ahead of me hung a historical plaque where I could make out the words *displaced persons* and a girl was walking down the pavement with a black, plastic guitar case. In a car park to my right stood a dark blue Volvo V70, its rear window sporting a sticker advertising the Tarantino action thriller *DEATH PROOF*. In a few days I would receive the proofs for my first novel, and as the perception gradually rippled through my veins I became aware that these proofs were autumn leaves and were falling from me. I began to be aware that a part of me was dying and had died with these proofs. I don't know how well this novel has turned out, but in it I found a way of writing that transforms me into a tree, and when the time comes I put out green shoots that grow and photosynthesise until they turn colour and float down, fall away. A tree, a dream tree in the landscape of a lost language, growing out of the water in which I sleep. Whenever I am conscious that I have found this way of writing, I am also conscious that I am no longer scared. Not feeling scared for a moment releases the catch, lets me be aware that I am here, that I can watch from this park bench as acts unfold around me. This unfolding is driven. There is a drive that compels me to sit in a park and take note that autumn has arrived, just as there is a drive that compels me to write a sentence. For a long time I thought that drive was something primarily sexual, but since I found a way of writing I know that drive is an expression of being alive. It is not easy to feel one's own tender touch and when it happens the moment is often an act of celebration, a solemn advent of autumn. I sat there in the park as if in a transition zone: ejected from the clench of a novel-writing process that had lasted many years, before the process metamorphosised into a book. And suddenly, unexpectedly, I felt my own tender touch, the driving leaves became an image of

myself, being drive out of my own story, and I thought: autumn is a rupture too, a rupture with summer. Germany's perhaps most widely read author, Hermann Hesse (born not far from here), was not right when he wrote that farewells are like stages. And that there is a magic within every farewell that protects us and helps us to live. These are not stages, not like stairs leading teleologically up the hill of life, but unexpected ruptures. Life is a sequence of ruptures, painful breaks, reconfigurations, interruptions. Rupture that connects us to the inherent experience. Rupture between the generations, essential for the younger to detach from the older and to establish a relationship of equals; Klaus Theweleit calls it adding salt to the wound to remove the pain (*Buch der Könige* I, p. 267):

The post always breaks down between two generations. [...] The exchange of lifestyles that has taken place in the Federal Republic over the last 25 years derives the material basis for its feasibility from the fact that no halfway reasonable person born since the war believes a word their fascist parents tell them on any subject at all. Nothing their parents suggest is taken on board (Basic Law). They are drivelling on about herbs? Fascist medicine! Advice on how to treat superiors, neighbours, women? The stupidest, most gormless and usually most underhanded stuff imaginable. [...] Free sexuality is the precondition for all liberation (1968); nothing can be liberated by sexuality (1986). If we didn't have AIDS, there would be some other form of terrorism to underpin the paradigm shift. Capitalism is the devil's work/We are so grateful to be living in the West. (How many years inbetween?)

The Egyptian psychoanalyst Jacques Hassoun, in his book *Les contrebandiers de la mémoire*, likens this to a father clipping his son's ears the first time the son proudly declares: I am a Jew! The rebuke conveys three difficult experiences:

1. As a Jew you must place blind trust in nobody, not even your dearly beloved father.
2. There is nothing so reckless as displaying pride in your Jewish identity.
3. To assume your inheritance you must first break your bond with me.



THE BLIND VIOLINIST, ABONY, HUNGARY, 1921

Hannah Arendt has something far more unbearable to say in her essay “We Refugees” about how rupture equates to bonding when handing down – in this case Jewish – traditions: a Jew wishing to assimilate another culture has no option but to assimilate its anti-semitism too. In other words: Jews have spent many generations living in a lawless space and self-denial is part of Jewish identity. The other side to this Jewish capacity for self-denial, as I see it, is the Jewish ability analysed by Arendt to build a relationship with non-being, with the void, with the blank page. With the childhood state. With the place where language is snow. Where things can happen. Its inhabitants are not formed or developed, but are born and become. Jean Francois Lyotard calls it (*Lectures d'enfance*, p. 105):

The “presence” of nothingness, of birth, death, and indivisible singularity. So one only needs to defend oneself against so-called external reality to the extent that it can arouse this so-called internal “truth”, this something that par excellence one can neither change

nor exchange. [...] Hitler, ensconced within his (totalitarian) onion, is no less exposed to the THING than an insignificant Swabian student outside. The self is always naked as far as birth or death are concerned [...]. But the Führer wants to forget or make others forget childhood, the terrible nakedness that constitutes childhood. One is obliged to conclude from this that the THING must present as a threat, that the relationship with the reality of desire must be apparent, for an apparatus of subjugation or oblivion as powerful as totalitarianism to be able and required to emerge. This is where the origins of totalitarianism must be sought.

Lyotard is saying that what the National Socialist system sought to combat in Jewishness was its relationship to nothingness, to natality. Which establishes a bond with genealogy and with the dead. Hannah Arendt:

The “miracle” is that people are born at all, and with them the new beginning that they are able to perform through their actions by virtue of being born. [...] That we can trust in the world and hope for the world is perhaps expressed nowhere more succinctly and more beautifully than in the words used by the Christmas oratorios to announce the “glad tidings”: “Unto us a child is born”.

It is because of my natality, not because of how I develop, that I am capable of a new beginning in the form of independent action. It is this action, says Arendt, that enables us to discover our unique identity, to explore our mesonatalty between the generations; it is our link with the dead.

The pain of the rupture as bonding, as the seasoning in the stew that the generations find themselves in together, is a pain to which we can never grow accustomed. It hits us between the eyes every time. Writers and artists who seek to do justice to this difficult fact of the pain inherent in any metamorphosis – and any true art comes at the price of this tussle for justice – are sometimes not easy to bear. I mean me. I thought that once the weight of my first novel

had fallen from me and I had wrung a legacy out of myself that could exist without me, it would be easier for me to be. I would have a protector, a paper shelter. Like an architect whose graduation project is his first very own house. The sentences in my book would be a little nation and I would be their regent. And I would be able to milk them. Like lice, I would milk the letters in my book and suck the life force out of them. The blanks between the letters would be my flesh, the alphabet would be my habitat. The lead would be my blood and the ink would drip from my eyes. A lily would spring from my book, and this lily reaching tall into an empty sky would be me! In the Canton of Bern, where I was born, they pronounce 'belly' like 'book'. It was only when my mother died that I was capable of writing this book. Only when my mother died did I become fertile, able to sprout buds, to cast off leaves, to give birth. And the conflict I waged with my mother in her last years was due to that curious fact: I was competing with her over her ability to give birth. Why didn't Sigmund Freud ever notice this equivalent to penis envy? The boy's envy of the ability of a woman's body to bear children? This anger towards my mother might have been due to her regarding me as her creation: seeing me as her creature, the work that gave her a justification for her own existence on the shoulders of my being brought into the world. And when my mother died I, the child of this conflict, was able to give birth to my novel, odd as that may sound. When I was twelve I came across two portraits that a street artist in Thun had drawn of my mother when she was twelve. They show the most beautiful girl I know in the world, or have ever known. With a soft pencil, very apt for shadowing and the fine lines of physiognomy, this artist, with a diligence I have never yet encountered in today's street portrait artists, consigned my mother, my mother's face, to paper. Simply the separate strands of her thick, healthy, wheat-blond Albert Anker plaits, her eyeballs, the irises of cornflower blue glinting through the tint of lead and paper. An X-ray gaze shining at me through time and paper, looking at me. Like the ghost of my libido. I remember how I immersed myself full of passion into those drawings by copying them with a pencil. By plumbing my lead into the gaze of my mother, exactly my age, delving into her, for hours, for days. I filled over forty sheets with graphite lines, increasingly accurate, until I could circle her nose precisely and managed to expose exactly the right tiny bright spot on the tip, delicate and not too wide. With the point of my

pencil I was searching out her singular essence – entirely in keeping with Roland Barthes in his book *Camera Lucida*, which I discovered much later and read like a novel. Back then I did not find it. It was sunk too deep inside me, and the loss of my sweetheart from the mists of memory was too hard and painful for me to feel it at the time. But the pictures delighted my mother, who showed them proudly to her best friend Hanke, a Dutch painter. My mother had no inkling that these were dark documents, documents of a pain that led others to become criminals, henchmen, violent aggressors, and that through them I was trying to probe the reasons for that unfeeling loss of the person who took such a delight in them. I think the statue of the Madonna that Goldmund carves for Narcissus out of wood right at the end of the novel is similar, and Goldmund was able to do it, to tread the tightrope between birth and death as he carved, because he was anticipating his own death. With this figure that lent form to the nature of his love for and bond with his mother, he was shaping himself for and into his own death. In the hands of this severely ailing, broken artist, the wood became his mother's flesh, which shielded him as her creation and at the core was Goldmund's death. Narcissus recognised this in the figure, but he could not recognise that his love for Goldmund was due in part to his own inability to find this figure within himself. What Goldmund says to him, with eyes that rupture, on the last page of the book, which caused me to die a little too as I read it, although with tear-oozing, not rupturing eyes.

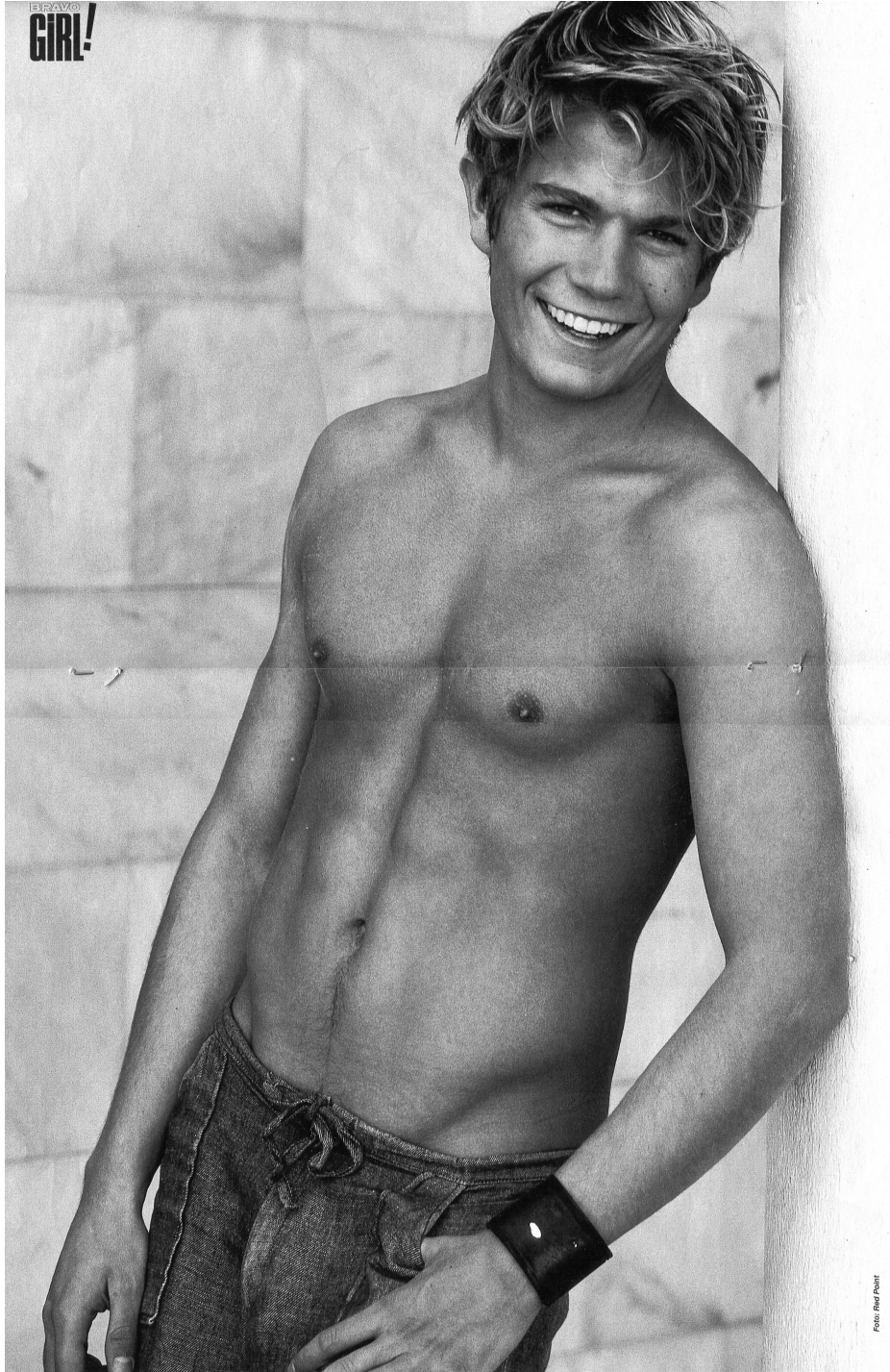
That strange, sea-filled liquid that we ooze when something touches us. A liquid that bears irrefutable testimony to the fact that we are creatures with a body inhabited by a soul. A soul that forms as we float in the sea of our mother. A soul that forms and sleeps within our body. A force which later, when our bodies and their armoury have taken shape and often enough grown into castle defences, can blaze a trail of terrible tempests. In her essay on the *Iliad*, written in 1940/41, Simone Weil explores the belligerent episodes she experienced herself as a member of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War and in the embryonic Résistance in occupied France. It is the souls locked away in our bodies, writes Simone Weil, in her fundamental reflections on violence, where she describes violence not merely as activity between victims and perpetrators, but beyond this as a fundamental subjugation of

humans by humans that nothing can legitimate. In the *Iliad* she recognises a response to this violence that perhaps down the centuries reveals an opportunity to convert mourning for loved ones who have perished from forms of violence into perceptible pain by making it livable, by giving it language:

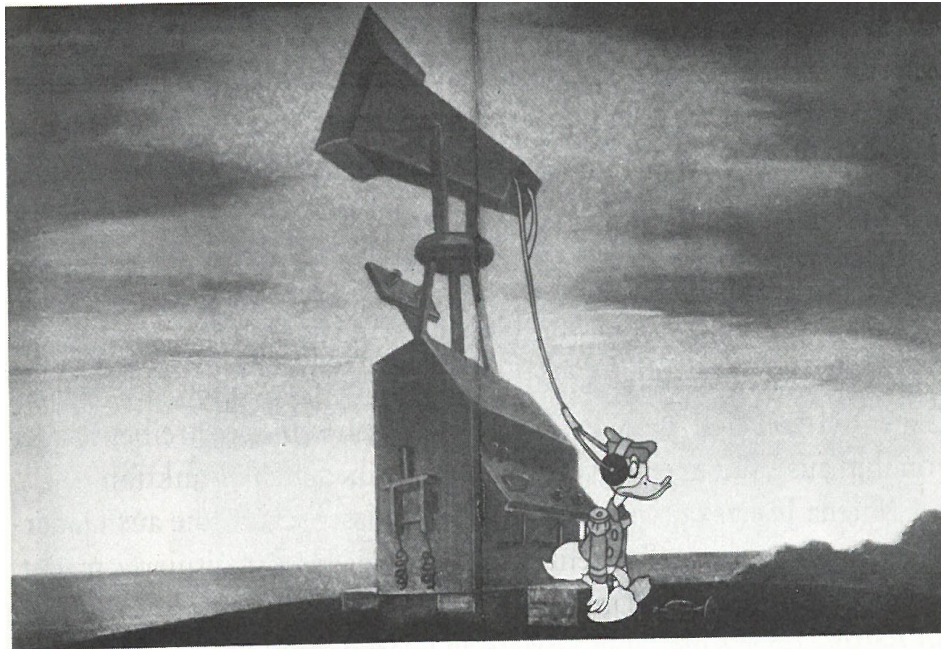
In any case, this poem is a miracle. Its bitterness is the only justifiable bitterness, for its springs from the subjections of the human spirit to force, that is, in the last analysis, to matter. This subjection is the common lot, although each spirit will bear it differently, in proportion to its own virtue. No one in the *Iliad* is spared by it, as no one on earth is. No one who succumbs to it is by virtue of this fact regarded with contempt. Whoever, within his own soul and in human relations, escapes the dominion of force is loved but loved sorrowfully, because of the threat of destruction that hangs constantly over him.”

When I started writing my novel 13 years ago, I was alighting at the end of a long spiral of violence. A spiral that had made me a mercenary in the war for attention, that most contemporary of all wars: I had become a TV starlet. At some point, this starlet read Adorno’s comment about fascism dolled up as the mass culture industry, and it made me sit up. I began to feel that I was beset with poorly perceived currents of violence. Even now they ripple through the veins of every member of my family and they were the downfall of my younger brother when he was twelve. At the time I was not capable of putting it into words like that, but after my brother died I was overcome by a pious hope that I would manage to recognise the expressions of violence in my family and my entourage/ the society where I lived and to escape from this spiral.

ERAVO
GIRL!



The beginning of my escape from the spiral of violence coincided with my return to the country of my birth, Switzerland. I came back to Switzerland to study at the Swiss Institute of Literature – or to be more precise with the writer Friederike Kretzen. In the first semester break I rented a room in the Franciscan Convent of St Joseph – in the Muota Valley in the timeworn canton of Schwyz – and observed silence. I kept silence, went on walks along the valley and to the *Hell Hole*, the craggy birth canal of the most notorious evildoers of the Old Confederacy, dreamed, gaped at my surroundings, yearned for a cigarette, even inflicted sexual abstinence on myself, kicked a pebble as I went, watched a little bird bobbing on a branch and caught sight of a big black raptor gliding noiselessly across the dark-hued evening sky. Met a mountain farmer but did not greet him because I had resolved to keep silent at any cost, whereupon he – as we crossed paths on the narrow road without exchanging glances, perhaps like obdurately bitter childhood foes – evinced a guttural Wuah! I jumped out of my skin and was grateful to him. Went to sleep, slept deep, dreamed of something bright – *Stichl, was hat dir getrahmt* – and in my dream was startled in the field by an angel. Woke up, looked around the dark room, above me hung the crucifix with the naked body of a young man not much older than myself, sensed the pulsing darkness, the presence of the sleeping and likewise dreaming Franciscan sisters.

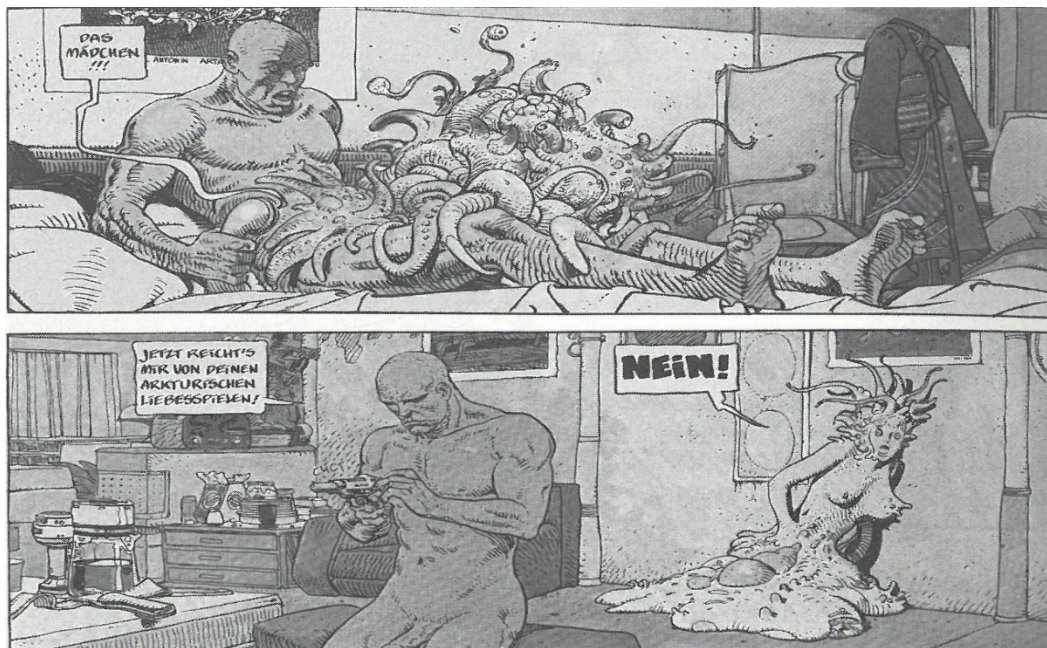


Der G.I. Duck am Lauschgerät für Bombergeräusche, 1944

Klaus Theweleit, Buch der Könige I, Stroemfeld Verlag, p. 1021

On the last day, following a lane that branched off the main road, I found the entrance to the Lourdes Grotto, built over the rubble of an ancient landslide. The headband of a statue of the Virgin Mary praying alongside the eternal candle reads: Je suis l'immaculée conception: I am the immaculate conception. L'immaculée reminded me of the name of the opera based on Hermann Burger's novel *The Artificial Mother* which I had once seen or would see one day in the future: *Macula Matris*. Mother's mark? This is presumably what ails the novel's tragic hero. Wolfram Schöllkopf, an impotent lecturer in glaciology and new German literature, is attending a convalescent home, the *Healing Cave of the Artificial Mother* in the Gotthard Mountains, and as he prepares to begin his Auer-Aplan-Alpine tunnel therapy his doctor diagnoses: "Birthmark across the entire body." In his book *Male Fantasies* Klaus Theweleit complements the ideas of Weil, Arendt and Lyotard with his analysis of male totalitarian violence, probably a pivotal current in the violence of Nazi fascists and one that made fascism

a murderous articulation of borderline patriarchy: fascists – argues Theweleit, based on the findings of the paediatric psychoanalyst and infancy specialist Margaret Mahler – are men who as newborns experienced too little natural, playful skin contact with their mothers or carers and therefore as adults – always in fear of fragmentation – developed aggressive disorders and took on the armoured bodies of soldiers. In a nutshell, fascists were men who had undergone incomplete births and whose bodies were still encased in the skin of the person they had most deeply loved and repeatedly loved as infants – and whose touch gave them at least a sense of the connection between self, skin and world. Bodies that because they were swathed by their mothers – who in turn had been numbed and embittered by the trauma of unmourned deaths in the First World War, so that the tender membrane whose function the sons bitterly needed for their detachment process, had become anaesthetised and dysfunctional – were unable to develop a complete ego based on a stable sense of physical boundaries. Fascists, then, were sons who all their lives failed to enter the world fully because they were encased by their mothers / had never been able to let go of their mothers and therefore had no other resources to draw upon apart from meaningless violence. Fascists were men who were covered by a stifling maternal skin and who therefore believed they were unable to grow an independent masculinity and capacity for love and who therefore – in a misguided act of liberation – knew no other solution than to blast things to pieces, with bloodbaths, with blown up asphalt surfaces, to demolish absolutely everything, to demolish the centres of Western civilisation. The demolition of the unbearably ambivalent yearning to return into the symbiosis of body and soul within their own mother’s womb, whose core of experience they could not salvage but could only destroy, because of a failed process of detachment. Might the urge to demolish and destroy the most valuable core of experience we have be an as yet inadequately researched root of fascist totalitarian evil, whose outgrowths we are still grappling with today?



Klaus Theweleit, Book of Kings I, p. 400

Back in my student's lair in Biel I sensed that something had shifted. I read Peter Handke's "A Sorrow Beyond Dreams" about his mother's suicide, began to cry, caught up in this verbalised despair, the hallmark of which, according to Kierkegaard, is its invisibility, the despair of a woman from Carinthia who could equally have been my mother, fell asleep, woke up ten minutes later, went to my desk and began for the first time, out of nowhere, to write. Very soon a character emerged, whom I called Jeff and who devised his own plans as I wrote. Who turned around to face me and permitted reciprocity, allowed for a third space. It was a space I had doubtless lacked when, at the age of twelve, I tried to draw my mother, space my mother perhaps violated when she took my intimate pencil professions of love and showed off to her friend about her son's artistic talent. But Jeff was different. He was both a survivor and dead. And something else, I saw him again recently at Fasanenhof station, reflected in a rail carriage, above him an advert for the Leuze Spa. A big, red-haired fellow in colourful rags *[break]*

Hello Jeff, I said. Want a game of ping-pong? He nodded. I stood there for a bit. There was a girl sitting in the train behind the reflection watching me, looking at me like I was a ghost.

Come on, let's go, I said. And we probably went and played ping-pong, or got ourselves a Mezzomix from the Turkish place in Gerlingen and sat for a while on the square outside the library, yes, I reckon we are still sitting there, it was a windy day, people say it's 2018 but nothing is so uncertain. A plaque on the building next to the library said: On this spot, on 7 March 1995, the homeless Christian Fischer was murdered. Jeff clung to me, I took a sip of Mezzomix, time went crazy, my mother was dead and Jeff gave me one last hug, we'll get it over with, he said, with that look. We looked ahead, there, under the lime tree, and along she came, a young blonde woman, stood there, in a no-go zone, surrounded by big swirling leaves of autumn foliage, like in that picture by the Russian Igor Grabar, with autumn leaves revolving around a centre as white as the soul and the skin of the girl, the ghost of my libido, and the edges aflame with all the colours of the spectrum, the one that Dostoevsky's translator Svetlana Geier says in the film *Five Elephants* marks the arrival of modernism. Sonja Sophia, Ms Geier's granddaughter, was in my class at school, and like Jeff she had red hair and freckles. All part of this autumn day, *displaced, big disgrace, sacre homini*, where time merges and against the background of a time-mingled present the face of a woman appears, older and already around for longer than my mother. Some relative of Eurydice. Tree dryad, lime tree bark woman. Grey as an elephant's skin. The singularity of my mother's face mingled with this other face, just like in Proust, an expert in lime trees and their calming effects, who wrote that "it is at the pinnacle of the particular that the universal unfolds".

Large-lobed autumn leaf, a young blonde woman, who looks at me and kills me. Makes me conscious that I am dead. Succumbed to my wounds. Is that all? Jeff takes my hand, we simply walk off, all the way down Dufourstrasse, past the park, past the circus grounds, past the sports stadium, simply out of town, we leave the town, leave the country, keep going. Until a few years later I am sitting in a little park in Stuttgart and reading the words *displaced persons* on a plaque and realising that I am out of place here and that this is not my place, right, I say to a dead Friederike Roth, to a dead Heinz von Cramer, we'll just sit here, come together, not be bothered by whether we are shadows or flesh and blood or maybe flesh-and-blood shadows, let people rattle on about whether we are here or not, we have come together

here and we are sitting in a circle like a gathering of ravens, druid ravens, invisibilities, of course, trance and cosmos, yes, planetarium, frenzy, yes, black spaces, a group, I wouldn't call them resistance fighters, they aren't resisting, they don't even insist on being here, but I can sense them, even in their absence. The girl walks past with the guitar and the 92 rumbles, like the no. 4 trolleybus that would tug its antennae along the electric wires above Dufourstrasse and I sat at the desk in my tree house and the blonde girl arrived, I looked out and lost my composure. Caught up with. And robbed. On my journey for years, on a quest for somebody who has definitely been dead for a long time. Now autumn is beginning, what is going on in Biel, what will people say now? Jeff, let's go to the park, to the ping-pong table, the girl from Ivory Coast be there, and the drinkers, the dealers, the Turkish gang, the tall trees, time, the skyscraper. Once a child lost his mother, although she was still there and the child vanished. The mother was sitting at the sewing machine and the child on the floor. He was swinging on a swing in the deer park in Langenthal, jumped down, looked to see if his mother and his grandmother had noticed his huge leap, and the swing came back, hit the child on the head, and he turned away, did not go to his mother but towards a little black copse, wanted to be alone with his pain, did not want to share his bitterness with his mother, stopped, rubbed his head, looked at his hands and saw they were covered in blood. Much later this child would know who he was, with whom he shared his blood. But not now, now I am sitting here, after a hot summer, the trees are losing their leaves, perhaps their composure too, the novel doesn't matter so much any more, a few people are there, a small dusty square, my hands, my jacket, time, the country's name is Germany, the people here are Germans, there are sharks in the sea, an old woman is buying a frying pan, what do you all want? What does the child want? Why does he think he knows? That this blood, in his hands, is his. You ask that? The answer is easy: the child feels a pain that was numb for a long time and you are this child, you feel this pain, and now you have lost your mother, take care of her.

[Link]: That here at one of the many endings of my novel I could devise no solution and found myself in more trouble with my writing than I had ever dreamed is part of the beauty of the language in the *Iliad* that Simone Weil describes, in her life-enabling treatment of the

bitterness which admits no mourning for our war dead. A bitterness that pervades the centuries, that makes us insensitive to grief for the dead, that results from “the subjugation of the human soul to violence, hence ultimately to matter”. Language such as this can still help today to prevent this grief becoming a sediment of undead embitterment, because it rekindles feeling in the surface membranes of the soul which been hardened and immobilised, numbed, by daily life, growing up, taking a profession, wounds of love, bearing the burden of our parents. Anaesthetised like this, we sense not the ruptures that establish bonds but separations. Writes Friederike Kretzen in her essay *We can't go home again – Versuch zu 68*: “Be it the separations of thinking from feeling, of experience from significance, or of love from work, of uncertainty from freedom. The prisons of culture and the prisons of economics, they have not stopped imposing their cages within us.” In these prisons we like to confine writers and also all too happily that beautiful yet terrifying lady Imagination and to detach literature from life. On the other hand, a literature of becoming, a verbal skin able to synthesise, by contrast, befits the form open on all sides that we acquire in the womb: an incredibly powerful blend of soul, matter and non-existence. With which the Greeks, as Walter Benjamin writes, upon reaching the ecstatic peak of their festive ritual trances, resumed a form of communication and where it was quite possible that a mother could no longer distinguish herself from her child and devoured it. And to which I struck a connection with my first novel during my work process. A connection with my core of experience as part of a bigger cycle in which I float when I write, when I read, when I dream or when I – as I sometimes manage to do, as I recently managed to do there in that little park in Stuttgart – begin to speak out from this all-embracing dream of a lost language. A dream out of rediscovered grief for a lost language, whose loss I could not live without.

Luke Wilkins

Literature

Friederike Kretzen, "We can't go home again – Versuch zu 68"

Simone Weil, "L'Iliade ou le poème de la force" (En: "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force")

Marcel Proust, "Letter to Daniel Halévy"

Hermann Hesse, "Stufen" (En: "Stages"), "Narziss und Goldmund" (En: "Narcissus and Goldmund")

Klaus Theweleit, "Buch der Könige I" (En: "Book of Kings I"), "Männerphantasien" (En: "Male Fantasies")

Jacques Hassoun, "Les contrebandiers de la mémoire" (En: "The Memory Smugglers")

Hannah Arendt, "Vita activa oder vom tätigen Leben" (En: "The Human Condition")

Roland Barthes, "La chambre claire" (En: "Camera Lucida")

Walter Benjamin, "Einbahnstrasse" (En: "One-Way Street")

Peter Handke, "Wunschloses Unglück" (En: "A Sorrow Beyond Dreams")

Hermann Burger, "Die Künstliche Mutter"

Jean Francois Lyotard, "Lectures d'enfance"