

Unformed days

Sample translation
by Annika Domainko

There is a concept in psychoanalysis known as the fear of breakdown. Pasts buried, a feeling of falling forever, timelessness, repetition without end, fragile skin, a self that doesn't speak to you from the mirror, but from foreign mouths, a self whose tongue is breaking. For me it starts like a chill urging you to seek refuge, a tingle at the brinks like bubbling water. Stories that can only be read by those who know where to dig, breakdowns are in need of archaeologists. I don't know if I can count myself as one of them, but in my dreams, I am washing the soil of unformed days off my hands.

Part One

I didn't know where I was when I woke up, the floor below the window saturated with light I emerged from a mindless state, exempt of any sense of time or orientation. It was early evening, I realised after a while, it fell into the room in mustard yellow, and I had slept through the afternoon.

My temples were throbbing and I felt reluctance, physically, heavy and with a certain sense of finality, a feeling that had been seizing hold of me for months now whenever I was unprepared, after waking up, during my night shifts, when I was drunk. I got up, massaging my neck, folded up the blanket and opened the window. The house was quiet, Josefine had stayed at her sister's with our girl. The breath of air coming through the window was cool and smelled like fresh soil, like the dying leaves the trees had been casting into our courtyard and onto our window sills on the third floor for three weeks now. My right eye was watering, my daughter had squeezed her tiny finger under my lid the day before, and a milky fog was clouding my sight.

The sky was clear and I leant forward to get a glimpse outside the window. There wasn't a single grey spot indicating that anything could happen, everything was porous and open, the garden mould in the courtyard, the neighbours' freshly chopped firewood. I reached into the leaves on the sill and dragged them into a little pile. The leaves in her hair yesterday had felt exactly the same, I thought. So brittle they had decomposed between my fingers and trickled onto the ground like confetti. She had not rang the bell, it was a coincidence that I had noticed her just when she tumbled down as if by command. I had seen her faltering shadow behind the milky glass, she fell so gently that no sound reached my ears. When I unlocked the door and pushed it open I had to shove her body over the floor. It sounded like a brush in dry hair. The resistance echoed in my arm.

The foyer had been empty, the woman who worked at the reception desk was nowhere to be seen. The sliding door at the entrance had opened and closed again without anyone there to enter. I had kneeled down next to her, put my hand at her neck to take her pulse, addressed her repeatedly. There was no response, her eyes were closed, her body without tension. I had raised my voice, felt her forehead, slightly slapped her cheek with my palm. When I had scooped her up in order to

bring her to the ward and call the doctor who was on duty that day, she had opened her eyes, widely, and stared at me. She hadn't struggled to get away, but there had been a sudden jolt rippling through her body. I had pulled her closer, and there must have been something like a question resonating in this gesture, because she had nodded at me, like an answer in a wordless conversation which still baffled me since I did not understand it, and it usually never happened that something like this was of any interest to me once the situation was over. I had used my foot to push the door open and had carried her across the threshold, I had sensed her gaze on my face the whole time. She had been warmer than I had expected after feeling her skin, her body raw, but surprisingly heavy in my arms.

I grabbed the stack of leaves that I had piled up on the window sill and threw them into the courtyard. The wind caught them, carried them away. I liked the crackling sound they made, like a spitting fire. She had become warmer and softer in my arms, I thought, with every step I had taken. Leaves had fallen off the both of us and left a trace on the wooden floor, from milky glass to milky glass, all the way through the hallway up to the examination room, I had swept it up with a broom later on.

I closed the window. The cold air had filled the office and cast out the sleep. Office, we still called it that, although I hadn't used it for work in a long time. My distance learning course was suspended since our daughter had been born, I used the room to read, seldomly, to write emails, make calls, I came here after my shifts when I wanted to be by myself. Contrary to Josefine's office, teak furniture, book cases floor to ceiling overflowing with legal texts, Marcel Breuer chairs and Tecto lamps, my room still exuded the spirit of my student years, I hadn't even got rid of the posters, on that very carpet I had already slept with Mira. I would have loved to spend my nights here as well, with our little one next to me, her gentle sleeping noises all to myself, without being seen by anyone or anything.

I slipped on the pair of jeans that I had thrown on the floor when I had come home, put on a hoody over the shirt I had slept in and went into the kitchen to make some coffee. I filled the kettle, pulled the tin can from the shelf and put two spoons of ground coffee into the French press. Pouring the water into the pot I watched as the fluid formed soil-coloured bubbles welling up like in a fenland. With the smell of fresh coffee in my nose I pulled out my tobacco pouch, put filters and papers on the table and rolled myself a cigarette. The throbbing in my head grew louder. I scraped some glue off the pouch with my thumbnail.

With a cup of black coffee in my hand and the cigarette between my lips I opened the door to our balcony, pushing down the rusty handle with my elbow. I kicked the door with my hip, it swung open with a creaking sound as always, movement after movement, a routine of little things. I sank onto the bench next to the door, eyes on the tomato vines and grasses, my feet resting on the cold wooden floor, and opened Spotify to listen to an episode of the archaeological podcast I had subscribed to a couple of weeks ago. Echo of another time, the first degree I had started without graduating, I had dropped out just before the final exams more than twenty years ago. *Das nächste Fremde* they called it, *the other closest to us*, a famous trope, invented by German classicists and invoked over and over again to describe classical antiquity as being foreign to us and familiar and formative at the same time, the other in the self, and vice versa. But their topics were good, their ideas less ancient than I had thought when I saw the title. I put my smartphone on the sill behind me and lit up my cigarette. In my head the smoke merged into the intro jingle.

I had rolled a cigarette for her as well, I thought, inhaling, because she hadn't been able to do it herself. Struggling to wrap the paper around the tobacco crumbs she looked like a child awkwardly doing craft work. Her gaze was fixed upon her hands, in the end she had left the tobacco in her lap, the paper scrunched up next to it like a still life. We had engaged in a stagnant conversation. Shortly before, after I had carried her to the examination room, I had plucked the leaves off her hair, taken off her jacket as I'd do with a child, her shoes were completely soaked for some mysterious reason. She had been dehydrated, and I had held her head to help her drink some water. She hadn't said a word the whole time, struggling to evade my sight. I had rolled up her sleeve to check her blood pressure. There had been a medical patch in the crook of her arm, the same kind of cotton pad we used in the hospital. It was only then that a thought had crossed my mind. That she hadn't been lost, hadn't fallen into my lap, but returned to us.

Can you tell me your name?

She could. I had looked her up in our database. She had been with us for eight days. I had no memory of her face whatsoever.

I drew on my cigarette, for a little while I kept the smoke in my lungs. The throbbing in my temples weakened. I went back into the kitchen, lit cigarette between my lips, I knew how much Josefine hated this, and got a second cup of coffee. I grabbed a piece of cake from the counter, the apple slices in the dough prickled on my tongue. From the window sill I could hear the bodyless voice from

the podcast. The *apotropaion*, they said, was an object or symbol that was thought to have the magical ability to ward off calamities. From ancient Greek, *trepein*, turning around, warding off. An important example from Greek and Roman times, they said, was the Head of Medusa which, frozen in place as an emblem, was not only displayed on the shields of Zeus and Athena and some mythical heroes, but had its place also in reality, affixed above countless thresholds, entrances, monuments, temples. A petrifying gaze for trouble spots, a marker of inside and outside, a rift in space, the standard here, the other there. I finished my coffee and balanced the empty cup on the palm of my hand. Medusa, brittle snakes for hair.

As I arrived at the hospital the next morning and got off my bike it had finally started to rain after weeks on end without a drop. I parked my bike under the eaves protruding from the old building, pulled my hood closer and ran to the side entrance next to the reception. The wind was blowing in my face and I was glad when I could close the heavy door behind me. I walked down the stairs, my shoes squeaking on the linoleum, threw my backpack into my locker and switched my hooded jacket for scrubs, my wet boots for sneakers, it was my daily act of taking up the necessary armoury, only my jeans I kept on even though it was against our orders. My reflection was watching me from the mirror inside the locker, a beard that used to be blond, a forehead in wrinkles, a 5 o'clock shadow on my shaved head unable to disguise the receding hairline, not old, neither young, an observation dripping with absurdity, especially with regards to one's own face, I thought. I touched the little black ring that I had been wearing in my lower lip for more than twenty years and, for the thousandth time asked myself if it was time to get rid of it. I made a face at myself, slammed the door and ran upstairs to the ward, taking three steps at once.

The nurses' room greeted me with its familiar odour, disinfectant, aggressive detergents, freshly washed sheets, coffee, stagnant air proving that the windows here were only to be tipped, and never to be yanked open. I grabbed a mug from the shelf, it had a little crack on the rim, poured myself some coffee and sat down on the table next to Kroh. I rubbed the brim with my thumb.

Morning, Grün, he said without looking up from the files, you're late. Hard time at home?

Don't worry about it.

I didn't feel like making conversation. Kroh stacked the files and lifted the heavy pile from the table. He looked at me, searchingly, and threw the stack onto the rolling cart next to me. He put his hand on my chest, fingers widely spread, as he walked past me, he had something about him, like a giant bird, I thought, the name fit, Kroh, the crow. He forced me to turn around and shoved me in front of the shift rota that was hanging on the wall on a huge whiteboard.

Michaels just called in sick, he said. You have to cover for her during the rounds. And take a look at her files and check how many of her patients you can take care off.

He wiped Michaels' name from the board and marked down the changes.

It shouldn't be that many, two, I think, or three.

Kroh skimmed through the files.

No, it's two. See. Room 124 is a better fit for you anyway.

It felt like a spread wing when he brushed my upper arm. He pushed the rolling cart into my direction and disappeared in the hallway, feather step for feather step.

It was 7 o'clock in the morning, the ward was quiet, the hallway in semi-darkness and even the nurses' room was only lit by two desk lamps that my colleagues had needed to work during the night shift. I pulled out the two files I was supposed to check, smothered a yawn and started to read. Daniel Rother, 53 – I slammed the file shut. This guy I knew better than I ever cared for. Since I had started as a nurse at the secure ward, Rother had been here at least a dozen times. He usually lived in an assisted living facility, but every few months he would bolt, discontinue his medication and develop serious hallucinations that lead to the police collecting him from the streets and dropping him off at the ward where everything started all over again. Rother was the boulder that you'd push up the hill for weeks on end, only to be knocked out when he rolled back down and rubber-stamped the absurdity of our work right into your face.

I pulled out the second file which was much thinner than Rother's, a silver lining. It was hers. She had been here for a bit over a week, brought by a friend, disoriented to time and place, but able to tell us her name and address. Felber was her treating physician, ICD-10-F33.3, recurrent depressive disorder, current episode severe with psychotic symptoms, followed by a big question mark, a weird blind spot within a system devoted to the illusion of seamless recognition. I read that since her admission she'd spent almost the entire time in her room, that she barely spoke to anyone. Her orientation was subject to prominent fluctuations, Felber had noted, furthermore: identity conflict and intrusive overvalued ideas of guilt, again followed by question marks, and: affected by a delusion that made her identify herself with public figures who had somehow burdened themselves with guilt when she came across them in the media. In parentheses: keep under observation, shield from

newspapers and television, exclamation mark. Acoustic hallucinations, voices that could not with certainty be identified as inner voices, thought diffusion. Signs of dangerous behaviour, possible suicide attempt in the past. Besides: general state of health good, nutritional status good; due to recent events: no permission to go out. At the bottom of the page there was my own record. 5th October, 4pm: found at the entry of the ward, disoriented, benzodiazepine after consultation with physician on duty. Conversation not possible, patient fell asleep after medication, my signature.

I flipped through the rest of her file. *Conversation not possible*, that wasn't entirely true. Shortly after this entry she had suddenly appeared in the communal room, standing quietly in front of the door to the garden, her forehead pressed against the glass, leaving a greasy mark. Her hands had been buried deeply in the pockets of the long blouse that she was wearing over a leggings with a gaping hole at the side of her thigh. She had smiled when I came up next to her, but a second later her facial expression was reduced to a blank canvas, just as earlier that day. I had come to the communal room because I wanted to go for a smoke in the garden during my break, so I had dangled my tobacco pouch in front of her, Do you want one?, and unlocked the door. She had hesitated, but nodded after a while, letting me escort her through the door that I had left ajar. We had sat down on the bench next to the door and I had rolled two cigarettes. Her hands had been shaking, I had to give her a light. We had talked about music, about the book that I hadn't noticed in her hand at first. About the weather. She had said that it had been her fault, that afternoon, und apologised. I still didn't know what she meant by that. Ten minutes later she had asked to go back to her room, I had unlocked the door once more and the gloaming of the common room had swallowed her, only the red of her hair had lit up for a second.

Morning, Grün.

Felber appeared at the nurses' room with the usual cluster of assistant physicians and interns around him. He looked tired. I glanced over my shoulder at the whiteboard. He just came from a night shift.

Are you coming later? I want to start our round a bit earlier today, during breakfast, he said. Do you do the documentation? And is there any coffee left?

Felber yawned with his mouth wide open and looked around.

Yes, and yes. Change of plans. Michaels has called in sick. And one more yes, look behind you, the red one, I said and pointed at the coffee pot that the crow had refilled earlier.

He finished his coffee in one gulp, took off his glasses that sat on his face like a delicate insect, and rubbed his red eyes.

Are you done with your report on room 129?, he asked me. I'd really like to know what you think. We are stuck and your observations about the daily stuff that we don't see might be a big help for my talk with the chief resident later today.

You'll have it by noon, I haven't had the time yet, I said.

Thanks, he clapped his hands.

I nodded slightly, pushed the rolling cart with the files into the hallway, and the cluster of Felber-people followed me to the first room. I knocked on the door.

I had been at the ward for more than eighteen years now and things had a stubborn habit of repeating themselves. The rounds, the medication, the beds, the fear, the voices, bottomless pits, files, discussions, outbursts of rage, the crises, career ambitions, the young physicians fresh from university coming to me during nightshifts, clueless, aggressive, in tears, asking for consolation or pep talks, depending on their disposition, the Rothers of this world, guys in their early twenties caught on substance induced psychosis, anorectics being force fed while waiting for actual therapy, bipolar trainwrecks, all these stereotypes, the lack of understanding, outright malice, the self-righteousness and cynicism, the rift between us and them, the thin skin of the normal people, the brittle one of the others. It's like this place was made for all those stuck hovering above the threshold, like actors, while actual life was happening behind the curtains that we used to shield their beds from the world. I wondered if any single one of them would actually notice if the world went up in flames, without newspapers, and when the evening news appeared on screen one of us was always there to change the channel.

Grün, can I have a look at the file?

I was startled and looked up into the face of an impatient Felber shifting from foot to foot and reaching for the stack of files in front of me. I mumbled an excuse and handed him the first folder on top. While he was checking the medication, my eyes wandered through the room. I knew that I was asleep at the switch, I couldn't focus on anything. Hardwood floors worn out, blue panelling around the beds, one table,

two chairs with backs made from plastic, washable seats, windows with locks on the inside and bars on the outside, no curtains, no coat hooks, no detachable shower heads.

What's your impression, do you feel quieter with the new dose? How's your sleep?

No response.

Can you sleep at night?

I saw a nodding head from the corner of my eye.

Better than before?

Another nod.

That's good. And your thoughts? The idea you need to harm yourself?

No reply.

Still there?

She was sitting on her bed, legs folded, with her back against the wall, her face hidden behind a veil of greasy copper hair.

But you can assure me that those are your own thoughts? Not forced onto you by strange voices? Anything left coming from the outside?

She shrugged her shoulders. Felber took a deep breath.

Okay, let's up your dose some more and see what that'll do for you. Do you understand? We up the dose of the neuroleptic that you already know. We keep the meds that help you sleep. And we'll talk about an additional antidepressant once your thoughts clear up.

A hesitant nod.

Are you okay with that?

Felber, question mark, made a move to shake her hand. She seemed hostile when she looked up, glanced at us and finally seized his hand.

Take care. I'll see you Monday.

I noticed the way she fixed her gaze upon Felber and felt a sudden urge to throw myself into the firing line when he jolted me out of my thoughts by putting his hand onto my shoulder.

Could you talk to one of your female colleagues, he asked. They should help her in the shower and with maybe washing her hair, okay?

I swallowed and nodded and the Felber-cluster turned towards her roommate. I pulled out this other patient's folder and gave it to Felber while I skimmed through the new notes and doses in her file. She was still sitting there completely still. I wondered if she had had any visitors at all since her admission. There were no flowers on her nightstand, no fruit, no sweets, only her glasses which fractured the light of her nightlamp into a rainbow. The door of her wardrobe had been left ajar, but she didn't seem to use it anyway, I saw a gym bag that hadn't even been opened and a pair of boots. There was a pile of books on the floor, another book, spine broken, was lying next to her on the bed. Apart from all of this she seemed blank like a canvas, there was something that didn't add up, and this was rare indeed, a medical finding that was surprising amidst the recurring patterns of our routine. She was still wearing the washed-out leggings with the hole at her thigh, her feet were bare. The hair falling across her face looked exactly like yesterday when I had cleared away the leaves and twigs.

I heard the sound of a folder being slammed shut, took it out of Felber's hands and shoved it back into the stack on the rolling cart. Like a many-headed creature we wandered past her bed and left the room. When I turned around to close the door she was sizing me up, and there was something about her that I could not make sense of.

The next hours were dragging on. After the round I wrote my report and went outside to collect the balls and rackets and frisbees that a couple of patients had left scattered all over the garden. It had stopped raining and the ground was exuding damp humidity into the air. You could reach the garden from the yard via a flight of stairs. A couple of metres away, there were two ping-pong tables, we had a basketball court around the corner and densely growing trees and shrubs on the other side of the yard. And then the fence, metal braces covered in a green patina, three metres high and overlooking the access road to the hospital and the river in the background. The rest of the yard was covered in grass with a big chestnut tree in the middle and little stone treads that marked the paths. Only one other ward adjoined the garden. Although the weather was nice, there were only two men outside playing basketball, and Ms. Wiemers, who had been with us for three weeks, was sitting in the sun with a big hat and her late husband's scarf wrapped around her neck. I liked her. I collected everything I could find and stowed it away

in the little container under the stairs, and before I went back inside I let the sun shine on my face for a little while.

Together with Huey and Dewey, as I had dubbed our two naïve trainees, I was preparing the medication for distribution during dinner, when she knocked on the door of the nurses' room.

Is there anything you need?, I asked her.

Her deep-set eyes were underlined by dark circles. She hesitated and darted a testy glance at Huey and Dewey before looking at me, opening her mouth and closing it again without uttering a sound. She shook her head and the tangled hair swung around her face.

Just a second, I come on out. Can you wait outside? And you, can you finish this up?, I asked the trainees.

They looked at me nervously. I swallowed the comment that sprang to my mind and turned around to leave.

Grün, room 132 is sounding the alarm, can you take a look? The guy's been on edge all morning --

Aschbrenner took a quick peek into the nurses' room and disappeared in the hallway again.

And no one has felt like doing something about it since he's already been on edge all day, or what am I supposed to take from this?, I shouted.

It's not like we don't have anything else to do, she yelled back and gave me a thumbs up. Besides, you're better with him than the rest of us, I heard her say, you're basically an old married couple.

She glanced at me over her shoulder and I gave her the finger which she countered with a silvery laugh before disappearing in one of the patient's room.

As I walked down the hallway she was sitting there on a bench next to the nurses' room, waiting, hunched over, asking for pity, I didn't see another word for it. Well-known reluctance hit me and clogged my throat.

I am sorry, I'll be with you in a second, okay? You can wait for me in your room, I'll drop by in a little while.

She hesitated, I heard something like a blast coming from the other end of the hallway.

Okay?, I asked impatiently. Maybe you could take a hot shower in the meantime, I added, see you later, I'll be there.

I was vexed about the fact that I had just wagged my finger in front of her. There was a second crash, louder this time, and I started running without looking back.

Rother had managed to take apart about half the furniture of his frugal room. The moment I opened the door he threw a chair after me. I wasn't quick enough to get out of the way, I yanked up my arm and the chair crashed into my shoulder and bounced back right into the radiator that made a sonorous sound like a Chinese gong. I shielded my face with my forearm and tried to locate the panic button. Before I could reach it I was hit by another chair.

Rother, stop that bullshit —, I grasped for air.

I pushed the button and jumped back towards the door. Rother was running riot and had just slammed a coffee mug against the wall behind my head when I saw my colleagues from the corner of my eye, running cross the hallway, followed on the heels by the journalist who had been doing her research about life in a psychiatric ward for a bit over a week now. I rolled my eyes.

Rother, I was speaking gently, how long have we known each other? Fifteen years? It's always the same game. You're doing stuff, we're doing stuff, we have more pull, it's no fun for you and not for me either.

He released the brakes of the bed and pushed it across the room, right towards me. Two people entered the room behind me and seemed to just stand there indecisively, Huey or Dewey, I couldn't for the life of me tell them apart, and Aschbrenner. Neither of them as tall as 5 foot 5, Aschbrenner seemingly more lightweight than some of the furnishings Rother was throwing at me.

I started swearing, didn't you call for the other wards, god damnit? Haven't you heard what kind of show he's putting on here?

In the meantime, Rother was trying to push me out the door along with the bed. I put up all the resistance I could muster, braced my feet against the movement, but still, I was being shoved across the room, in slow-motion and amid unnerving squeaking sounds. I saw Aschbrenner who turned around and sprinted into the hallway.

Get out of here, that's not helping anyone, I yelled at the trainee and the journalist who had just peeked through the door, notebook in hand.

I had finally managed to get hold of the bed and was no longer being pushed over the floor uncontrollably. In a single leap I slammed on the brakes.

Rother breathed heavily as the bed came to a sudden halt, for a moment he had lost his footing.

Rother, I started again, you know me, right?

He was still pushing and pulling on the bed, spit was gathering in the corners of his mouth. I could see a blood vessel pumping on his forehead, and for a moment, I didn't know where to go, what to do with myself or him, turning around, leaving seemed to be an option.

What do you say, can't we settle this like men? Like old friends?

I offered him my hand. He stared at me and made no move to shake it, he kept pushing, his feet were treading water, Wile E. Coyote on the hunt for the roadrunner.

Something was happening behind my back. Two colleagues from other wards busted into the room, Demir gave me a friendly clap on the shoulder while passing me by, and I cringed as a sharp pain shot through my arm down to my fingertips. Rother seemed surprised by the sudden change of events, he let go of the bed and squeezed himself back against the wall. The colleagues grabbed him on both arms, Demir was towering over him by half a foot, and they held on to him without any fightback. Dewey and Aschbrenner came into the room once more, Pinel restraints in hand.

Do we need those?, Aschbrenner asked.

I went over to Rother and my colleagues. Demir was assessing Rother from head to toe.

What is it, Rother, you calmed down or do we need the restraints?, I asked him.

He threw me a hostile look.

I'd say, better safe than sorry, Demir raised his eyebrows and looked at me.

I nodded slightly, and just when I made a move to turn to Aschbrenner, Rother jerked himself free and, without warning, punched me right into the face. I crashed backwards into the nightstand and onto the floor.

Fuck it, I launched a kick into the nightstand that took the door off its hinges while Demir and his co-worker were fixing Rother in place. I left the room, blood dropping from my nose onto my scrubs and the hallway floor. When I tried to unlock the door to the staircase to get a change of clothes in the locker room, she suddenly appeared out of nowhere, standing there, just looking at me. She reached for my face. I turned away, irritated by the encroaching gesture. I could see her shaking her head and walking off, I opened the door, grabbed the rails and felt my way downstairs, step by step by step.

The next day I had my first nightshift, I spent the free time that lay ahead on the couch in my office, tending to the black eye and broken nose from my encounter with Rother. I hadn't called in sick, there was something soothing in my routines. In the early afternoon, Josefine knocked on my door.

Are you getting up at all today?, she asked, or was your quick appearance for breakfast all that we get?

I closed my eyes.

I spent all night correcting the compliance guidelines and catalogue for the ethics commission, she said, and had to take care of Maja at the same time. I really have to lay down for an hour or two.

Why are you even doing this when you're on maternal leave?

She looked at me, a dark expression in her eyes, searching. Because it's important? And because my name is on it?

The accusation in her voice provoked me, the hierarchy she installed between her job and mine. I considered ignoring her, but came around once I remembered our evening plans with her family.

You're right, I said. I pulled her close. I get Maja dressed up and take her for a walk in the woods, alright?

She kissed me on the mouth and I raked my fingers through her curls that enveloped me thick and soft like a cloud as she bent over. She touched my beat-up face and I flinched.

I'm sorry, she said. How long are you going to keep doing this, in this ward?

I could feel her eyes on me. When I didn't answer she shook her head and gave me a kiss on my throbbing eye.

Maja is with me. I'll take a nap, she said and disappeared in our bedroom.

I got dressed and walked to the bathroom. The upper right half of my face was shimmering in grey and dark blue, my eye was bloodshot, I had to put a band-aid over my nose. There was a cut on my left cheek where I had been hit by the chair.

I warily washed my face, brushed my teeth, one of my molars seemed to be loose, I felt it with my tongue. After a last glance into the mirror I tip toed to the bedroom to get Maja from her cradle. She was awake and looked at me, she was all eyes. I pressed her to my chest and buried my nose at her little head, kissed the parting of her fluffy hair which made her giggle. Josefine rolled over with a narky sound. I left the room as if I hadn't heard her and closed the door behind me.

Half an hour later I was in the forest, Maja was sleeping at my chest in her sling. The ground was riddled with puddles from yesterday's rain, I zigzagged between them, it felt like my current life, I could hear the dirt scrunching under my feet. After I had walked for an hour I looked for a bench and sat down, the foggy view over the valley was as soothing as always and I rolled a cigarette. I checked how Maja had turned her face and made sure to exhale in the opposite direction.

Lit cigarette between the lips, I adjusted my headphones and glanced at the landscape that I had never been able truly to make my home. Hardly a building was in sight although I was basically still in the thick of the city, whenever there was a brief lapse in the conversation of my podcast I could hear traffic noise in the distance, something I wouldn't come to grips with since it went against my idea of nature, being actually outside, but Josefine loved her flat in the old building. The latest episode of *Das nächste Fremde* was devoted to sanctuaries, the hosts introduced their subscribers to the basic terms and concepts of ancient Greek temple architecture, they mentioned some of the most famous examples, the Parthenon on the acropolis, the Artemis temple of Ephesos which had basically disappeared by now, Delphi, Olympia, Kap Sounion, Agrigantum, Pastum, Aegina. But apart from the splendour and pomp of architecture visually entrenched in a landscape, they said, there was also a more fundamental concept at the heart of every sacred space. The *temenos*, I thought before they uttered the word, from ancient Greek, *temnein* to cut, to chop off, I remembered the term and the idea behind it. A definitive space, marked-off and separated from its environment, a sacred island within a secular space, being devoted to a deity by means of exclusion, a space for everything that has no part in our daily lives, self-contained with rules and rituals for the inside and the outside, in ancient literature depicted as an oasis, *locus amoenus*, a place of calm and nature, pure and unspoiled. For C. G. Jung, they said, the *temenos* was the quintessential safe space where psychological development becomes possible, a metaphoric dimension was never too far off with a concept like this, but Jung's adaptation was new to me. The podcast hosts ended

the episode and I put out my cigarette. I took the phone out of my pocket to switch to my music playlist.

Maja's face was so deeply buried in my jumper that I could barely see her. I kissed her head, fixed her tiny knitted hat and scrolled through the playlist with my thumb, undecided, and clicked on shuffle. As I let the phone slide back into my pocket, I could hear the first chords. Justin Sullivan's voice, raw, a sound like coal in your lungs and machine oil on your fingertips, and I was twenty-five and in London and comfortably stoned and I had this picture inside of me, an open room with gigantic folding doors, a balloon inside my chest that pushed against my costal arch from deep within and made everything bigger and wider. I knew every single guitar chord and my hands would perform the movements in the air even though I hadn't touched a string in years. The sound levered up a space that I did in fact remember without the music, but the smells, the taste, the naked skin under my fingers, those big and embarrassing feelings that had once lived in this room, all that I could only find with certain melodies in my ears. It had surprised me that she knew New Model Army, British independent rock from a time when she was barely born. She had smiled as I had played *Believe it* on my phone, and moved her fingers on imaginary piano keys like a child in make-believe. Josefine had never had a thing for folk and rock.

Maja took a deep sigh, and I started to shiver with cold. I wrapped my scarf around myself and the baby sling, got up and set out for home, not without a certain unwillingness.

As I opened the door at home, Josefine came up to meet me at the entrance. She was wearing a black dress and transparent tights, heels and a big clip holding her heavy curls so elegantly that I knew I wouldn't be able to do the right thing tonight.

Why didn't you pick up your phone?, she sounded angry. I called you a million times.

I was listening to music and had it on silent. Hi, peanut!

Maja had woken up, and I talked and shushed to her to keep her happy while I untied the baby sling and took her out. She gurgled and enthusiastically kicked her little legs. Josefine took her off my hands and carried her to the bedroom, her heels clackering on the wooden floor.

I wanted to tell you that we can have dinner at my parents' and that I wanted to pick you up at the junction. We could have driven there right away. They are waiting for us, Josefine said and started changing Maja.

Didn't I tell you that I wanted to have a shower before we leave?, I said. And even more so if I have to go to work right from your parents' place.

So? Is that an issue?

If I can't have a shower, it kind of is, yes.

I went to the kitchen to drink a glass of water, I sat down and briefly closed my eyes. My face was throbbing since I had come back from the cold to the heated apartment, I had to breathe through my mouth as my nose started to swell shut.

You know what?, I yelled towards the bedroom. Just take the car and drive to your parents' house, so you can go ahead and have dinner. I take my bike and come along later, freshly showered and with my stuff ready to leave for work. And then we'll have a nice and calm evening together, okay?

Josefine didn't answer. I put my glass into the dishwasher. When I came back to the bedroom she was just about done dressing Maja and put a hairband with a huge ribbon on her little head that towered above her forehead like a gigantic butterfly. I couldn't stand it if she dolled her up like that.

Okay, Fine?

I was leaning in the doorframe, the side of my body was aching, and I waited for her to answer.

It's just not possible for you to simply come with me like a normal husband when we're invited at my family's, is it?

She fixed her lipstick. I said nothing.

Okay, she said, took a piece of tissue between her lips and pursed them.

I gave her a fleeting kiss on the cheek that made her smile despite it all and went to get the car keys for her.

After Josefine and Maja had left I took off my clothes in the bathroom and surveyed my body in the mirror. It had softened, I could see my age. Everything hurt, bruises sprawled on my forearms, the skin on my collarbone was covered in a dark violet shimmer. I let the hot water pour over my neck and could feel my muscles

hardening for a second before they relaxed. As I had picked her up from the floor, her body had gone through a similar movement, she had tensed up and softened again like a bow being bent and released, she was like wax, for a moment I had feared that my fingers could leave marks in her flesh. I gently jabbed a finger into my stomach and felt the dent it left in my skin. I dried off without another look into the mirror, patched up my nose with a new band-aid, got dressed and jumped onto my bike with my backpack to ride to my in-laws.

Before I rang the Kramers' bell I went for a last smoke. Josefine's two brothers and her sister were there as well as the neighbours, everyone had brought their kids and dogs, the noise and their voices carried through the front door. As I entered the living room the air was buzzing with the children's laughter, the sound of toy cars, the mumbling of conversations, whimpering dogs under the tables and the smell of the lighting gel glowing below the hotplates Josefine's mother had put out for dinner. Nobody noticed me and I was okay with that.

The older children were already eating, they were dragging their toys through lasagnes and salads. Josefine handed me Maja over, took her plate and went to the kitchen where her sister was busy arranging home-made pizza, grilled meats and noodle salads on plates for the guests. Maja grabbed my lip and started playing with my piercing.

And you have to work tonight? Josefine's father spoke loudly and the table fell silent.

His shirt was tight around his middle, he was wearing a sport's coat that seemed weirdly formal for the occasion, and he had a patronising way of leaning forward over the table and looking at me. I tried nodding the eyes away that were fixed on my blushing face while simultaneously struggling to get Maja to stop pulling my lip.

Yes, my voice sounded thin and I cleared my throat. I have the nightshift for the rest of the week, I said more loudly, starting tonight.

And what the heck happened to your face? Fine has already warned us so no one would get a heart attack. He looks as if he'd been in a bar fight, she said. One of those psychos been hitting you, hasn't he?

Yeah, something like that.

Josefine's oldest brother came over and took a seat next to us, he greeted me with a fist bump. Since I made no effort to join in they dropped the subject, as did the rest of the table who took up their conversations where they had left off, tax returns, the local news, a concert on the next weekend, soccer bets, if I had laid. I shook my head. When my brother-in-law started to explain to me that I could still partake with the right strategy, I excused myself with a vague gesture to my beat-up face and got up.

I walked aimlessly through the room. Since I could feel them staring at me I decided to get something to eat. With Maja on my arms I walked to the kitchen and fetched a slice of pizza from the tray. I was tired and didn't know what to do with myself, I wasn't hungry, I was overwhelmed and my face was throbbing while Maja, mesmerized by the colourful food in my hand, was reaching for the plate. She was squirming in my arms, she twisted herself so much that her little body was shaking with excitement. I kissed her ear to distract her and slightly massaged the muscles along her spine. She giggled at me and arched her back, she became soft and tender in my arms and snuggled up to me with a natural devotion that took my breath away.

I pulled her close and kept rocking her, I got some salad from the kitchen counter and just stood there without knowing what to do. Everything here had been prepared so painfully accurate, this was nothing I ever understood. There was no hotplate without a crochet coaster, the paper napkins had floral patterns on them, there were tablecloth clamps in the shape of little oranges, the parsley towered on top of the salad like an ornament on the edge of an abyss since the guests had emptied the bowl by working around it, dried flowers were hanging from every doorknob, the fixtures were sparkling clean, on the counter there was a calendar with an integrated moon dial.

The Kramer's seating area was arranged around a corner booth and held together by a traditional domestic shrine, a wooden crucifix with a simple inlaid work in a shimmering copper. On the wall next to it there were photos of Josefine and her siblings, at communion, at school, always with the same background in the smoky blue that tied together everyone who had attended elementary school during the eighties. Next to the school pictures there were wedding photos of all their children, but of Josefine's parents as well, serious faces in the late fifties, a decade after the war, then pictures of the grandchildren that had been taken in kindergarten in the plain style of the 2000s and 2010s. I couldn't make out any chronology, it was a

synchronism of times, the different styles got lost within each other, and for a moment I had a lump in my throat as, for the first time, I noticed my own face on the wall, Maja in my arms, my slightly younger reflection staring at me and smiling awkwardly. There wasn't a single spontaneous moment at that wall, no snapshot, it was a collection of staged constellations, moments that had been ritualised, that pulled in a grid underneath our entire lives, birth, baptism, kindergarten, school, communion, the wedding picture and the following baptism which signalled that the baton had been passed on to the next generation. From now on, Josefine and I wouldn't make an appearance any more, two implicit lives behind Maja's stages that would find their way onto the wall in the years to come, the thought was soothing and depressed me at the same time. The only photo that stood out was Josefine's graduation ceremony, gown and cap, the pride of a family where no one before her had graduated college and on which my female job had put a damper, even though no one would ever admit to it.

I slowly walked back to the dining room. Hoping that my spot would be occupied I headed for the sofa, but Josefine's father was already signalling me, and my brother-in-law was moving over to make room for me at the table. He gave me a beer as I struggled to sit down and pulled Maja closer. I couldn't stand myself when I was here.