

Anja Kampmann

the silence the house the siblings

Time is a child, moving counters in a game;
the royal power is a child's.

Heraclitus

It began one day in early fall. It was just sunny enough so that the doves, before they landed on a roof or on the rusty reservoir, would throw their sharp shadows onto the roofing tiles. They would then sit there as dirty white or light gray stains, on the tiles, on the rusty red of the roofs, covering fruit trees, whose leaves had already changed their color from luminous red and yellow to a darker tone of brown, even though the phy... (yellow!) still blossomed in the flowerbeds and *the glowing white* of the arbors plastered walls did barely allow any thought about the upcoming winter. It much more seemed that [this fall] *the two of them* could perpetuate their horseback ride. Smooth wind moved withered leaves in the cherry trees, and only now and then a dog or a rambler (and how they surveyed every little change!) passed their way. They rode uphill between the houses and onto the open field near the snowberry bushes, shoulders with thin bars of sun on them, Margareth – like always – riding Hannah, the dark pony, a few steps ahead, and (she!) followed some meters behind on a vigorous WelshCobGelding, whose hoofbeat like an echo reverberated from the cobblestone.

The sun was shining, the sun was shining, the sun was shining, onto the rusty reservoir in between the arbors, onto the visors of the riding helmets, single crows flying, shadows, hastily touching upon landscapes and houses, ever the same paths, over loose shale that would carry them further from Albertswill, [she] saw the croup of the darker mare in front of her, saw the dusty wale in the hair coat where the mother's whip kept on *as if tired* hitting the same spot, just like she let her legs in the roomy riding boots, toes turned slightly outward, swing against the mare's body. It was a beautiful day, a damn beautiful day, that might be worthy of talking about it, even more precisely, with its feathery clouds gathering above the hills with the breath of a hamlet having started heating its homes, where one would walk around with turned up collars just pleased by the fact that the laundry could one last time dry in fresh air.

Chinese Lantern blossomed hotly between the fields, [she] had just turned nineteen, and there was nothing but the glowing orange flowers in the sun, *and that she would stay a little further behind*, as the path took a bend, passing the stadium, carrying them even further southeast. Near the sports facilities some bikes were chained to a metal fence, the small mare in front of her slowed her steps, straightened up its tail, scurried nervously along the fence, *Jelena, come closer, you hear*, and it was her mother, falling forwards, *come closer*, holding herself in the mane. It was the slight touch of the whip, the Chinese lantern and the shouting of the soccerboys, who supposedly didn't see anything but two equestrians in the blinding light of dusk, just two people in a state of mild unrest on their way back to the farm which was just outside Albertswill, two people following a small path whose shale, on rainy days, would eventually cause the horses to slide; and maybe the boys knew their names, certainly they knew their names, as all the names were known in Albertswill, *too well* as Johannes wrote in a letter to [her], in his last letter from some basement in town where he was editing movies, news, for some television network, for shitty pay *why don't you come join me* two equestrians in the blinding light of dusk *Jelena!* the reservoir glowing in the color of rust *captivating beauty* [she] drove Charlie towards her mother while Hannah, the dark pony, calmed down again, and that skinny woman was still holding on to the mane with both hands, while the path took a bend and the mare had reentered an easy rhythm. There were those doves on the roofs, some fume, all that, and Margareth still holding on to the mane, not letting go, not able to let go, not as the fading sun illuminated her face, not as Jelena ran her fingers over *her* forehead and eyebrows that the helmets visor covered in shadow, seeing her eyes, glassy in the light of fall, glassy between hedges and Chinese lantern [sic!] on the narrow band of tar which they were now reaching, *why don't you come join us* she didn't let go, *something* in her eyes was gloomy under the clear blue sky above, power poles, yapping puppies romping in an adjacent garden *hold on* the mother's knees dangling against the saddle's side plates *mum* Jelena approached her, saw the mare's shoulder on which the end of the rein kept moving with every step, *there's nothing wrong with you, is there* and she almost didn't feel the hit of the whip which merely reached stirrup leather, *leave me alone* the mother hissed, the whip fell and with her ridiculous skinny legs Margareth drove her mare into a bouncy trot, making the last meters of the driveway. Jelena drove her WelshCobGelding back to the spot where the whip had fallen down, saw her mother bearing down on Bernard the gardener, who was making one more of the countless efforts to fill up the holes in the driveway with gravel from a wheelbarrow, [she] had just turned nineteen, saw the mother waving beneath Bernard's eyes, for moments only sitting bolt upright in the saddle.

And she would often think about it later, astonished at first, yet not knowing why. Weeks later Johannes sent a photo showing him in a diving suit in his apartment up on the eleventh floor, above the city, in a street named Calea Mosilor. He said, it had four lanes and that even at night they sold flowers at its edges. Far above, with snorkel and goggles *in that old neoprene* and never enough time to drive *anywhere*. On the wall above the bathtub [she]

hung the brother in the diving suit up, with a smile in her face and with a feeling saying that it was probably them same thing: a riding helmet in broken light or a diving suit in the eleventh floor in the city. Outside the window fall descended, silent streets shining after the rain, looking always alike, evenings which she spent alone with her mother in the huge house *why don't you come join us*

The last thing was summer, like a heap of straw crumpled up by the rain or like some hot thicket. The days, one by one, seemed to die slowly and nothing ever moved, but something had changed since that last Friday in august. But even though she had spent whole days on the field pacing off the fences still nothing had been clearing up, and she stood stiff as a statue when Margareth knocked on the bathroom door, ran her fingers briefly through her face and hair *what are you doing in there.*

Although she tried to stay *all normal* she caught herself checking her face for signs. Something new. Your time is running. Anyhow. Stay bright.

Later on she leaned against the wall in the hall, heard the television running inside, *Listen...tonight: can I – No* Once again the key was not hanging on its nail, dirty rain dropped against the window pane. It had not been sure how she would handle it [the diagnose], there was Sunday television and the benediction *hail...[again since very recently]* the mass from the cathedral.

And Johannes, he just ripped the photo off the wall, when weeks later he had followed her call, landed on the nearby airfield. [She] had been sitting there for over an hour drinking watery tea behind the window of a diner, happy to be out of there for once, had watched him getting off the plane, crossing the taxiway in the rain with a small travel bag over his shoulder. Announcements, flight numbers, destinations, [she] had watched him and for more than a moment she couldn't decide to get up to welcome the brother behind the passport control, to embrace him *Johannes.*

The way was the same, with its knotted apple trees on the roadside, that he had not wanted to know about for the past two summers. The old jeep and the road, the bag in the trunk, something misty, the clammy meadows.

And there were no fireworks above it all. And it was easier now to fight about the photo in the bathroom. *Come on, im just joking.* It was easier to look out the window or to focus the compass needle on the jeep's dashboard while they were driving into town to buy some new medicine, to run errands *you and your stupid cows.*

It was still shiny leaves of fall, the doves on the roof, and was it *weariness* or some silent longing to forget, Johannes who couldn't go upstairs to *her* for hours, so flimsy under the sheets, who left words unmentioned and already left after three days, saying he would come back around christmas to check if everything was in order.

It was easier now.

Those were days on which they would sit together, both too afraid to ask what one could

still wish for, on which Johannes found himself in the middle of old faces, reminiscing over the brown color of an oaken table in a misty pub, that once he had been happy, when he used to drive through the traffic circle, back home, with Kathleen, when each of them still went home on their own, long before it all got complicated and the city made no sense to him anymore, with all its streets, that in the end all stood for the same impossibilities. Those were days on which *like in the movies* they sat at the kitchen table in the morning behind their newspapers, changing radio stations once in a while but despite it all there was really nothing to report. It was Johannes who came back, seeing his sister coming out of the stables in rugged boots *Why are you doing that to yourself* maybe not seeing more than the soccerboys that morning, when the sun was still hanging low and the two equestrians were on their way back home, when there were familiar faces or at least appeared to be, only that Margareth's eyes were *glassy that day in the countryside* of which they would later so often be talking about.

And he could have left and come back for a hundred times, it still wouldn't be a tale. Even if one of those heavy boned guys down in the pub had succeeded in having a decent conversation, even if someone in the neighborhood had stabbed his wife to death with a [fish]knife, had hastily buried her in the garage and had told his lover about it (who would have told someone else who then and so on until everybody knew) it still wouldn't be a tale. It didn't matter, the tea at the airport, what they were saying on the newscast, it was news as inanimate as the shale on the roofs, available but not accessible, cold like the evenings that now remained still, without the fruit schnaps brought down from the attic in big bottles, emptied shot by shot. They came home from the darn clinic where they had heard the word *metastases* so often that it now was equally absurd and normal, like the word sugar or flour or the uncommon word father, which they only used in company of strangers, denoting that person who *had the skeleton in his closet*, that person who *had shattered the fragile formation*, at least when they asked each other about it, at least when the silence at the kitchen table became unbearable.

The only tale was that, while commanders sustained damages on their tanker ships releasing thousands of tons of oil into the ocean, while in Chile the Llaima volcano erupted and while Romanian doctors were suing for minimum wage, one single woman could not stand lying there alone, certainly not lying alone in that bed with all the mirrors around her and with the hollow sound of the foghorn in the evenings. The tale was not even about her scurried movements in the hallway or about her crying when she found the *pictures of another woman* in his inside pocket *Who is that woman*, just as she had been feeling a little better. It was drama, as if it had been written for some Friday night TV show, Margareth with Chopin and a bottle of wine, while for some reason *he* was the stronger one, he was the one who was driving away from her impotence in his blue Mercedes, to meet some *bitch*, as Johannes said, *meanwhile she-*, and both of them too afraid to wish for anything, as they had had forgot how to have wishes *in the mild cities*, since along *Calea Mosilor* races were held at night, driving *everything* further away at over a hundred miles per hour. Tales that would never end, but this one did, and a woman motionlessly lying in her bed for days *Is there*

something else you need- maybe- no rush. It was tilted power poles in between small hills and grass, that over the winter covered them in broken beige, it was Johannes who got off the plane for the second time *around Christmas* this time holding a big suitcase in one hand and a tiny girl from the city on his side, who did not have Kathleen's eyes, she did have a similar tush, though.

He had quit the *job in the basement* to move somewhere else *later*, a city, where at ten to five the lights on the bridges would be litten and where the warning signals of the patrol cars would run through town like in the Hollywood movies, something else, something *big*, when the farm, the cattle a the calves would have yielded enough profit. But for now they sat under the rim of the drop-light in the kitchen, it smelled of oily fish *mackerel* that the anglers now dropped on their porch in big bags, ever since they knew or thought they knew *something*. And they regardlessly threw the bags of jerking fish into the freezer in the hall, listening to the throbbing on the corridor long after anybody had said anything, not listening to the gifts of the anglers, the throbbing on the corridor that kept on for a while, just waiting, all of a sudden the kitchen was very bright, *don't understand-* he ran his fingers over the girl's bony spine and they startled whenever the phone rang. The doves were swallowed by the darkness or they were somewhere else now, and it was the crimson tiles and the handmade pottery, the searching look of his sister *Promise* that made him repeat, *lets do this* while his thumb still stroked the insanely thin fabric.

And so they crossed themselves occasionally around noon, ate beans from the big pot, when *the girl* was long gone already, moved their mouths silently to some newscast, felt the skin of the apples under their nails, and they wondered about what would need to be done with the old bastard, they didn't bother taking off their shoes anymore before they entered the kitchen, also let the dogs inside now, *crumbs and leftovers on the floor*. Regardlessly they threw the bags of jerking fish into the freezer and didn't hear the tapping that kept on for a while, didn't hear the gifts of the anglers *mackerels in fall* who stood down by the water for hours and gave them gifts from goodwill, ever since they knew or thought they knew *something*.

They had brought bottles of juniper schnaps down from the attic and they were almost over all of it, the clinic with the always already made beds *don't leave traces nowhere* their calls in the winter nights that *he* had not been answering for quite a while now, they had seen their mother who made eyes at the priest when she could stay at home for some days, and they had seen their father, the old bastard, who waited at the harbor basin in his old parka, hunched *he looked terrible, didn't he- yes, but it doesn't help* as if he could pop the life vests on them, cast off the sailing boat *MARY III* and show them new hills on new coasts, who didn't know a thing either.

They had skipped out on taxi driver's bill and they saw the seagulls on their invisible swings every day, they let time lapse away and did not commit to anything, at night they chased the

cows back to their enclosure, heard the click of the snap hook against their legs as they searched the field path with flashlights, they heard sirens passing far away through the landscape, saw the amber light being swallowed by the valley and maybe they started another story there that didn't belong to them, they kissed strangers in crowded bars, awoke in unrest not being able to set their steps anymore, and they chopped down trees and cut wire and waited for the storm that passed through with its minor devastations and that had been named after a sun god of the old Greeks. They accosted the neighbors, stabbed tires and Johannes knocked out the postman, they let the bushes grow over the driveway, accommodated themselves with strangers from around the world, who could believe the sentences about them which they invented and who didn't know anything about the ticking of the clock, that stayed the same but still was different when he had left.

Waking up to the sound of wheels on the gravel in the driveway. Seeing his old Mercedes rolling along the driveway, bushes, striking against the paint, an old sky in the dirty windshield. Hearing the clashing of the dishes in the cupboard behind the door. Pounding.

The old man came in the morning, since she was in the clinic *don't you show up here ever again* some dishes clashed in the cupboard, which they had moved in front of the door, they heard him downstairs, had just got up, heard his knuckles on the door, heard his foot at the entrance door, at the kitchen door *what's all this about* had seen his old Mercedes coming up the driveway, and Johannes, not wearing anything but a shirt over his shoulders was standing near the curtain upstairs *what does he want* and writhed his shoulders as if someone were pushing against his sternum. He appeared smaller than she remembered him standing in front of the big window, he appeared insecure when he walked, almost weightless when sometimes he would get up from his seat, take the stairs without making a single noise, except his hands running over the handrail. *Was it long before you slept- I can't sleep here- you'll get used to it.* It was always days before he was *him[self]* again.

And he was standing quietly at the window, they saw the tall gaunt man sweeping the concrete, always facing the house, moving towards it, a man in a silhouette, *fuck my name father* the sun was rising just now. And there was no one else. The sound of sweeping. Light on the open fields. Bright daylight. He lied down flat on the ground and stared at the ceiling. Whenever he swallowed she could see his voice box move. The room was empty. The wood was dusty. Splinters in the forearm or the possibility of it. They were lying there in some distance, she approached him, he didn't move. Calming down. Lying on the rocks above the river, just a little brightness in the branchwood. Hornets, landing on the trunk of a tree, eating the resin. Watching them.

They heard the scraping of the broom *the old man*, lied there side by side but on their own, and Johannes was the same and tall and heavy, and it was the gurgling sound of the water that could be found on these wooden panels, under the high ceilings, in this old house, once built by slave masters, on these wooden panels, on which the day effortlessly faded. Listening. He didn't leave. They didn't hear the sound of the engine. *Why don't you go*

downstairs and tell him to get out of here. Why don't you strike him dead. Why are we lying here. Jelena reached out for him. Stop it. Was it that they finally got up to make some lunch. That they laid down on the cushions, with movies, Italian flicks, [behind closed curtains] Two old ladies black and white pointing shotguns – old school – at passersby, at strollers who would incidentally Italian pass the house in which the two old ladies had been living all alone for far too long already. Strollers, with or without dogs. Was it that they laughed a little or that months later they had to bury an animal, [the frost and the stranger, rabid raging about something] Awaiting one day. A stranger. She reached out for him. Stop it. Not being able to just look at the dim illumination of the street lights.

Translated from the German by Till Jakob