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Extract from the novel *Für den Herrscher aus Übersee*

For the Emperor from Overseas

The Aviatrix sits in a bean-shaped aircraft, three wheels underneath, a propeller in back, and a single white wing, cut like a linden-blossom petal, on top. She has her helmet on, gloves drawn over her fingers, and a scarf around her mouth. The birds fly ahead of her, in V formation, white and gray, paddle feet retracted, beaks extended into the wind.

The land below them is divided into fields, yellow and brown, with little lakes and rivers in between. Trees bearing fruit, and others whose leaves have turned red by now. The sky above is white, and streaked with colored bands that reflect in the water on the ground below. The Aviatrix flies with the birds, the wind blows against them, the sun burns their faces.

People have stepped out of cars and wave to the sky. On a black-rutted field there's a giant bright spot that covers up everything underneath it.

It's the thumb of my brother, who holds in his hand the autographed postcard of the Aviatrix. We look at it wordlessly and stick it on the wall, heedless of the writing on the back.

Grandfather comes into the room, sees the card and asks if we don't know how to read. 'Cause he can, he says, and sticks the index and middle finger of his right hand in the air. Vee, he exclaims, as in victory, vee as in aves, and vee as in how the birds fly!

The V is easy to write and leads the way to W. Inverted, the V almost gives us an A, and A is the start of it all. Which eases us into the E's and the I's. The eyes of a peacock nestle in its feathers, looking blue, green, brown, and round like so many O's. O, my brother and I say, our mouths wide open.

Grandfather and Grandmother live in a house on a hill. There are many birds in their yard that teach us how to write and read.

It's summer and our parents are away. They're traveling around the world and send us a postcard every day. On the front of the cards they sketch a panorama of where they happen to be, on the back they write instructions and greetings. We know that when the card panoramas encircle our room, closing ranks, our parents will return.

Meanwhile there's enough to do. My brother and I have to get our grandparents' birds back home in the evening and collect the eggs from their nests in the morning. Hens, partridges, a peacock, a pheasant, and many other smaller ones, called ornamental fowl. The hens and partridges pluck the grass in the yard in the daytime and have a roofed-in shelter at night. The ornamental fowl stay in an aviary. When the sun shines, the peacock and the pheasant strut up and down the fields that border the house and the yard, up to where the woods begin and our grandparents' property ends. Standing out in the yard, my brother and I look up to where the field is and see the two of them, the pheasant leading the way, the peacock trailing behind. Sometimes they start to spin in the air, colorful circles a few yards off the ground, before plummeting right back to earth, the peacock trailing behind, the pheasant leading the way. In the evening we catch the birds and bring them back to their shed.

There are two of us, my brother and I. We look alike, even though my brother is younger. We have the same hair, same eyes, same fingers, the same toes, and under our nails it's equally black when we come in from the yard and sit down at the kitchen table.

Grandfather is waiting for us, and gives us flying lessons with plate and silverware. He directs our noses and arms. My brother and I thrust our knives in the air and toss our heads back. We climb from the floor to the benches and onto the dinner table. Grandfather does the wind, blowing in our direction, and calls out the names of the points on the compass. Grandmother shouts: Prepare for landing! and gives the signal with her skirt.

Take-off and landing are maneuvers: the birds should climb and descend along with her but not hurt themselves on the aircraft. The Aviatrix flies slowly, barely hears the motor, and leans her body in every direction in order to steer her flight. A little bit, she thinks, like the way she'd held the birds when they were still in their eggshells, turning them in her hand.

The Aviatrix opens the throttle and the birds fly in a pattern beneath her, switching places in formation. The Aviatrix then flies in the middle and sees the birds breathing next to her, moving their wings up and down.

She's given each one a name: Red Legs, Bushy Feathers and Bulging Eyes fly through the clouds, beneath and between them.

Fly up to the sky and circle the clouds, that's what my brother and I want to do. After the meal we sneak into the attic. We take paper, material and wire and build two apparatuses, one for each of us, which we slip on our shoulders and tie around our waists. We run out of the house and down the meadow, flailing our arms. We scream and we fly and we fall, until our grandparents hear us.

Grandfather stands outside the house, watches us for a while, shakes his head and keeps yelling: Doesn't look good! My brother and I pay no attention to him. The yard lies behind us and we fling ourselves down the hill, almost to the street below, with the wind whistling in our ears.

Heavier than air? we hear Grandfather say from a distance, it's heavier than lead! He runs into the house, comes back, loads his holiday rifle and fires a round of black powder in the air. My brother and I pack in our apparatuses and, heavily laden, trudge back into the house.

We refuse to speak another word to Grandfather. The house is quiet till evening, until Grandmother calls us to supper. Grandfather sits at the table and smokes. Grandmother stands at the stove, pots steaming. A fly buzzes. Grandmother swats it with the flat of her hand. Grandfather grumbles, stands up and paces the kitchen, drumming his feet on the floor as he walks.

My brother begins to clap between steps. I tap a spoon on the plates in the sink and the pots on top of the stove. Grandmother swats the dead fly a second time, then again, rapping at the window sill in between swipes.

With that we're back on speaking terms. Grandfather gives us a hug and says, I started out just like the two of you. He opens his beer with a knife and begins:

The short peace between one and the other was just about long enough to catch a paper airplane at recess and unfold it into a pilot's license, stamp and all, says Grandfather, and before I knew whose side I was on, and who I was supposed to be against, my knapsack was already packed. Double the body weight is what they say for migratory birds, in my case seven things precisely, and off I was overseas. I climbed into the sky and stopped counting the days. It was hell, cold and stormy, and I dreamed at night that I'd been shot down, between the world powers. And if I had known your grandmother back then, thinking of her would have been the only way I would have been able to bear it.

Grandfather cracks open another beer. It's evening. Grandmother lights the candle at the table. When it's dark you don't see anything, she says, then leaves the kitchen. Our soda-pop bottles are gleaming green and red. Grandfather holds a cigarette up to the candle flame, smokes it almost down to the butt, then lets my brother and I each take a puff. We spin off our chairs like two

propellers. Sprawled on the floor we gaze at the stars. Grandfather explains to us navigation and orientation.

Somewhere between the heavens and the earth I met the Lady from Japan, says Grandfather with the voice of a child. At first all I saw was her hairdo: a giant hive of hair, braided and twisted around the back of her head, decorated with flowers and birds, that was the fashion back then. And I could smell her too, says Grandfather, and heard the birds chirp in her hairdo, or was it her dress and her shoes? Then I forgot the dress and saw her hair and rosy lips, her chalky white skin.

And at first she looked at me with eyes that said: your type is like cherry blossoms in spring, so many one doesn't even bother to count them, that the air becomes white and rosy. In the shower of blossoms she didn't even notice what a tall and handsome man I was back then.

My brother and I, still sprawled on the floor, don't judge our grandfather's handsomeness, even when he opens a photo album and holds it down to us as proof: you see, the tallest, darkest, bravest: that's me. There's no one else in the photo, we say as if in chorus. Exactly! cries Grandfather, and stubs out his cigarette on the floor between our faces.

It smells burned, the Lady from Japan suggests with the fanning of her hand, as young Grandfather approaches and she points to her plane. How could such a beautiful, delicate woman, dressed in silk and rustling like paper, fly such a heavy machine? wonders Grandfather. And how could she still look so good, as if she were straight from a picture book, even after a crash landing that nearly cost her life? And how strange it is when she speaks: like flowers growing inside her mouth, one by one, and falling to the ground. They really do fall; I bend over to pick them up and tie them into a bunch.

That's how my brother and I, still laid low by our last cigarette, hear our elderly grandfather talking down to us, from a heaven of blossoms and billows of smoke, and we hang on his every word, like Grandfather hung on the lips of the Lady from Japan.

The sky is black and the moon hangs overhead, thin like the mouth of a smiling man. The Aviatrix has landed and lies on the ground. She reads the stars, which are named after birds and fish, and one of the constellations is actually called the Flying Fish. The birds are asleep next to her, resting on wet grass, and are under her protection now. The Aviatrix sleeps with a wakeful eye, which after half the night is over is relieved by the other for the second half.

Get up! says Grandmother, fanning our sleeping faces with a new postcard from our parents. She shoos away the flies that have landed on us and that now buzz away. Your faces are sticky with soda pop still, she exclaims and spits in her hanky. Stretching on the kitchen floor, my brother says: Grandmother, we're the early birds, we've caught the worm. She laughs and bares her teeth, then rubs us clean.

I read the card from our parents and am disappointed. Of all the letters on it, there are only two F's, with a handful of A's and O's around them. Father's signature alone requires an F and an A, so you can calculate what will be left, my brother says, when you add the daily greeting to our grandparents. Maybe we're also disappointed, I say, that it's only one card a day, and not two, or four, or even none for a change. Not too little and not too much, you don't know if you should miss your parents or if you'd rather get rid of them.

But the pictures on the cards and their assortments of letters appeal to us: the front side pasted or painted over, the back side filled with irregular characters that we sometimes recognize as our letters and sometimes take for the outlandish contrivances of our parents. The illegible parts are richly embellished by our grandparents when they read out loud.

The pictures are often of landscapes: dark forests, blue rivers, here and there frogs and birds, then sand, clouds, splashing water, and on the ground you can see small explosions or running children. There are sun and storms, day, night, summer. Sometimes mountains grow behind flowers or cabins into the sky, or a giant creature flies over the trees and looks like it's proclaiming something. Sometimes the sky is full of stars, sometimes bugs, sometimes dust. Machines are standing around or tools leaned up against walls, cars drive down mountain roads. There are gardens and vegetables patches, or big cities with steeples and streetcars, and sometimes someone waves out of one.

Sometimes it's groups of people, playing games or jumping, some of them have horns on their heads or are wearing long reptilian tails or capes. Sometimes the cards can be opened, or there's something inside to unfold, or a slide to move the pictures back and forth with. Sometimes the cards are frayed at the edges, sometimes they're gold. Sometimes our parents think up new names for my brother and me or embellish our old names with titles: to the fairest pair of children in the Kingdom of a Thousand Birds and Flying Fish.

And sometimes the children on these cards can fly, and sometimes a couple of women lie in the grass stark-naked and we have to work out for ourselves what one thing has to do with the other. Faraway lands! Grandfather sighs.

What brought you here, young-man Grandfather asks the Lady from Japan. And when she doesn't understand him he asks the question again, this time talking with hands and feet. But she understood him right away and already started to dance her answer, something like: Well, I wasn't in the mood for world history to begin with so I tried to rise above it till the air became as thin as my dress. And she points to her dress and stretches out both of her arms like wings: I flew across the great pass, and for several days saw snow and storm from above. It was hard to land, it was hard to fly. Sometimes, in certain moments, I lost consciousness out of fear and sheer concentration, then I came to a moment later when my head and hairdo hit the cabin window. It was hell being up in the heavens, I eventually stopped counting the days until my airplane crashed here. Now I'm here and back at zero. Zero, Grandfather says, and forms the number with the index finger and thumb of his right hand. He forms it with his left hand too, puts the two zeros together and holds them on his nose like a pair of glasses in order to see the Japanese lady better.

Zero is a circle and an O, my brother and I interrupt our grandfather, who is looking off into the distance with a squint in his eye.

O, we say more loudly now, how glorious is the morning, off we go to fetch the eggs, heigh-ho. Give us some spare change and we'll bring you bread and meat and cigarettes. I could use a good smoke, says Grandfather, so why don't you huff and puff yourselves out of here!

We get into our flying gear and make a running start down the hill.

I love my brother, but I want to fly higher and farther than him. I want him and his contraption to get caught in the bushes, I want him to scrape his knee and land face-down in the stinging nettle. Sure, I love him, and yet everyone can see that his wings are ridiculous, that his model wouldn't hold up in a light summer rain, that he looks so small in his flying suit, and the suit big and clumsy on him. That the heavens will laugh at him, and he'll have to land after just a few minutes, take off again, land and take off. He'll trip down the hill while I fly, light as a leaf in the wind.

In town, we meet at the butcher's and baker's. My brother took a different route, he says: I almost flew too far. My brother orders the bread, my job is the meat. I count along as the butcher-woman cuts it into delicate slices, then give her a sign: enough. Two slices less each time at the butcher's mean a small sum for me at the end of the summer and one living animal more for the world.

My brother comes with the bread tucked under his arm, his pants pocket jingling. I say, you still have change in your pocket. No, my brother pulls out some screws from Grandfather's

workshop and the tiny skull of a bird that he found in the yard. I say, you're well prepared, Brother. We hug each other and fly back home.

The Aviatrix flies overhead, the birds to one side of her aircraft, single file this time, and for quite a long time, as if they were on a thread. Below them: hills, trees, rivers. Humans and animals can be seen from above like little bugs and mosquitos.

A flying bird, if it keeps its mouth wide open, will return well-fed to its roost in the evening, the Aviatrix thinks, and wipes a dark speck from her glasses.

The fields are yellow, brown, or green, the meadows sometimes almost purple, and black in certain places. Sometimes, down below, the wind roars across a hilly ridge and bends the long meadow grasses every which way, with no rhyme or reason, their color changing according to the wind, one minute shimmering silver, the next minute gleaming green.

And the birds, they can see even more, says the Aviatrix. There's an eye mounted on each side of your head, one for each of the hemispheres.

The birds are flying and the air is warm now.

The day is short if you fly slowly, says Grandfather, as my brother and I get back from buying the bread and meat and cigarettes.

If your grandmother had crossed my path earlier, when I was still a young aviator, your father wouldn't have circled the globe another two times with the storks. And if only you'd been here earlier too, instead of always being too late and standing around all the time. These days I have to be sparing with my time.

But you two laggards can at least be grateful that you got to know my clear and nimble mind, otherwise I would have long since demoted you, you'd be my cigarette-runners. But Grandfather, here are your cigarettes, my brother and I say, laying the pack on the table.

Fine, says Grandfather. At the speed you run you can be happy you at least inherited my skillfulness and discipline. Otherwise you'd be my beer-bottle openers. Bottle-opener one and bottle-opener two is what I would have called you, and those would have even been honorable duties. Grandfather flicks a crown cap through the room.

Let me tell you, he goes on, many have asked to play the opener for me. Many have lurked around here in the early hours of morning just waiting to open things for me, my eyes or the door. To hand me my cap and conductor's baton so I can teach our feathered friends in the yard some rhythm.

You know my cellar: full of jam and schnapps, each jar and bottle labeled with gratitude, wishes and praise! Yes, your grandfather is the greatest, the darkest, the bravest, Grandfather goes on, you saw it in the photo. Your grandfather got the best hill around to put his house on, with the best view of town too. And, although it would have been more convenient for the expressway to run at the bottom of his hill, it's courteous enough to keep its distance, and all those people trying to race from one town to the next down there have to brake hard just to negotiate the curves.

Since we now know how to fly a little and also how to read a little, my brother and I voice our suspicion in private that, seen from above, the curves and loops of the expressway spell the name of our grandmother. Only grandmothers, my brother whispers in my ear, can have names like that. Or birds, I whisper, a syllable for each wing, so they don't lose the rhythm while flying. And anyone with a three-syllable name is always asymmetric to this world, and always needs someone next to him to have an even number of extremities, like you and me.

But I know, says big-eared Grandmother, who presently enters the kitchen, I know the name of every bird that flies overhead. Your grandfather shouldn't show off so much with his curvy road down there. He should try driving it, instead of talking about flying all the time. Flying is for the birds.

I don't like them when they stay on the ground and lay an egg every day. When they hop, flap, and stumble instead of flying. Not to mention the ones who stay on the ground and don't even lay an egg!

But Grandmother, my brother and I say, everything has its place in the world, and ornamental fowl exist for grandchildren to love them, and hens exist so we can gather theirs eggs each morning. And the pants pockets of grandchildren, says Grandmother, looking at me and my brother, exist so that it can jingle inside them?

Grandfather leaps to his feet, grabs my brother by the shoelaces, yanks him into the air, turns him upside down, and shouts at the tips of my brother's shoes. He shakes him in mid-air, and the coin collection of the past few days, the screws and the bird skull all fall to the floor. Grandfather keeps my brother hanging, dangling from his giant fist, and starts giving orders to me with his index finger: Headstand, you too! I throw myself to the floor and put my feet above my head, the coins in my pocket are jangling, and my brother is red in the face already, I hold the position and, with eyes half shut, count who's collected more coins, my brother or me. Grandfather keeps my brother hanging and I keep myself in position. Our heads are glowing, both of us, I count our treasure, am already tallying sums and constructing new amounts: all the gold ones and all the silver ones. I make separate piles in my mind, and at some point the world begins to spin. I look at my brother: the chair, and Grandfather, and the table behind him are all upside down now, but he and I are the right way around, at eye level with each other, we're even: each of us has collected the same number of coins, I think, then fall back to the floor, while my brother, too, drops to the ground.

There's fog on the ground below, making take-off and landing more difficult. The Aviatrix flies her route with the birds and looks down at the ground. Above her the clouds, beside her the birds, gray-white, sinewy, loud. And the wind blows at her back and propels her. And before her in the distance is the goal, and she asks herself how it would be to fly upside down, if the birds would rotate with her?

And how will it be at the finish: Will the birds come together in pairs? And will they miss me? Me, who gathered them from the nests of others back when they were still in their egg shells, who told them the aircraft was Mother Goose and I was her soul, who provided them with food, shelter and flight lessons too? I, who waddled up the hill with them, day after day, at the start: me in a taxiing aircraft, the flock trailing behind me.

And when the birds got a little bit bigger and each had developed its beaky face and its own way of putting one foot before the other, we began running faster every day, hopping between steps, and the seconds flew by more rapidly while our feet lifted off the ground and our heads reached higher into the sky, and the landscape below us grew smaller and smaller. And I did my best to be bird-friendly when I showed them in my flying gear how they had to do it.

I was with them when morning broke and when night set in. And when at midday they bathed for the first time in water, it was me who swam alongside them: a human head, half submerged underwater, next to the bird bodies gliding on the surface. And I loved when one of my feet would pop up from the murky water a yard or two away, like a fat fish snapping at a fly, just to provoke my birds a little. But the next moment their warm little feathered bodies were pressed against my cheek again, or they bit on my hair with their hard, bright beaks.

Pretty soon they were better than me at everything, and when they soared into the air on their own for the first time, without me sitting in my aircraft, I was proud. But wistful too, and I called out to them from below like a bug, in one eye tears of joy, in the other tears of wrath: At least write a card to me from up there!

Grandfather sits at the kitchen table, writing, piles of labels spread out in front of him, some with his lettering, some white as blossoms. He has a variety of writing utensils at hand and scribbles long words on paper in different colors and scripts. He says we'd better not bother him, he still has to

cover the whole table with writing and he doesn't need a couple of illiterates to help him. We can see his point, we say. You have to know when you're a nuisance, says Grandfather.

My brother and I pack bread in our bags and fill up a thermos with tea. We go outside to the mailbox, fetch the postcards from our parents, and pack them away with our food supplies.

We grab shovel and broom from the tool shed and start cleaning the dung from the shelter of the hens and partridges, then the aviaries of the ornamental fowl. We change the water, scatter feed corn, and cry: chick-chick. Seventeen times, my brother says, first you, then me, then together. We cry and sing chick-chick, and forget how time flies, till a cool wind sweeps in and we duck for cover with the birds in their shed, and pull the card from our parents out of the bag.

Dearest children, my brother says, who tries first to read the card, we are here in a very strange land. Here the men are women and the women men. Here you are poor if you're rich. You put your pants on backwards and never tie your shoelaces.

I say to my brother: That can't be. We have to learn some new letters if we want to be able to read our parents' cards. And my brother says, but it's true, he learned the C and the L and the U and the K from the hens, and can work out the rest on his own by way of logic. And he continues reading: No one walks here, here they fly. We eat foods that otherwise don't exist, and take each day as it comes. We hope you're doing fine at your grandparents' and that they're not saddling you with too many chores, because work is forbidden, with love, your parents.

What have you accomplished, shouts Grandfather, when we come back exhausted from our day. We cleaned out the bird cages and gave the birds fresh water and feed, and we cried chick-chick.

Fine, says Grandfather, those who work shall eat. I'll tell you now about the loveliest bird I ever caught, but I don't want to be interrupted. My brother and I nod, sip our soup, and listen with ears wide open.

O like the hole in your ears, O like zero, I stood there before the Lady from Japan, and the Man in the Moon came tumbling down. She told me her story, and it felt like she'd been around the world in eighty days, through storm and stress and darkness, while a chump like me with sails for ears gets blown out of the classroom window tossing paper airplanes. She was so pale and delicate, and yet so steadfast and full of energy that I, young man that I was, felt like wiping the crumbs off my face from the sandwich my mommy had packed me for recess. And she did in fact approach me, and her embroidered silk sleeve even brushed my mouth, which was all agape (o!) out of sheer delight.

Grandfather, I bet you had spit on your lips and your tongue reached down to your belly button, says my brother, and we laugh. I'll wash your mouth out with soap, yells Grandfather, you haven't got a clue, you two knuckleheads, you wouldn't understand that kind of thing, and anyway it was completely different back then. But my brother and I know perfectly well, and we want to remember it for when we're old, and we wish it were written down somewhere: that children know it all from the very beginning.

Anyway, that's how it was, says Grandfather. Grandfather, we shout, from the very beginning and the whole story! History, says Grandfather, we don't want to make world history, the Lady from Japan and I used to say back then.

Or we'll make world history that's ours, and it's set in a landscape like this: bigger than a backyard, smaller than a field. There are trees, flowers, animals, there are water and fire. We have a saucepan for cooking, and we have tools to repair an airplane. In the end we'll be able to fly again.

Grandfather, we don't want to talk about the end right now. Children, when you're as old as I am, the end is always part of the story. Grandfather, when you were a young man with eyes wide open

and stuck out your tongue to the Lady from Japan, you only had the beginning in mind, and that's what we want to hear now!

Alright, imagine this: your tall, dark, and brave grandfather as a young man with the beautiful Lady from Japan on a tiny field with trees and animals, and just beyond it the water of the ocean.

He circles her airplane many times, it's lying upside down on its white back, belly torn open, metal sticking out and plastic parts, tattered fabric, wires, screws, cables. He asks her what she's been through and how she got through it, and says: It will be a long time before your plane is up and flying again. Her eyes are trained on him and say: One could put up with this for a while.

You're going, says the young Grandfather, on the assumption that I'm staying here to repair your plane and be with you. And of course you're right: Anyone would repair your plane and be with you, but it's chance that it's me repairing it and that I'm the one who's with you now. It's chance, say the eyes of the Lady from Japan, but I will be with you as if I'd chosen you.

I've chosen you, says Grandfather, I saw you burning from far away and high above, and the pattern of your dress glowing like a distress signal. Man does not live in the sky alone, the thought flew through my mind while I prepared for landing.

The birds have flown with the Aviatrix for hours and miles before it's time to land. Down below, the runway owner and his wife are already waving, they're awaiting the flock of birds along with its wingwoman. Just to make them smile, the Aviatrix flies a few rounds in the evening sun with the birds trailing behind her.

By the time she touches down, the birds are suddenly out of sight. The Aviatrix freezes, feels the wind now cold on her cheek, there, ah! they emerge from the clouds after all: all the birds, none is missing.

The runway owner and his wife applaud when the birds have landed too, then point to the shed they've prepared for them and, once the birds have been taken care of, invite the Aviatrix to the house for supper.

The runway owners are aviators out of passion, and they talk all evening about metals and motors. The Aviatrix eats and drinks, listens at length and speaks very little.

Tired and with her head aglow, she drops late at night, early morning into bed. In the room next-door she hears the runway owners' bed creaking. It's good for them to have guests, thinks the Aviatrix.

Let me be your guest, says Grandfather to the Lady from Japan, who made tea in the saucepan over a small fire while he soldered, turned screws and filed. He sits down with her and drinks a few sips, before his head falls on her lap from exhaustion. Is it the meadow or is it her dress, he asks himself, when it begins to smell like blossoms, and he wraps his arms around her waist and pushes firmly up against her body, hot-pressing her dress. Then he lets go and scoots an inch or two and presses himself against her again, burning little creases into her dress with each movement, like a fan or an accordion, played and pulled from neck to ankles. The Lady from Japan lies motionless in the grass, and when grandfather is finished folding and creasing the accordion contracts with a moan, and the dress is only as broad as a bandage which barely covers her neck. A white body comes to light, with veins visible beneath the skin. Grandfather's head begins to spin, and he thinks he can read the pattern of the dress in the veins of the Lady from Japan. He blacks out. Then, when he comes to and takes his next breath, her skin suddenly blinds him. He runs his palms over it, and she flashes red, burning Grandfather's fingers. It hisses at every touch. He takes her head in both hands and holds it like this for a while and looks at her. She looks at him and keeps her head still, but her body breaks free to one side and the other, as if it were trying to take off, or push Grandfather away from it, but

her face remains between his palms and her eyes are wide open, allowing Grandfather to peer inside them.

You see nothing but hear a lot at night, thinks the Aviatrix, who's having trouble falling asleep. She can even hear the birds, cackling away outside. Is a storm coming? Is the fox prowling around outside the shed? The Aviatrix leaps to her feet and into her shoes, fastens her flashlight onto her forehead and steals away to the birds' nocturnal quarters. What are the animals afraid of? she asks herself silently and peeks inside. They sit there snuggled up to each other, each one with its wings around the other. They sleep there in communal cooing, living pairs of bellows, she thinks. One bird, the oldest, cracks an eyelid and snaps it shut again.

The wind blows, but no storm is gathering. The Aviatrix gropes back to bed in the dark.

It's getting chilly, Grandfather, tell us more. Grandfather has flung the window open and looks out into the night. He wipes the sweat from his brow and upper lip and prowls around the kitchen. Head bent, hands clasped behind his back, he counts on his fingers, clutches his forehead, and completely forgets about us. Grandfather, how does the rest of the story go?

We begin to flick cigarette butts at Grandfather and manage to hit him once. He stands still and pauses, we look at each other. He picks up the cigarette butt that hit him and lights up the tiny rest of tobacco. We sigh.

You know, says Grandfather, who holds the burning cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, pointing it at us and screwing an eye shut, something just missed me on my journey across the fields of this world. It was no flimsy filter either, like this one here, but was hard and vicious. It bores through the skin like a knife through butter, and hits you right in the heart, you little chair-huggers, just so you know. It's ultimately thanks to my wind speed that I'm still here among you and you under me. Though I might have been spared a few things in this world, your esteemed presence included, if I hadn't dodged out of the way so fast.

Grandfather, tell us what happened with the Lady from Japan. Alright then, says Grandfather, while we're at it: I looked her straight in her dilated eyes, and what I saw there hit me right in the heart. Right in the heart, bang-bang, right in the heart, sings Grandfather a couple of times more, spins around and shoots himself in the breast with his extended index and middle finger, whistles the melody between his teeth and dances and punches the air. Right in the heart!

I can see miles inside you, and what I see hits me right in the heart, the young Grandfather says to the Lady from Japan. She strokes his cheek with the back of her forefinger, all the way down to his lips, then puts her palm over his mouth so that Grandfather gets hot and red in the face and puffs himself up from inside. Before long he's snorting and spluttering, grabs the arms of the Lady from Japan and pushes her away to the ground.

Her immovable hairdo begins to bend, the pins and combs in her chignon break. I arrived here wholly intact, say the eyes of the Lady from Japan, which scan Grandfather up and down, I fell from the sky without a scratch, and you come and ruin everything for me.

She lifts her head up to Grandfather and the ornaments in her hair fall tinkling to the ground. Her hair undone, she sinks her teeth into his neck. Grandfather shakes her off. He kisses her on the mouth and whispers between her lips that he'll fix everything, that he wishes she understood his words, his slurred and slurping speech.

We understood each other immediately, Grandfather says to us now. There was never a language problem. Grandfather, you're mumbling, we say, after Grandmother's brought him his umpteenth beer so he could tell us his story without her around and to loosen up his tongue, he says. Grandfather, you're mumbling. Grandfather, you're a bumbling old fool with your stories, says Grandmother, who's back into the kitchen now. Can it and go to bed.

Good night, you two. Grandmother kisses us each on a cheek and gives a good pinch to the other one. My brother has a mark there that's red like a flower.

Blossom, my lady friend, whispers the young Grandfather into her ear. The Lady from Japan rolls her eyes. Blossom, blossom, blossom. And locked in each other's arms the two roll across the meadow. The grass gets caught in their hair and pokes them. Little stones leave an imprint on their skin, and the two of them leave their mark together, a long snake track on the ground.

Even today no grass will grow there, says old-man Grandfather now. That's the story, and you have to go to bed now too. My brother and I lie awake in bed. Sleep is out of the question, says my brother. Absolutely, I say, sleep is out of the question. Then we're silent.

At some point my brother says a compound word, something like: love-drunk. To which I reply: drunk-as-a-skunk.

Then we fight, because he can't think of anything to follow skunk. My brother flings his pillow in my direction. I bite through the fabric till there's feathers between my teeth, and fall asleep with teary eyes.

Young Grandfather sets to work again the next morning. He turns and screws, disassembles and assembles, inspects for defects, and puzzles over replacing spare parts. A repair job like this is no picnic, nothing to make light of, no one-handed affair. You certainly need both hands, not to mention plenty of courage and brains if you want to make something fly. Young Grandfather knows all of this, and is equal to the task. It's not for nothing, he says, beating his breast, that I'm the one taking care of you. And destiny, too, young Grandfather says, occasionally needs a helping hand. Repairing an airplane is tough, but it doesn't take forever. It's complicated, but not impossible. And then? I'm tinkering on her airplane but digging up my own foundation in the process. When I'm done she'll hop in and then zoom off! And I'll be left alone with my love, and what'll I do with it then? It'll just be ballast to me, I'll crash from the extra weight flying home. And when I'm down and shattered to pieces, she'll stab me in the back and grind me to dust, this love of mine.

Dearest brother, we have to go down to the birds and fetch the eggs for breakfast. I shake him, the sleeper, and he wakes with a start, all sweaty and gummy-eyed. You've got feathers between your teeth, he tells me. I'm the nightmare of your day, I say, and I open my mouth up wide so he can see my feather-studded teeth all the better.

Fast, I shout, before the eggs become birds. I run ahead through the dewy morning, on my way to the henhouse. My brother stumbles behind me. We grab four breakfast eggs, still warm and dirty from the nest. Always the same, my brother grumbles, as the fluttering and cackling hens peck at us with their beaks. But then, just a moment later, they've forgotten about their eggs, and blithely stalk off without a care in the world. They're happy and dumb, my brother says, Grandmother's right to find them repugnant. I nod and keep on digging in the straw. A smallish egg rolls into my palm, it's bluish but my brother insists it's brown. I say, A cuckoo's egg! My brother says, no, cuckoo's eggs are always in the nests of songbirds. Then this one, I say, has been smuggled into the nest of a nonsongbird, doubly estranged. I'll take it with me and hatch it myself. My brother doesn't think incubation will work, but he wouldn't want to miss out if it does. We pack the little egg in a tissue and keep it warm with our four hands. We walk very slowly and hiss at each other not to shake it too much and to hold it properly. Like this, on four legs and joined at the hands, we reach the house and our room. We lay the egg in a little suitcase that we punch full of air holes and fill with paper and straw.

Then we hear Grandmother. She stands in the kitchen and screams: I can't breathe around here anymore!

Grandfather waits in the stairwell. He smokes his cigarette and says: Don't let the door hit you on the way out. Then he turns to us, while we stick our heads through the narrow doorway and watch: She doesn't understand us aviators. She doesn't like the hens and their eggs, and she doesn't like my jam, either. She has no sense for the grander scheme of things. All she thinks about is setting the kitchen table when I need it to do my correspondence!

Grandfather leans against the wall. He gestures with his right hand and, repeatedly lifting the left one to his mouth, puffs away at his cigarette. It's a matter of life and death, he goes on, a matter of heaven and earth. No wonder she can't get any air when she's never seen the world from above, not once. The air down here is thin, that's a fact. Up in the sky it's thick, and smells like the continents down below, like the people down there, hustling and bustling, loving and hating. You can't see that from down on the ground, 'cause you lack the big picture, the grandeur and adventure. Down below you're caught up in the here and now, too drilled into the day-to-day. But a well-seasoned traveler knows: in the morning it's nighttime again in Japan. So why all the fuss about breakfast?

Grandmother, who's listened to Grandfather's speech, now screams: it's a matter of life and death for her too. She grabs Grandfather's rifle, hanging over the dinner table, and aims it at him. Again she screams: life and death! then packs the rifle under her arm and marches into the yard. My brother and I run to the window. We watch her until she's small as a dot and then becomes invisible.

The Aviatrix shoots a glance at the map and circles the next stage of her journey with a pencil. The runway owners fill a thermos with coffee and say their goodbyes with future invitations. You and your birds, they say, are always more than welcome here. The Aviatrix puts the pencil behind her ear, slips on her helmet, pulls on her gloves. She takes a deep breath, makes gestures of departure, whistles to the birds, swings herself into the aircraft, taxis down the runway and gathers speed. The birds waddle and run behind her, flapping their wings fast and faster, till they lurch collectively into the air, increase their speed and climb even higher. Then, when they've gained sufficient altitude, they veer around one more time and circle the property of their hosts: A lap of honor for lovely people, the Aviatrix says. Another reason she carries her hanky, to wave from the clouds one last time.

You have to give the people what they want, says Grandfather to me and my brother, and puts his breakfast on the table after all. Is Grandmother coming back? we ask. I don't know, he answers, but she's always come back before. O Lord, we long for her return, we say, then beat on the table with fork and knife. I'll have to go see what I can do, says Grandfather, who heads outside after freeing himself from the table.

Freedom is a bird in the air and a person in a gently humming aircraft, the Aviatrix thinks, and beyond the clouds it's boundless, you have to agree with what that famous philosopher said. But this freedom is cool and drafty, she thinks, before the first ray of sun strikes her face and she's blinded by the new day. She looks to the birds, who blink their eyes and flap their wings as if they were laughing. Then it goes bang. Bang!

There's a bang, and my brother and I run back to the window, but we don't see our grandparents outside. We jump in our boots and charge into the yard.

There's a bang. The Aviatrix is momentarily motionless. And the thought flies through her mind of what would happen if one of her birds suddenly fell from the sky, the air full of feathers, all the other birds breaking out of the flock and squawking over the hunting ground.

But everyone knows why we're doing this! she screams. Everybody knows about it. Everyone knows that I raised the birds and we learned to fly together, that we're just a few days' flying away, that we struggled so long for the permits, weather forecasts, people, vehicles, lifeboats, not to mention the time, and our lives. And now someone just comes along and has to ruin it all?

Tears run down the Aviatrix's face, into her mouth and down her throat.

But, no, nothing has happened to her birds, the bang came from somewhere else.

The bang was in the yard. My brother and I hold each other by the hand and run down to the shed. Birds are scattered all over the place. The pheasant is limping, and the peacock has fled to the field, where it hides between yellow ears of grain. The partridges flap a few inches off the ground before they come crashing down again. The hens cackle and cluck, running up against the wall as if by remote control. My brother and I are silent. We run up and down our grandparents' property, collecting all the birds, which cower under our arms.

On the expressway down below, it sounds like two mopeds have had a collision. It's always young men, my brother says, who don't know their way around in these parts and underestimate the curves in the road. Young men who crash in Grandmother's name, I say. We glance down at the road below, but the two men have already gotten back up, shake hands and speed along.

Laden with birds we pass through the shed, where, after a passageway, in an unroofed area, the aviary is located. There we see Grandfather sprawled on the ground. Grandmother sits in the corner, holding the shotgun and staring at him. We stand and behold. My brother and I: like two guests dressed to the nines who've come too late to the party, I think. It's quiet now, even the birds have retracted their heads, just a lone feather floats through the air, gently rocking back and forth.

My brother and I get weak in the knees. I watch him lose his balance, he's carrying one bird more than me, and plop with his load of feathers right onto the straw-covered ground. I see the whites of his eyes and everything goes black in mine, I think I'm falling. And I'm pretty sure we lie there until Grandmother finally screams: Damn it all! and until the hens are walking on top of our heads with their claws, tapping on our skullcaps with their short little beaks. We glance at our grandfather, lying face-down in the straw and bird dung. Damn it all.

Damn it, your grandmother is a hot-blooded huntress, and she got it from me! Grandfather turns his head to us and hollers. And again: Damn it all! shooting a little ornamental bird point-blank with a shotgun, who on earth ever heard of such a thing, God damn it! No one pulled off a stunt like this before her, and no one will do it after her either, except perhaps yours truly, humbly speaking. Get a load of that, quite a dame! groans Grandfather, yes siree! He snatches the shotgun away from Grandmother and levels the barrel at the aviary. Bang-bang-bang! He empties the magazine—and misses each time.

Just for fun, my brother says later, he just wanted to see what he can do, and must have just forgotten how much he really loves birds, especially the ornamental kind. Bang-bang, he fired the gun, and the force of the blast knocked him right on the ground, after which he burst into violent sobs. Howling, he crawled on his elbows to Grandmother, as if he were holding the rifle and pushing his way through the trenches. He trembled, hugged her, blew his nose in her skirt. And Grandmother hugged him too, and we laid down beside them. We all hugged each other and cried.

Enough blubbering, says Grandmother, who's the first to get up. I'll butter some bread, we'll open a bottle of wine, and then we'll call it quits for today. My brother and I dry the tears from each other's faces. Grandfather, once he's standing again, bends down to Grandmother and kisses her. Scram! she says, and wipes her lips using the back of her hand. My brother puts his thumb to his nose and, holding his right nostril shut, blows his snot into the corner. I shudder, and say: Disgusting! then do the same as him. Disgusting! says my brother. And holding each other by our clammy hands, the four of us head back to the house.