Judith Hermann

I'd Like to Go Back in Time

Novel

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To which places have the memories retreated?

Judith Hermann follows the traces of her grandfather, who was stationed in Radom, Poland, during the war. She thinks about what effect the little knowledge and the speechlessness in the family had - and what influence it also had on her writing. From Poland, she travels to her sister in Naples and pursues remembering and forgetting in subsequent generations. In intermediate and undertones, Judith Hermann tracks down the voids and damages of every life, but brings us a little closer to the beauty hidden therein with her magical and magnetic stories.

"*Judith Hermann's books are unflinching explorations of human conditions.*" — Neue Zürcher Zeitung on *Home*

"*A master storyteller.*" — The Independent, London on *Summerhouse, Later*

"*In the 'Nobel Prize League'*" — Frankfurter Rundschau on *We'd Have Told Each Other Everything*

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Judith Hermann was born in Berlin in 1970. Her debut story collection *Summerhouse, Later* (1998) was extremely well received. It was then followed in 2003 by the story collection *Nothing But Ghosts*, and several of the stories contained in the latter were adapted for film in 2007. In 2009, she published *Alice*, five short stories that received international acclaim. Her first novel, *Where Love Beginns*, came out in 2014. It was followed in 2016 by the short story collection *Lettipark*, which was awarded the Danish Blixen Prize for Short Stories. Hermann has received numerous awards for her work, including the Kleist Prize and the Friedrich Hölderlin Prize. Her novel *Home* was published in spring 2021. It was nominated for the Leipziger Book Fair Prize and received the Bremen Literature Prize in 2022. The author lives and writes in Berlin.

Sample translation
by Katy Derbyshire

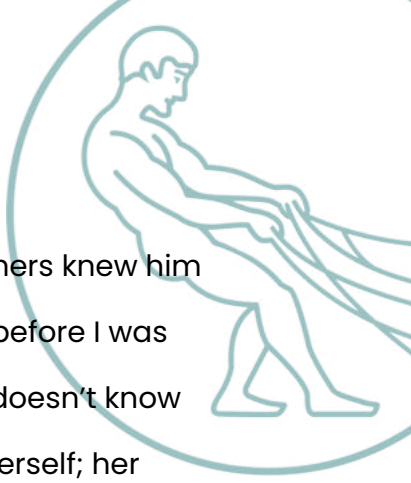
What will I leave behind, my mother asks me.
What have I got to pass on, what will be left of me once I'm gone.
She asks this question in a strange tone, both blithe and annoyed at once. She pretends she doesn't mean it quite seriously, but she obviously does mean it more than seriously; she doesn't wait for my response, answering her question herself.
She says, nothing. I'll leave nothing behind, there'll be nothing of me left.

I.

RADOM

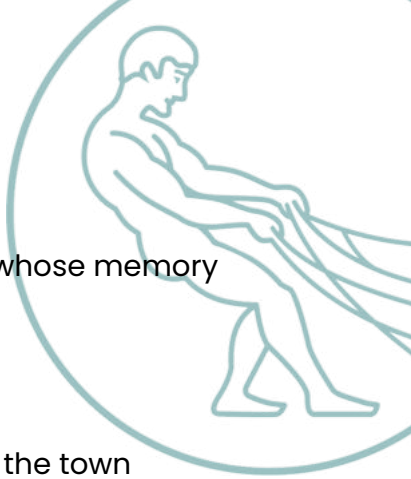
My mother remembers the tattoo under her father's left arm. On the underside of his arm, faded, pale blue, the size of a one-pfennig coin. She first saw the tattoo on his deathbed; he died in a single room in the hospital, she was twenty-one and she looked in at him through a round window in the door.
That's what she's told me. What she told me before. When I speak to her about it now, though, she says she'd always known about the tattoo, even as a child.
She says, that deathbed thing is what you make of it. Especially your notion about the round window in the door. That's what you make of it.

My almost eighty-year-old mother's memories of her father are contradictory and confused, always have been contradictory and confused. Confusion and contradiction aren't a matter of her age. My mother didn't really know her father,



my grandfather – that's how she says it, didn't really – and her brothers knew him just as little. He left the family when my mother was young, he died before I was born. It's not that she doesn't want to talk about her father, but she doesn't know what to say and she keeps what she thinks to herself. She censors herself; her brothers do the same. My grandfather's time in the SS is an open secret, it exists and is simultaneously denied. My grandfather was a convinced Nazi and on top of that he was in the Waffen-SS, the tattoo was a mark of his membership and a note of his blood group, and he obviously saw no reason to part from the tattoo after the war, to have it removed. There were people who shot themselves in the left arm; my grandfather didn't do that. He took the pale-blue marking to his grave, twenty years after the war's end.

My mother will of course leave behind having been my mother and my sister's mother. Having been the daughter of my grandparents; she has taken on her mother and father's legacy, carries it no matter its weight and will pass it on to us. Possibly after thoughts of this kind, years ago I had applied for and received permission to read his file. Before the pandemic. In my fiftieth year, at that age when we often begin to take an interest in or to confront our parents', grandparents' past; I am far from alone in my search. I had gone to the archive, had put my coat and bag in a locker, been handed a basket for my pen and notebook, and a cardboard folder. The folder was light, inside it an SS membership card, a certificate of possession for a weapon and holster, a holster, a draft letter and no more than that. I had photographed these documents and returned them, viewed the exhibition in the foyer before reclaiming my coat and bag from the locker. Eighty-year-old sound recordings. The voice of Goebbels. The bloodcurdlingly dense, feverish buzz of a crowd of people. Heat. The grounds around the archive were gravelled and in the gravel were sculptures I took for tree fungi, xylobionts, which would have been strange because tree fungi only befall



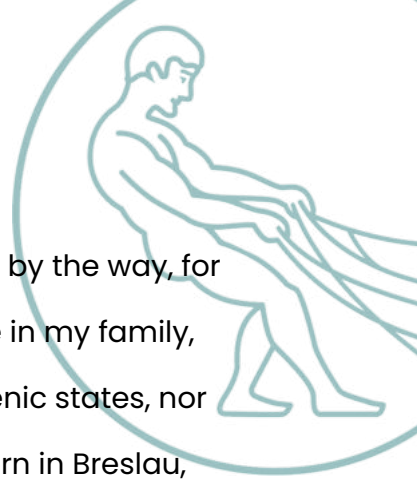
diseased trees, and if these fungi symbolised memory, the country whose memory was supposed to be represented here would have to be sick.
An ailing country.
I had waited a long time for the bus outside the archive, returned to the town empty-handed.

My mother had been unimpressed by the inconclusiveness of my research. She had been neither disappointed nor surprised. She had said she'd expected nothing else, I had asked why she'd expected nothing else, she had given me no answer. Shouldn't it have been her who went to the archive, then told me about it; we hadn't talked about why I had gone to the archive, not her. She had casually handed me a small wooden box, which she'd apparently reserved for her father. I got the impression she wouldn't have given me the box if I hadn't gone to the archive. As if she'd waited all these years – and now I had met a particular condition and we could go on.
Inside the box, I found my grandparents' marriage certificate along with their death certificates along with a release letter from an Allied prisoner-of-war camp, Certificate of Discharge, along with a pile of unsorted photos; someone had noted their places and dates on the reverse in an impartial hand. My mother couldn't match the handwriting to anyone. She said she didn't know the handwriting, it wasn't hers, wasn't her mother's or her father's either.
My grandfather in a gymnastics association. My grandfather in SS uniform. Walking along a tree-lined road, towards someone he is pleased to see. On the day of his wedding, an SS a guard of honour outside the registry office. My grandfather on the edge of a forest between dark firs in a buttoned coat, noticeably polished shoes and the ambiguous smile of a fairground showman on his face. My grandfather in July 1941, on an SS motorcycle in Radom, Poland.

What was he doing there, in Eastern Europe, in Poland, in the summer of 1941 in the central zone of all horror.
I had asked my mother that question; she had shrugged and raised empty hands of her own. She didn't know what her father had done in Poland. She knew the Germans had occupied Poland, that there'd been a ghetto in Radom. She knew that, at least.

My grandfather was born in Berlin in 1904, his father was a teacher, his mother died young. He was ten when the first world war broke out, fourteen when it ended. He trained as a druggist and gained his apprenticeship with the lowest possible grades, he did something in retail, presumably selling soap. Buttons. He joined the NSDAP in 1932. Without much fuss; he appears not to have hesitated. He married my grandmother, had three children, two sons during the war and my mother in November 1945.
He disappeared.
Came back and left the family for good, he got a divorce in the mid-1950s. He was, according to the marriage certificate, of Protestant faith. I am his first grandchild, but he died in 1964, six years before I was born.
That was what I knew of my grandfather.
I knew no more than that.

That comment of my mother's that I was making a story out of my grandfather haunted me. She said thing but she meant story, thought a story was unseemly here; she wasn't wrong. Was the unseemly thing embellishing a serious family matter with the odd invented detail or two. I could have said, but I have to make a story, some kind of story in any case, I have no other option, I have to think up this grandfather because you won't tell me anything about him. If I think him up, I've engaged with him. Engaging with him lessens the distance I need to be able to



see him, I could have said; that's a pretty complicated undertaking, by the way, for a story. On top of all that, this grandfather, unlike most other people in my family, possesses no literary repertoire. Neither melancholia, nor neurasthenic states, nor weakness; if he was superstitious, he kept it to himself. He wasn't born in Breslau, didn't have a squint, possessed nothing that I still treasure today; there is something swathing him that is more than dark, I have to put it like that. My grandfather is not a literary character. He is a void, and at the same time he's the opposite, he's a terrible blind spot, I can't manage to capture him. He has no story so I can't make one out of him. My grandfather dwells in a world in between, and I ask myself, could I have said to my mother, I do wonder if I'll be redeeming him if I think of him.

My grandfather is a cold case in every respect.

This past winter, my mother suffered what's called a transient global amnesia, out of nowhere. All-encompassing memory loss, temporary but terrifying; from one moment to the next, my mother no longer knew who she was. Nor did she know who we were.

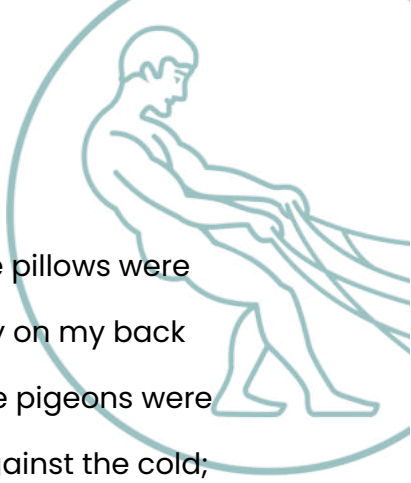
She knew neither where she was, nor where she came from or where she'd been intending to go. For several frightening hours, she knew nothing at all, and she gave the impression it didn't matter to her – then everything came back to her. She had gone, then she returned to us.

The amnesia didn't change anything about my mother's general ability to remember. No surprising memories surfaced that had previously been buried, and the memories my mother possessed remained untouched. What happened was, though, that I couldn't stand the idea of her possibly losing her memory again, or her going before I'd found out something about her father and thus about her. My mother's amnesia led to me going to Poland.

If not now, when.

I took the train to Radom in February. Coincidentally, I left unintentionally on the anniversary of my grandfather's death; I hadn't connected my departure to the date, let alone known anything of it. My mother had pointed it out when she said goodbye, in the casual tone she adopted when she spoke about her father.
She'd said, You're leaving on the day my father died.
I had found that fairly amazing; she hadn't. Perhaps she'd tried not to dramatize the start of my trip, because the end of the trip was dangerously uncertain; now, though, I think my mother chooses to find very few things amazing, in general. My train did indeed cross the River Oder at around the time noted on my grandfather's death certificate. Sixty years after his death. The Oder was green, holms along the Polish bank, swans and winter undergrowth, patches of unthawed snow beneath spruce trees, slate-coloured sky, then I was on the other side. I changed trains in Warsaw, arrived in Radom in the early evening.

Radom is in the southeast of Poland. Between Warsaw and Krakow, between the Vistula and the Holy Cross Mountains, a small Polish town with a teacher-training college, a university and a theatre, a cinema, two museums and factories for weapons and precision engineering. I had rented an apartment online, close to the station and facing the Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I knew nothing about Radom. The flat was on the third floor of an apartment building's annexe, where every door had five or six locks and was also barred; mine was the only one with no bars and a single lock but it looked as advertised, large, unpersonal, pleasantly empty. On the evening I arrived, I crawled underneath the desk to connect my laptop's charging cable. I opened all the windows, moved three chairs and deposited the black-and-white photos of the Eifel Tower and the Jardin Luxembourg in the wardrobe. The crockery in the kitchen cupboard was random and chipped; I fished through it and picked a green cup and a plate with blue



edging. I ate the last remains of the day's food and went to bed. The pillows were cold, in the apartment above people paced quietly, barefoot as I lay on my back and listened, then I fell asleep. When I awoke the next morning, three pigeons were perched on the balcony table, heads in their plumage, puffed up against the cold; the apartment seemed to be largely unused. The large room was warm and bright, the view from the windows surprisingly far. Pines and spruces, low houses, wintery gardens all the way to the cathedral. I left my things in my suitcase, all February long.

I flipped it open, pushed it into a corner of the room but unpacked only books, PG Tips, the box of my grandfather's papers and the unremarkable but important things I wanted on the desk. For all the weeks, I had the feeling I might have to leave in a hurry, so I left the suitcase the way it was. I put the books on the wide windowsill and hung a picture above the desk that I'd brought along from my writing room in Berlin, a framed photograph of my mother as a happy child on the day of her confirmation. In Berlin, the photo had been one of many in the midst of a salon hang; on the empty wall of the Radom apartment, it changed drastically. Had it shown mainly my mother, in Berlin, in Radom it now showed my mother and her family, a fact I had paid remarkably little attention to, previously. It showed me, above all and as if for the very first time, my grandfather. Behind my mother. Hands placed gently upon her narrow shoulders. My mother is wearing a special dress with an embroidered collar, my grandfather a suit, the unknown person taking the photo is saying something that makes everyone smile. My grandmother is looking up at my grandfather in tender, proud devotion. The family is interconnected, my mother's older brother holding his sister's left hand, her middle brother the right hand, both of them smiling broadly and unselfconsciously at the camera. My grandfather, fifteen years after the war's end, is markedly present. His

smile is restrained. He's the only one not showing his teeth. How could his children, how could my mother insist on not having known this father.

In Radom I went into town every afternoon, a little further every day. I wanted to know something about the year in which my grandfather had been here; I had assumed the town had been awaiting me and would now somehow dictate, lay out a series of required steps, but it didn't, so I went out in search of something, I didn't know what. The February was icy cold, the light came late, the darkness early, I wrapped up warm and went down to the park I could see from my windows, Tadeusz Kościuszko Park. Through the park to Antonio Corazziego Square, then along Żeromskiego to Wałowa, from Wałowa to the market square, into the industrial estates beyond, into wastelands, then back to the house in a wide curve. I drank coffee in a kawiarnia where the waitress wanted to foist the English menu upon me before I'd removed my hat, taken off my coat; I asked in German for the Polish menu, we battled it out, and eventually she reluctantly conceded and I ordered something that turned out, fortunately, to be sweet braided bread with cinnamon. I sat by the window and looked out onto Żeromskiego, where German soldiers, after invading Poland – long ago, only yesterday – had once dismantled the street signs and renamed the roads previously dedicated to freedom fighters, architects, writers, calling them Adolf-Hitler-Platz, Pappelallee and Lindenstrasse; they had had the gall to do so, but later the Poles had changed them all back, hopefully forever. In that kawiarnia with a view of the beautiful eclectic Karschów Palace, of the Stanisława Biskupa garrison church and the classicist Kierzkowski Palais, I read Mitscherlich's The Inability to Mourn. I read, Denial is a defence mechanism related to disturbing perceptions of external reality; disturbing perceptions are those the accurate perception of which causes unpleasure. Repression refers to the unpleasure-producing perception of one's own instinctual impulses. In common

parlance, the term ‘repression’ is incorrectly applied to all attempts to avoid disturbing experiences, I had a pencil at hand and took notes, underlining whole pages at a time. We must accept the multiplicity of the systems governing human behaviour; this is an historical necessity to which we must yield. The blind fury with which the bogey of communism is raised in the West and, conversely, that of capitalism, revanchism, etc. in the East, is a manifestation of the tremendous surplus of aggressive drive which (as in the days of the Crusades) must immediately be channelled outwards – I underlined that.

It was definitely the case that I saw myself from outside.

A fairground show-woman, performing myself to some extent. A pale German in a woollen sweater, wrist-warmers and reading glasses at the window table of a kawiarnia in Radom, Poland, eighty years after the war’s end, pencilling scattered notes into Mitscherlich’s Inability, a performance that was clearly dubious, if not completely amiss, but I intended to bear with it. I could have read it in the apartment, I could have read it in Berlin or wherever I was, I could have read it years ago in the first place, but I hadn’t. I read it in Radom. I had taken the train to Radom to read Mitscherlich. That was how it was, and the waitress also ignored it, she spared the book and she spared me, the bread was milky white and sweet, the coffee so strong it gave me ecstatic palpitations, it was warm in the kawiarnia, by some wonder they never played music, and I went there several times, always with Mitscherlich.

At home, in the apartment on Waryńskiego, named after the founder of the first Polish workers’ party, I read Babel. Bunin. I had brought along a small, chaotic library to Poland, an intuitive and overwhelmed selection of books that had more or less fallen from the shelves of my Berlin apartment into my fluttering hands, I had packed them as they’d fallen, these books had forced themselves on me or affiliated themselves with me, they had surrendered. Dagerman’s German Autumn, Wodin’s She Came from Mariupol, Miłosz’s The Issa Valley. Should I have

tried to read different books in Radom, in a different order. Tried to read something contemporary, what they call new, new thoughts; decades had passed in all these countries and there was still a war on, the war had shifted position, expanded, spoiled. It hadn't stopped. My awkward selection was irrevocable. I read Kaminski's Kith and Kin, a book that annoyed me incredibly after the halfway mark, then Langer's Nine Gates and Singer's A Day of Pleasure, I read Gombrowicz's Pornografia and Gombrowicz's Ferdydurke and now I wonder whether that reading, aside from the selection, was repression or denial; it was certainly surprisingly nervous. I broke it off. I switched straight to Ford's The Sportswriter, Ford too having joined me on my trip to Radom, and then Naipaul's Miguel Street, and that book was a consoling book in which, far away in Port of Spain, Trinidad, on the Gulf of Paria, a carpenter builds something that refuses to take shape; he calls it thing without a name, I underlined that and then I felt better.

I read poems. I looked up from the book of poems, past the line what can we express we can express nothing the fire beneath the stove ring Nasti making pancakes, past that line and out of the window and I watched a man in a blue tracksuit pulling a handcart full of glass bottles along a slabbed path between buildings, a woman in a dressing gown and fur boots feeding a pack of fat stray cats, I heard the bells of the cathedral ringing for an incomprehensibly long time. I sat, head propped on my hands, at the desk and looked out at that cathedral, then I got up, went as far away as possible from the desk, did something else.

I went out. I went to the small cluttered sklep in the building across the road and bought linseed oil, white cheese, pale sour gherkins straight from the wooden barrel, I bought dill, humpy potatoes, horseradish, winter apples. I ate at the table in the middle of the room while watching the previous day's German news on my laptop. The internet was blocked, it was impossible to watch current news and so I ended up in a time loop, which suited my state of affairs. The news was unchanged, all ceasefires immediately broken again, a new minefield every day,

cities reduced to rubble, drones above the borders, the self-same landscape of ruins, and by watching what had happened yesterday I was anticipating what would happen tomorrow, it was too simple, but that's how it was.

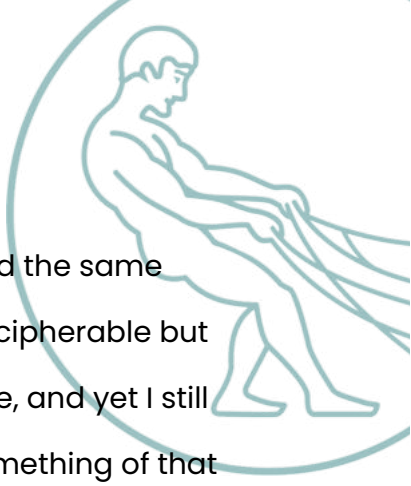
[…]

II.

NAPOLI

From Krakow, I continued to Naples. Looking back, I can't explain how this journey came about across troubled Europe, a continent startled by the global situation; in Krakow, I was in the south and since I was already travelling, I continued my journey all the way to Naples to visit my sister, who has lived there for years, and that was all, it just came out that way. But of course, with a certain wistful distance, it now seems significant.

I took the train from Krakow to Vienna and went to the Jewish Museum to see the exhibition The Third Generation – the Holocaust in Family Memory, and I simply lost my nerve at the very beginning, beside the Holocaust survivor Uri Ben-Rehav's model railway car, a model of the cattle car in which he was deported with his mother and brother. I lost it quietly, inside my head. A clip from the film Back to the Fatherland was projected on a small screen, in which Uri Ben-Rehav visits his grandson Guy in Vienna, takes a tram with him and talks about the fear he felt when he was arrested on a tram by a Gestapo officer because he, a Jew, was wearing the colours of the National Socialist Reich. In the film, Uri Ben-Rehav's voice fails in remembering that fear and he turns away from the camera, looks out onto Kärntner Ring, then closes his eyes. Guy takes his grandfather's hand in his. The Germans were bad people and they have remained bad people and they will remain bad people. I stood in front of the screen and in my head I lost my nerve for Uri Ben-Rehav, but I also lost it for my grandfather and me. I was still running a fever and I felt genuinely abandoned. In the sense of the Holocaust in family memory, I too was part of a third generation, the generation of the perpetrators' grandchildren, and understandably there was no museum for this generation and no counterpart, no one who would have taken my hand. That doesn't leave me



cold. It does leaves its traces inside me. That was what Guy said, and the same went for me; my grandfather's life had left its traces inside me, indecipherable but clear, and of course the same goes for all of us, ultimately, it's simple, and yet I still lost my nerve. The exhibition's leitmotif was silence. I understood something of that silence. The walls were hung with black-and-white photos of vineyards in winter, which reminded even the survivors' grandchildren of a concentration-camp roll-call area. I saw the roll-call area too, but unlike the survivors' grandchildren I had, in a grotesque contortion, neither cause to see it nor reason for those feelings; I had no entitlement. My mental world, so I perceived it, is a narrative without language.

I took the train via Innsbruck, on to the Brenner Pass, and between Vienna and Innsbruck the speed slowed, the train came to a stop. My fellow passengers looked up from their phones and out of the window, they rolled their eyes and said, Oh, Deutschland. The train stood still for a while, a pause for thought. It moved off again, accelerated, carried us back to Austria. I alighted in Innsbruck and immediately continued my journey to the Brenner, not wanting to be in Austria any longer, not wanting to be anywhere any longer, I wanted to stay in motion, onwards and away. An hour in Brennero, of which I had read that it was Europe's pain threshold; on this piatta, Hitler and Mussolini had shaken hands, made plans in a lounge car, snow had fallen, German soldiers had waited in the sleet for permission to stand down, to get back into the warm and dry, the conversation had lasted two and a half hours; the station seemed unchanged since then. I dragged my case, which was light because I had sent all my belongings in a parcel, uncertain whether it would ever arrive, and I would have been more than content with that parcel's possible disappearance, I dragged my light suitcase past history into an Italian restaurant on the other side of the tracks; I hadn't been to a restaurant for weeks. I sat down at a small table between rosy-cheeked

overheated families who had spent all day outside, perhaps skiing, though I hadn't seen snow out of the train window, only snow on the peaks; the slopes had been grey and bare. When had I last felt as snug as in that Italian restaurant opposite the ghostly station, with a bowl of hot soup and a glass of wine, between all places; no one knew where I was, I was at the pass.

Between the mountains. At the bottom. Without possessions, at the end of a phase, occupied with all kinds of questions and with a ticket for the night train to Roma Termini in the pocket of my coat with which I had come through the Radom winter in one piece. I sat at my table among the others in that state of gratitude for three quarters of an hour, then I paid, dragged my case back to the station now being dusted with a fine layer of snow, isolated, bewildered flakes that settled on the ballast and the slopes. The train was already waiting on the tracks, dark and locked, as an ice-cold wind ambled along the platform and I waited patiently and in agreement for the doors to open.

My sister has lived in Italy for years. She's an archaeologist, she studied in Berlin and Rome, got her PhD in Bergamo, lived for a long time in the Sassi of Matera. Her field is graves, so not just the past, but beyond that, the dead of the past, a specialist field that could almost have been amusing, in relation to my field. It wasn't related, though. Quite the opposite. My sister and I never talk about these connections. When we're asked in new company about our work, my sister says, pointing first at me and then at herself: She writes, I dig. I agree with her. We say no more than that.

The distance is mutual.

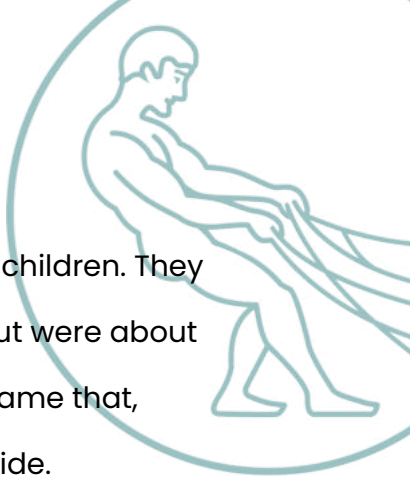
My sister doesn't ask me about my work, I don't ask about hers; as far as I can remember, it had always been that way and it barely changes. During the years when my sister was a student in Berlin, it seemed to me as if she'd chosen archaeology because the Archaeological Institute was the most remote. On the

margins. It was at the end of a corridor, behind the archives; I had picked my sister up there occasionally and spent a long time looking for her, all the rooms had been pitch-black, only in the last had a projector cast yellowed photos of ruins onto the wall, isolated students sitting at crooked desks in the twilight, most of their heads resting on the wood. I could have asked my sister why she'd chosen that faculty and I didn't ask her, I assume I had enough to do with my own matters. Then she went to Rome.

In Rome, I visited her once in the early nineties. She was sharing an apartment with other archaeology students, an apartment that reminded me of the institute in Berlin; in Rome, too, the rooms were dusty and dark, in each of them a person pondering at a desk, backs turned to the others, occupied with something that was hard to convey and long gone. My sister's room was a spacious closet with two doors. One led inside, the second onto the French balcony. Inside the closet were a bunkbed and a chair, no room for anything else. My sister slept on the top bunk and studied on the bottom bunk. When I visited I slept at the bottom, smoothed the sheets in the morning and stepped out into the balcony in my nightshirt to brush my teeth while my sister came down from the top bunk, arrayed her books and papers on the bottom one, dressed and left the closet, returning with a Bialetti of espresso and two cups on a tiny tray, during which time I had dressed. I drank my espresso on the balcony, she drank her espresso on the edge of the bed, then we left the house. At grey dawn. We always left the house at dawn, it was June and the city was so baking hot even before noon that we couldn't spend time outside, aside from which, my sister was obsessed with trying to show me streets and piazzas without any people on them, and she managed it. The abandoned Campo de' Fiori, Piazza Venezia, Piazza di Spagna. Trastevere. Ponte Sant'Angelo, deserted. Piazza della Madonna dei Monti, dead. Beneath the colonnades of St Peter's Square, homeless peeled themselves out of sleeping bags and washed in the fountains. The Spanish Steps. No one on the Spanish

Steps. Rome was a vacuum, a picture by Giorgio di Chirico, and we hastened through its surreal shadows, sticking close to the palazzo walls; we didn't talk much during my visit, I can't remember a single conversation, except one in which my sister forbade personal questions of any kind.
She was twenty-two that summer. I was twenty-five. She finished her PhD in the early 2000s, married an Italian linguistics professor, started working in archaeological parks, had children and moved to the countryside. Since my sister has had children, since I've had a child, our relationship has become closer, more trusting, though I fear it has never recovered from the speechlessness of our childhood in walled-in West Berlin.

I slept deeply on the night train to Roma Termini, and when I woke the Padanian plains were outside, cypress groves and white houses, ti manca Matilda, a graffito on a low shed, the distance grey and silvery, then palms, then suburbs, balconies with satellite dishes, washing lines, awnings, then Rome station and I folded the sheets, thanked the conductor who had guarded my sleep and alighted from the train. I drank a caffè in a bar in the station concourse beside a lieutenant from the Esercito Italiano, the tenth-strongest army in the world, as far as I know, a boy in a smart green uniform with hands like shovels, the espresso cup vanished inside his fist; he squished his croissant and shoved it in his mouth as I watched him, marvelled at him. He would defend Old Europa, stations like this, cities like Rome, Padua, Bergamo, a language like Italian, a way of life, he would give the entirety of his young life for all that, and besides that for my sister, me and the children; he had promised as much. He would keep his promise. He clearly didn't yet know the slightest of all this, and I'd have liked to get him a second, a third espresso, so as to silently invoke him, to keep him from leaving, but he adjusted his beret, shouldered his kit bag and headed off; he was still at the strolling stage.
I took the train to Napoli.



There at the station stood my sister, stood her sleepy, embarrassed children. They waved at me from the distance, as wildly as if I hadn't just arrived but were about to leave again, they were actually waving me off, but then we overcame that, hugged and kissed and continued on in campagna, to the countryside.

My sister has two children, Celestina and Pepe. Celestina and Pepe often remind me of Holden Caulfield and Phoebe, but the other way around; Celestina is older than Pepe, Pepe is little. I once asked Celestina what she was reading at school, and Celestina had reluctantly said, something by this Salinger guy, this book with a sister, I'd said, you don't mean The Catcher in the Rye, she'd said, yeah, that's the one. I'd said, You've got it so good, you're so lucky to read a book like that at school, and she'd looked at me as if I were out of my mind. As if she really didn't know what was up with me. Since that look, I think of Holden and Phoebe every time I see Celestina and Pepe. They both went to village schools in campagna and now they attend schools in Naples, speak Neapolitan Italian, talk with their hands, kiss their fingertips when they're pleased, pat their right hand against the edge of the left when they want to leave, when they've had enough of something. Celestina is an apparition in which her parents' perhaps still indeterminate charms – her father's thick eyelashes, her mother's eyebrows and shell-like ears, her father's slenderness of limb and turned-up nose, her mother's long-leggedness – has united into a perfect symbiosis; Celestina is a graceful beauty and will always be a beauty. Within the family, she is subdued, deliberately caustic, solitary, and outside the family almost certainly the opposite. Pepe is spirito buono, a childish good spirit, he is gentle, pensive and sensitive. He is small for his age but he'll grow, he'll end up tall, possibly a giant like his maternal great-grandfather was a giant, but Pepe will remain a benevolent spirit, a gentle soul.

Why do I know that. Think I know that. Why can I read it in Pepe's bare blue eyes.

I don’t know it, I’m invoking it.

Between my sister and me, my sister and the family, an agreement is in place not to speak about the darkness in the world in front of the children. My sister assumes, no doubt sensibly, that the darkness in the world will reveal itself soon enough. It will come anyway, of its own accord. We can’t prevent it taking shape in the children’s world, taking a seat at the table uninvited and raising its glass, brim-full, we can’t do the slightest thing against that. But until that point, she thinks, we can refrain from speaking of it. We can ignore it, we certainly can. Simply leave murder, manslaughter, death and wars, the past, the present, the coming wars, the never-ending multitude of all possible disasters outside, for the time being. Until they kick down our doors.

My sister doesn’t believe we might prepare for the darkness. She doesn’t believe it makes sense to talk about what has happened and what might happen. Talking about it doesn’t prepare you in any way, doesn’t steel you, doesn’t train you, simply makes no sense. The darkness is too great. Talking doesn’t make it any smaller. That’s paradoxical, of course. My sister is an archaeologist, she’s constantly occupied with digging up the horrors and delights of the past, deciphering, reviving and conserving it so we can see that things have always been horrific and delightful, from the very beginning. My sister studied the paradoxical necessity of reconstructing things because they have vanished. And at the same time, she has taken a daring leap over the recent, the most recent past and rescued herself in prehistory. She conscientiously separates the past from the present, she celebrates a perpetual here and now.

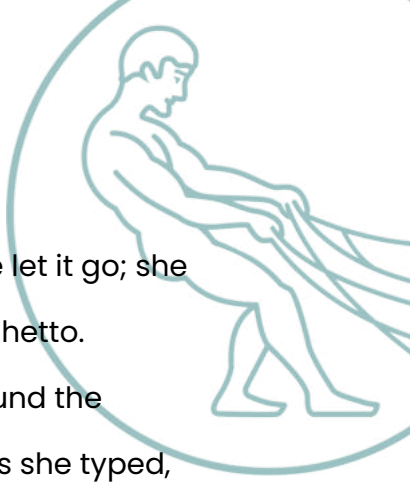
We stick to it.

We all stick to this idea of my sister’s, not among ourselves but in conversation with her and in our time spent with the children. We don’t utter the words. Climate

change, pandemic, famine, flood, earthquake victims, refugees, drought, famine, scourge of humankind, obliteration, fine.
We hold back; in a sad way, it's alright. Celestina has a phone, Pepe has one. We can assume the children know of abyss and disaster and keep it to themselves for their mother's sake, spare their mother. Presumably, they know more in the end than my sister, Carlo and I put together. Celestina and Pepe are the fourth generation.

Hence, my sister, who I haven't talked to in all my Radom weeks – I hadn't called her, she hadn't called me either, I hadn't sent her any messages, nor she to me, how easy it is to send a quick message but we had both refrained for weeks on end – used the hour on the train from Napoli to Salerno to ask me in the children's protective presence what I had found out about our grandfather's paths in Poland.

The train was hot and muggy. Loud, full of noisy chattering people, we were sitting across from each other, we had to shout to be heard. And yet I responded to my sister's question. I could have said, I'll tell you about it later. I was certain, though, that no later would come about, and so I responded. It was a manoeuvre. My sister kept me in check with warning glances, hands on her knees, fingers spread, poised to jump up and rebuke me. She focused tightly on me. I didn't pick a fight with her.
I shouted at her that it had been lonely in Radom. It was lonely in Radom!
I'd had an unusual amount of time to myself, I'd walked a lot, I'd found the place where our grandfather had been photographed back then, and here my sister interrupted me, shouting, I know, Mama told me already.
I insisted on the word SS, nonetheless.
I refrained from the word Gestapo. I shouted, the ghetto in Radom was large, was dissolved very quickly, he was bound to be involved in setting it up and clearing it, I



thought I could say that, and my sister seemed to think that too, she let it go; she counted on her children having their own, contemporary idea of a ghetto.

Her telephone rang. She rummaged persistently in her handbag, found the telephone, turned off the ring but tapped at the keys, she shouted as she typed, And what was your flat like there, and I shouted, Big.

I shouted, Towards the end I met people, talked, at the very end I celebrated sabbat, for the first time in my life.

You celebrated what.

Sabbat. On the Friday evening, at least.

My sister nodded, as if she'd heard that from our mother as well; she couldn't have heard that, I hadn't told anyone.

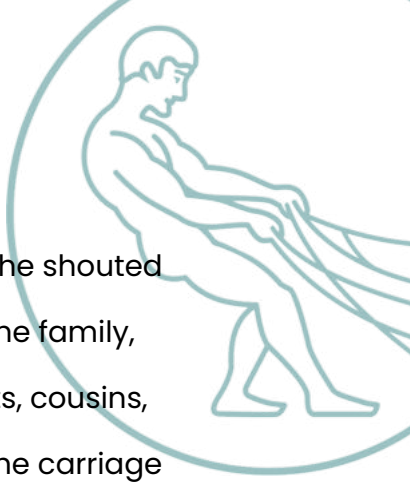
I shouted, Actually it was mainly a time during which I talked to your grandmother on the phone every evening. I looked at the beatific children nestled up to my sister, the hoods of their I love Berlin sweaters pulled over their heads, blinking like nestlings, and they were listening, and perhaps they heard everything I didn't shout. Now, I wish that were so – I'm sure they heard what I didn't shout. They're wide awake. All their instincts are there.

I leaned back; it wasn't right to talk about my time in Radom like this. I said, I spent a couple of days in Vienna on the way here and went to the Jewish Museum there, an exhibition about the third generation. You and me, we're the Third Generation. It's scientifically proven that the lives of the grandparents manifest across the parents into the grandchildren's life paths.

I said, I felt the pain and the heaviness in Radom. It's a small town. It's not like Krakow, like Warsaw, the town's too small, it's seen too much. It's hard to repress that.

I allowed myself to have said a sentence like that.

My sister cupped her ear; she understood what I said. Or she didn't understand it; either way, she let it stand. She confirmed the scientific proof with a brief incline of



her head; there was nothing to be done against proof of that kind. She shouted that it was definitely striking how inexistent our grandfather was in the family, ridiculously absent, if you like, unlike all the others, unlike great-aunts, cousins, ancestors spoken about as if they were alive, and then fortunately the carriage door opened and a man with a ukulele appeared. He strolled along the aisle, playing and singing, and my sister gave a blushing apology and started rifling through her bag for change. Pepe wanted to give him a coin. Celestina certainly didn't want to. My sister found three coins, passed them out to Pepe and me, and we gave the coins to the musician and then pulled into Salerno station, had to get off the train and never came back to all this, more or less.

We'd had a conversation that prevented a conversation.