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**Moor. A Novel**  
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**Sample translation by Nika Knight**

*The Tale of the Dragonfly in the Ray*

Long, long ago, in the murky depths of a large pond, there dwelt a dragonfly nymph and a ray fish. The ray was gluttonous, and soon tried to devour the dragonfly nymph. You may eat me up, said the nymph, if you turn me into a girl. The ray opened its mouth wide and swallowed the nymph whole. It had barely reached the ray's stomach when it turned into a girl, who lived from then on in the fish's insides. Once in a while the ray lifted itself out of the muck and climbed to the upper layers where the sun's beams still reached, so that the silhouette of a child shimmered through its white underside. The girl grew up and grew larger; soon the ray could no longer hold her. It swam to the bank and spat its dweller out. I shall set you free, said the ray, but in return, you must bring me a child. Or else, I will turn you back into a dragonfly.

The beautiful young woman brought a son into the world and lived with him happily for many years in a house on the water. When the boy was almost a man, the woman began to feel that she was starting to change. She grew wing membranes and lost weight. Again and again, she found herself drawn to the water where the ray was already waiting. One day she took her boy there with her, and despite his fear of the water he swam with her out into it. When they were far enough from the bank, she embraced him one last time, then pushed him into the depths, directly into the mouth of the ray.

But as he slid into the belly of the fish, he turned into a dragonfly nymph. The nymph was so small that it swam through the ray's innards and out of the fish, and then hid itself in

the muck. There it now waits for the summer, when it can moult and fly away, back to mother.

*one.*

### *AUTUMN*

No one speaks here. Where you lend an ear, water, alder trees, and wind pulling at the reeds is all there is. The fog, too, is soundless, has only its shape that comes out of nothingness, stares, and departs. The closest thing to words is the rain. The rain murmurs on in fluent sentences, cascades over the trees in full stops, stutters the consonants on leaves, clucks vowels in the dells, and when one falls into the other, a snarling flurry travels through the foliage, tosses up nimble waves, shatters the mist and bewilders the rushes — that's when you hear my voice.

You squat on the stump, umbrella before your face, shoulders hunched, your finger pokes into the pillows of moss at the tree roots, or is it the foliage that clings to your finger — a secret touch, somehow tender. The film on the leaves feels greasy, like the drops that you wiped out of your pajama bottoms that morning. You give this feeling the color white. The mornings with Marga at the pond are white. Her bathrobe, the steam in the ditch, the faltering light between the tree trunks and her mirror image on the water that becomes brown and transparent when the sun rises. When you were still a child you thought of cola, a deep hole filled with it where the old alder branch pokes into the water, doggedly pressing something down. You imagined what it's like to drown in the soft drink. But the tree has not yet moved, nothing emerges, now you are thirteen and when the mid-day sun is high, the water there is black, fearsome, and silent, just like it was in the dream from which Marga woke you.

All you knew was that you were naked and in the perilous deep, when she pulled the bed sheet away and your gaze, like every morning, fell on the big wall clock. Once, a kind moon the color of egg-yolk had smiled from it, but she had painted that over with a blood-red darter, a kind of dragonfly, as a birthday present. It was her first assault on your childhood: instead of the benign nightly presence, a predator insect measures the length of your dreams from the compound eyes of the clock face, which showed shortly before seven, and the room still dark. Summer was now definitively over. She pressed a kiss that smelled of sleep to your forehead, and said, Good morning, sweetheart. Shall we go to the pond?

You look at your watch. It's already almost half past seven. In forty minutes your German class begins and you'll have to give your presentation, topic: the dragonfly. You would have liked to practice it with your mother. She stands on the bank in her nightgown; through the damp fabric the contours of her body begin to show — breast, hipbones, the knobs of her spine — as though under a second skin. She peels herself out of it, shouts, Look at the alders! and tosses the bundle to you. You stretch your hand out, an automatic movement, rehearsed in all weather on countless mornings; you literally do it in your sleep, for your exhaustion returns and transfixes your gaze and it lingers a second too long on the nest between her thighs, which she simultaneously turns toward you in her throwing motion and conceals, one arm half outstretched, the other folded over her lap, as if they were two tentatively fanned out wings. When a dragonfly molts, you say in your presentation, its new body is still foreign to it. The moment dawns on you belatedly, in slow motion, just like this morning when you looked at the wooden clock and the second hand on the insect didn't seem to stir, until it jumped to the next digit.

The nightgown claps you coldly in the face, and you startle. She has undressed in front of you every day, but now you understand for the first time why you always had to look at the alders. She rolls her shoulders, stretches her back, is already standing with her feet in the

water. You are freezing from your neck downward — it's only your cheeks that suddenly feel the heat. How she performs her nakedness. Your gaze flits to the opposite bank. The alders are everywhere, the alders surround the whole pond, the first splintered branch catches your eye. In the dream, you remember, you were at this place in the water, trapped in the thunderous darkness, and when you tried to cry for help, the peat flooded your mouth. Your body swelled against your skin from the inside until it burst into pieces. Then the branch must have jerked you up, and your eyes snapped open.

Too late, she's already holding you in her hand. You shoved her away and turned over into the gap between the wall and the mattress. The erection feels different, harder, demanding; it wasn't as accidental as yesterday when, still asleep, you had approached the precipitous climax and awoken from the sudden sensation of pressure. The dragonfly on the clock also seemed redder to you, lurking, the mouthparts only seemed to hasten the next lurch of the second hand. Marga bent over you. You felt her weight on your neck and smelled the bath oil, lavender, her so-called good-feeling smell that she lounged around in until midnight. You could barely breathe. The air dammed up in your collar. The moisture also released smells from deep layers of skin: bitter sleep-sweat stirred up by her pills, trails of perfume and cold smoke, and underneath that something sour, stale, from her boozing the night before or from the pond, still. You closed your eyes to create more room for yourself. You were wishing yourself back to sleep when she positioned your hand under her nightgown, on her belly button. Further down there was the hair, softer than cotton grass but more bristled than the moss on the tree stump. Tonight, she said, she dreamed that she was pregnant with you again. You've imagined the knotted naval hole with the grassy gap underneath it as an entrance to a swim bladder filled with water from the moor, which squeezed out a mute, slippery creature, you, Dion, the pliant boy with the strange name, for which you've earned nothing but ridicule and laughter. *All the children are brought by the stork – all except Dion, who was made by the moor*, that was the adage when you stumbled into kindergarten from the

pond in the mornings, wet with rain and wearing dirty shoes, past the other mothers who had bundled their children up dry and warm. Am I not enough for you, Marga had replied, when you asked her once again about your father. Truthfully, you don't look like any man in the village, and barely like your mother. She is straw-blond, you have moor-brown hair tinged with red, freckles on your nose that bloom with the heather in August, your birth month, on slack, slightly sallow skin that is just as pale in the summer as it is in winter, it can't bear the heat and threatens to dissipate in the sun like the morning fog. Marga's eyes reflect the greys and cobalt blues of the sky, but yours would rather stare into the dark pond toward the dragonfly nymphs, which, in order to to molt, climb up to the light.

Even your language allegedly comes from me. Gorbach, the class teacher, pinned that on you when only bubbles spilled over your lips as you read from your German book. You are mute as a pond, he had groaned, and then shouted. The class giggled. Benno, who sat next to you, read effortlessly. Under your tongue, saliva dammed up, dripping and dribbling like the hidden rivulets of the moor's channels, where the water rises and falls but still never flows. When reading aloud, asking questions and presenting, the words well up in your mouth, cleanly arranged into long, flowing sentences — sentences that then burst into the world like spit blisters, amidst and within your stammering and within your longing for a different and hazard-free language without sound and sharp edges, soft and immaculate as the morning silence at the pond. You want to only speak in the noise of the moor, to pierce your silence with my voice, whispering in rain, howling in storms, and when you still get stuck stuttering on a word the others will only hear the pattering on the eaves or the quiet cracking of dead wood outside in the bog.

At some point you were outside of the closeness of her embrace and then, with a leap, in front of the open closet door, which halfway concealed your arousal. She stood up, went to the window, and was suddenly very white before the shining day. I met your prick when it

was still just a nymph, she said into the dawn light. She spoke in the mist that would surely soon become rain again, with a voice that sounded sharp and pained like it always did when you had angered her. An agonizing, long moment of the impulse to take her in your arms and comfort her for something that you couldn't name. Still angry about yesterday?, she asked and came over to you, and that's when you saw her broken lip for the first time.

The condition of her mouth has always been a gauge of her feelings. You can literally read her mood from her lips — smooth means good, cracked a bad day when she couldn't paint and chewed on her lower lip, had a sleepless night or did something she now regrets. Your mother's mouth and moods are seldom without fissures and wounds. Ute is sick, that's why she had to fill in. She laid a hand on your shoulder, you brushed it off and at the same time wanted to take it and press it tightly to you. The gallery was so busy, she added, no time to call, an assertion you've never believed. She said it reproachfully, as if Ute had kept her from you, the gallery owner who once left Hamburg to pick out paintings with her, and had once even asked you your favorites. You had pointed to the moor paintings, which you like — birch stumps like skeletons, a thunderstorm over the pond where clouds clench into grimaces. Ute said, pretty, and decided on the nudes, mostly self-portraits that your mother puts up every Wednesday since then, when the art market in your neighborhood happens and the gallery allegedly overflows with tourists.

As soon as you are out of the house, she drives off with a trunk full of nudes and returns late at night with the same. You've gotten used to counting the paintings as you help her load and unload, and not a single one has ever been missing. When she comes home around midnight, her mood is wretched. She smokes two cigarettes on the patio and hastily downs a glass of wine in the kitchen. You hear her coming and quickly stick your diary in the gap beside your bed. Are you writing mean things about me again, she smirks, pulls the pen out of your hand and lies down in cold clothes beside you. She lies there motionless for a few

minutes and breathes heavily. What did you do?, she asks, even though she knows. You were, like always, at school in the morning, later doing homework, and after that outside at the remote pond, where you searched in the bracken and the stalks of the beak-sedges for the molted skins of dragonfly larvae, for your collection. You prop your head in your hands and look at her. Sometimes her nostrils quiver, strands of hair lying across her mouth shiver with her breath, an eyelid twitches. She acts as if she's sleeping but you know that she still wants something. Despite powder she looks pale and worn out to you, the kohl around her eyes has run, she's already wiped off her lipstick and applied lip balm; with all the layers on her face, your mother is always a bit foreign to you. On Wednesdays she often has no time or desire to go to the pond, she puts on black tights, dabs perfume on her neck and teases her hair, the bathroom is occupied for hours and you pee on a fence on your way to school. In the mornings she hums along with radio hits and in the evening she flies over the pigsty she's created. At first her mouth is blood red and then, after she returns, white from the cream. You've never liked Wednesday; it makes you lonely and sad, and Marga doesn't do well with it. You look to her mouth for a clue as to why Wednesday is an evil day, but because of the grease on it you can't see how she's actually doing. She turns toward you, pulls a face and demands her deserved kiss. You bend over her, take the strands of hair between her lips and lay them on her temple. She says, Everything is good again.

But yesterday, Dion, was not Wednesday at all and she was nevertheless out until late at night. After school a piece of notepaper lay on the table: Must go to the gallery. And then underneath, in her style of childlike handwriting: Don't forget to eat. Your stomach clenched, a pain began to dig into it, bites from a jaw studded with teeth. You lifted the cover from the pot, inside was the fragrant everything-soup, so called because practically everything yielded by the cupboard can be boiled away in the broth. At least she had prepared your favorite dish, which you then, however, refused, in protest against her lies. After all, in the barn no paintings were missing, all of the trunk nudes stood around, your mother posed on them,

dangerously wasting away, with her legs astraddle and between her thighs a black slash, no cotton grass nest, a deep slit, the art market had never been on Tuesday. The pain chewed and devoured, you sniffed the tubes of paint and cans of turpentine, the smell of the solvent tore the wound in your stomach deeper still — a red feeling, because it made you suddenly think of the sundew, of when you flick the tiny mosquitoes from your arm onto the moor plant's tentacles, shining like drops of blood, which immediately grasp and begin to digest the living bodies of their victims.

In your mind you'd already insulted her horribly and scribbled down suspicions in your notebook. The rest of the afternoon was then spent huddled in your room, always with an eye on the Heidedamm, where no cars drive by except for the tractor and her old Ford. You ran through your presentation in your head, over and over, in order to pass the time. But the hope, that you'd be able to rehearse the presentation with her at least once, was destroyed, eaten up by this feeling that was still more torturous than the ridicule of your classmates and your fear of stuttering. It even seemed as though the hand on the dragonfly clock was braking, with every glance at the wall it became slower, crawling, shuddering forth, crawling again, until just past four. You flung yourself onto your bed, lay there motionless and watched how the dragonfly tore time from your body with its pincers. Then it was suddenly five, on Wednesdays at five she calls from the gallery and wants to know if you've eaten, finished your homework, and cleaned your room. Sometimes, if no one is listening just then, she quietly asks you if you miss her. You are out of bed and downstairs to the phone, but at quarter after the thing was still silent and the hole in your stomach so big that the house, the Heidedamm, the village and the whole moor with its eternally displaced sky threatened to disappear. At some point you picked up the receiver and, in the empty sound, heard my voice.

She came home late, later than ever; the dragonfly, fat and bloated, sat at a quarter past one. You listened to the crunching of the tires on the gravel until the Ford's motor fell silent,

then turned off the light and pretended to be asleep. It wasn't until after at least three cigarettes that she closed the patio door. In the kitchen a cork popped, and then it was still for a long time; sleep beckoned and tugged, but you stubbornly braced yourself against it. Scraps of dreams stuck to your field of vision, you saw her standing in the doorway when you blinked. Then you felt her. A tremor went through the mattress, you pressed yourself into the gap. Now she was so close that she was blowing her breath into your nose, it stank of cigarettes and wine. Suddenly her body began to shake; she laid a heavy leg on you and pressed her face to your neck, which became warm and moist after a while. Although it itched like crazy, you didn't move. Under the blanket, she dragged your arm forward and forced it around her body, and as if the gesture loosened a deep paralysis in you, you finally pulled her to you. The itch subsided, nothing moved anymore. Only the gaze of the dragonfly roamed from your feet, across your bodies, to your heads and through the red night back to your feet again, minutes in which you were once again the child who felt for the strands of hair that fell across her cheeks and wished to never sleep differently, to be no one else, to stay just as you were, never differently, with her. Then she turned her head, perhaps surprised, herself, at the sudden closeness; instead of the strands of hair you closed your mouth on the scab on her lips. She tasted like the pond, a little bitter and rusty. You had tried a drop only once — licked it, seduced by the color, from the palm of your hand, and the ferric broth of the moor so nauseated you that you spat it out again. The disappointment was similar, colorless and deaf, not actually a feeling but closer to something that was suddenly lacking.

You pushed her away and got to the light switch. She wiped the tears from her cheeks, propped herself up and said, Everything is good again, but you knew that the sentence, just like the note from the morning, was lying. Her dress, too, looked like a betrayal to you. It didn't belong to her Wednesday outfits, and it was red. The good night kiss was botched, the child swindled by its mother, the pond had never tasted like cola but rather always a little like old blood; it is becoming time, Dion, that I tell you the truth above all else. She saw your

distrusting face, turned off the light, and went to the bathroom, where you listened to the splashing in the tub for a long time until I plunged her in the water, and you in sleep.

You startle out of your thoughts. She's already standing up to her hips in the pond, splashing around, slinging her arms around her chest — the preface to her rain pantomime, which is, in your diary, what you call the swim theater that she puts on each morning in such lousy weather. You know what comes next just as much by heart as you do your presentation, which, you confirm with another glance at your watch, must come out of your mind, onto your tongue and out into the world in less than half an hour. You run through the presentation in your head again, sentence after sentence to stutter points, you strike out sequences of consonants or replace them with words of similar meaning that have fewer threatening barbs. Meanwhile, you don't let your mother out of sight, even shoot her a smile, you are such a sweet child. She pins her hair up with a clasp, which makes little sense because it already sticks wetly to the nape of her neck. Soon she will dive in, making the mimosas dance, although the water is warmer than the air, from the summer. Then she swims with her giraffe neck, as if to spare her hair, one loop around and then back to the bank, where you, with the umbrella, must collect her and lead her to her bathrobe. She finds this funny, to you it seems childish, but she knows that you can't refuse her any request, like this morning when she still talked you into it.

If she had asked just once about your presentation. The imminent morning ritual seemed irritating to you now, an absurd impulse to swim at a time when other people are eating breakfast, still sleeping, or already working. You had once believed that the pond made your mother younger. As long as she went to the water in the morning, it would be a good day; danger threatened when she overslept the trip. After swimming, her face was often youthful and full of smiles, on sleep days it was crumpled and cold as if carved out of stone. You wanted the young Marga who wore short skirts even when she cleaned; the stony one

scares you even now — she hunkers down in a chair until evening, the nightgown clinging to her body like a skin made of mildew, her uncombed hair across her brow like spider webs and the eyes behind it like those of the church's Jesus statue, which the sculptor forgot to paint on. The stone mother cooks no everything-soup, butters no lunch bread, smokes from her oral cavity and swallows gravel-sized pills. You haul the tomb-heavy Marga to bed so that she can sleep herself alive again. You inch her feet up the steps and pray that she will hold onto the banister, just don't tip over now, you think, and shatter. The whimpering coming from her becomes heavier with each step until it is finally more like a creaking. You push and sweat, roll the mother onto the steps like Sisyphus rolled the boulder up the mountain. On stone days she can't go to the pond, she would sink on the spot, pulling her out would require ropes, winches, and the tractor, and it would be too late by then, and so you wrap the cold body in the blanket.

She pointed to the window and tugged at your sleeve as she always did when she wanted you to do something for her — mow the lawn, write to the agency, or massage her back in bed at night when she comes back from the studio and is completely crooked from staring and sketching. Do I have to come?, you wanted to respond, but you had already choked on the D in *Do*. The D is so fat and round and yet it still lodges in your throat, and then in its wake comes the hard C, which is essentially a K, and the letter K has always been your mortal enemy. It's so barbed, just like it looks, four zags with a sharp sound. A D sound and a K sound – by the end of *Do I have to come* your mouth was waging a hopeless war, slaughtering all the combat-ready vowels and bringing down the timid and defenseless *I* that had ventured between the fronts. You choked it back and fell silent before the end of the sentence. When a K sound and a D sound are deployed together, all you can do is raise your weapons. For example, the pronunciation of your name: Dion Katthusen, a massacre when Marga isn't home and you have to pick up the phone. During group introductions, like at the beginning of the school year or in your confirmation group, you survive only under the shelter

of the letter H in the middle of your last name, which lets you draw in air and gain time because it is almost invisible, or even soundless, soft and light as wind in the thorny rushes.

When you speak you imagine an exhalation around all the words, you wrap the rubble of your thoughts, troubled rank and file that require syllables and sentences, and say: *hDihon hKatt-husen* and *hDo hI have hto hcome*. Your speech evaporates into vagueness and haze, what you want dissolves and you hardly know who you are. You shift through the world with your secret like an aimless, wandering bank of fog above the treacherous waterland; no wonder, Dion, that everyone wonders what you have to do with me.

Only the mother understands her stuttering child. You never needed to finish the sentence. But she does everything for you, she said, and gestured half toward you, half to the window, a movement that captured nothing and included everything, you, the house, the village, a deep sky, the barn with all the useless paintings in it, her work in Hamburg, the day before, which you still don't want to forgive. You walked by her and looked out to me. The rain whispered at the window. You've never really understood this sentence, but you always knew what she'd add after a short pause. So you don't love me anymore?, she asked after two slow, threatening seconds. She knew the answer already. The *hNo* stuck in your throat, came too late and then with so much H that you could barely hear it yourself. Then she finally picked up her swim bag, grinned happily and boxed you to the door. She grabbed the umbrella from the bucket downstairs and opened it wide. Then she propelled you out into the rain.

Twenty before eight. She is still not on the opposite bank; she even, to your annoyance, took the long way around, over the opening of the trench out of which seepage water flows. She carves a path in the carpet of greenery, leaves and torn up alder catkins sink in the eddies under her hands. The second hand on your watch hurries from mark to mark, you want to throw on its brakes and at the same time drive your mother forward, nineteen minutes to go, and then you'll have to speak.

She actually thinks that the assignment is to write an essay. She doesn't seem to hear your stutter, or she hears it and it doesn't bother her, she hears and sees your torments and battles day after day and is just glad to have a son who doesn't constantly blabber and crow, out of a hundred children, she said one time as she laid her finger on your struggling mouth, I would sound you out immediately. But she lied, Dion. What is true is that out of a hundred children, you are lost. In front of the twenty in your class, you've already had your language switched out from under you, when you were about to name the topic of your speech, Gorbach, thinking he was helping, wrote on the chalkboard: *The Life Cycle of the Dragonfly*. Someone moaned, irritated, from the rows of desks, in the very back David Voss raised his hand and called out, *Don't you spell "cycle" with an H in the middle?* With just the title alone, the whole thing is already gone. You were planning to say "the life" instead of "the life cycle". Better still would have been "the behavior" — you could have at least ducked under the H — but you didn't think of it until too late. Now your saliva has dried up, your hands are beginning to shake, on the sheets of paper the text is slipping, seven pages of conscientiously formulated sentences, although Gorbach only allowed keywords.

For days on end, you had pored over the H pages of the dictionary. At every half-sentence you hook in a few extra words with which you can climb somewhat safely over the cliffs. You slipped a noun in here, slid an auxiliary verb out there, the text was fogged up with Hs — and in bed at night, when you think through all the sentences again and again, their bright sound, an already autumnal, cool night in front of the open window, and the hope that you'd catch the flu before Wednesday slowly whispered you to sleep.

Everything has been finished since Sunday. You copied out the presentation many times and put the pages beside Marga's plate at lunch. You were keening for her praise but she only griped about when she was supposed to read all of that, cleared up and went to paint. You spent the rest of the day slouching, with the paper under your behind, in the back of the

studio, where she restlessly sketched on a canvas, apparently her application for the Hamburg Academy was still missing a portrait. She looked down, up again, and as she continued to look through you, cried out, Chest out! Face more to the right!, or, Don't look so bored!, she suddenly let the charcoal sink, chewed on her lips and gazed morosely out the window. The fog had crept thickly up to the house and gaped back with blind eyes.

You had been waiting for this moment. When she starts to stare out the window her idea is gone, dispersed in the air before the empty sky. You pulled out the top page and inhaled deeply for the first sentence, with six spoken and written Hs. Yet before the first word her pencil scratched again at the coarse cotton. She said, No reading now, come over here, she took the pages away from you, pulled your sweater and t-shirt over your head, clasped your hands behind your neck, and pressed you to her as if to exhort you not to move from then on, her mouth open. You stood half-naked in the clutter for endless minutes, your backside on your presentation, an uncomfortable pad that bore into your flesh despite all the Hs. The charcoal stick scraped, the fog licked at the window, you wanted to take her ideas and help yourself with your speech, but she didn't look back anymore, neither out nor at you. She was fully absorbed. Outside, the last light abruptly disappeared; she switched the lamp on, in the windowpane your body was reflected in such large contours that it appeared more powerful and older, almost grown. But then another look to the window — a long, flashing one; not a gaze into the emptiness but something closer to an entreaty. Now she only looked at her drawing or over at your night reflection, she acted as if you aren't there at all. The sound of her pencil became quieter, finally broke off entirely, or had the fog penetrated the barn, devoured all the important people, and engulfed you? The box stopped poking into your back and your presentation even stopped its stammering in your head. With a last blink you saw your mother, happy and very young behind her workbench.

When she woke you, you saw a painting on which a young man, naked and with an overstretched head, lay. He was spread over an object that you took for the box at first, but

when you looked closer you recognized it as the tree stump by the pond. A relaxed arm hung down to the floor, the other hand touched his thigh and half hid his sex, which sprung up steeply behind the back of his hand. When you stared hard at the spot you saw, concealed in the tangle of lines, the insect. The closed fingers formed the wings, the wrist and knuckle the head, which the dragonfly craned in the way that you've observed at the pond, in the courtship dance, when the male creature grips the female with the forceps at the end of its abdomen and together they form a coupling wheel, at which point the insects on the reed leaf, where they wedge themselves in one another, often lose hold and fly off in the shape of a heart.

Alarmed, you looked down at yourself, but yes, your pants were on. That's good, she said, her voice sounding nevertheless despondent. In the impulse to hide the mortifying nakedness in the painting, you pushed your hand, like a reflex, between your legs, and discovered that she had already managed something better. What's with the kid with the dragonfly dick? In the academy, where the professors evaluate the painting, they'll think that your mother's indecent. Besides that, she'd got you all wrong, as a portrait you would have failed it. The smudged person on the tree stump now no longer appeared to be sleeping, but with his sparse, almost extinguished expression, seemed closer to dead. That isn't me, you protested, the sentence lasting a balefully long time, she knew after the second syllable what you want to say, spoke each word silently along with you, as if she wanted to help you bring it over your lips, and she almost did. Never believe a picture, she winked, and tossed your sweater to you. Do you?, you snapped and you were both shocked because in those two words there was neither inhalation nor interruption. She packed her brushes away, you got dressed and headed back to the house that you could hardly see from twenty meters away. When you turned toward her on the patio, the fog had taken your mother.

Quarter to eight. She's now reached the alder with the triple-split trunk. With its already-withered leaves, it takes on a slightly ragged shape, and it must have once been four-

limbed, as if it had arms and legs, before a lightning bolt drove into one of the boughs, which then collapsed into the water. Soon she will turn onto her back and swim a bit further until she is under the dead branches in which you've always seen the fingers of a hand. There, she'll turn around and gaze into the depths. Every morning you wonder what she's searching for in these protracted seconds under the alder claw, where she hardly moves and slowly sinks until her head dips under and you hold your breath on the stump. When the sun steps over the horizon line and the light pierces the dark mirror of the pond, she looks up again and you breathe out.

But today you're hoping, and you look again at your watch: thirteen before eight, today, you think, and tighten the strap of your knapsack, for she is already by the branch, today, Dion, your childhood is definitively over, the water has no more pictures, the pond is as voiceless as your life, which hasn't had any air for far too long. There is no claw, no alder ghost, nowhere are there rush whisperings and wind murmurings, and that you allegedly look like me is nonsense. Hair color, red tints, and your moor-brown eyes come from your father, and your name, how could it be different, your mother forced on you. No one speaks when you eavesdrop on me. In truth, I am mute as a fish, but fish are never to be found in the pond, only nightmares and horror stories, dead stuff that can't decay in acid water. In between, the dragonflies lay their eggs. Well, get up, and go get your goddamned presentation! Soon she'll swim back to the bank where you stand with the umbrella, where you'll hand her the towel, the best opportunity not to stutter out but to shout out everything I've suggested to you up to now, and then even in front of the class there will be no more holding back, You cowards, you'll yell, you pant-shitters, kindly listen up!, with a razor-sharp voice that even hisses the H, so that mouths swing open in amazement across the rows of desks, and David Voss, your arch-nemesis, will duck behind Thorsten Hinrich, but in vain, because what you have to say will turn into a storm, no, a hurricane, that shouts down the world.

You spare only Tanja Deichsen, the pastor's daughter who stumbles into the classroom at the last bell and not infrequently a few minutes later, often even after you, for which Gorbach gives you both detention, midday, when the school house is empty and the rows of desks are so still that the head of your German teacher sinks deeper and deeper over the essays on his desk until she finally nods over at you, quietly packs her things and limps to the door. In seconds you have shouldered your knapsack and caught up with her in the corridor, but you preserve the meter-length gap to leave space for all the inexpressible feelings, and at the church she turns around and says, Bye—, in secret complicity, it seems to you, because Tanja is like you, is what they call *handicapped*, and doesn't have bones like everyone else but instead has glass, more precisely stated it's a skeleton that lacks important building stones, which is why it shatters under the slightest burden. She is small-statured and more ethereal than the other girls in your age group, also a little bent from a badly-healed break, one that you often saw in plaster, from the sidelines, back in kindergarten. Out of her clouded blue eyes, which give her the affect of something secret and foreign, she would silently consider the crowd of others and startle when an accident happened, when someone plunged from the swings or was downed in a game of tag, but always joined in the laughter as soon as the bumbler picked themselves up and rioted onward. Both of you were kids from the edge of the playground, you the talk-cripple and she the walk-cripple, one the breathing boy and the other the glass-bone girl, who seemed in an inexplicable way to be linked to you and so she, too, will watch from her row of desks to your left as you yell down the school house, yes, the whole world, she will simply sit there and look at you without praise or reproach, with this blue flaming, disquieting gaze, which knows.

Later, when the throng of students, ears ringing, has left the classroom and Gorbach has wordlessly recorded an A, she patters away down the corridor. You overtake her, hold the heavy hall door for her, and the sentence that invites her for a walk through the moor comes easily over your lips because unlike the others, she doesn't look away when you talk. She

hasn't yet answered when you see Hannes Lambert reflected in the glass panel, the rangy sixteen-year-old with an angular skull and blond, matted hair in front of his eyes, which roam around as he struts like a predator down the corridor, always followed by a clique of upperclassmen, and all the loiterers in the hallway flinch reflexively. He approaches you, half a meter away and his gaze unwavering, like a sharp green ray that drills into your forehead. You believe it has something to do with his eyes that are slightly too close together, the ones whose gaze swings over you at the last moment. He cracks his gum and knocks the door out of your hand. As the oldest of the four from Lambert Farm he had to lend a hand with the stalls in the afternoons, but unlike a farmhand he didn't smell like pigs, or had you held your breath out of fear, as you always did when he brushed past you, and could his scent be something entirely different?

Now you breathe him in, but he's already passed. Between your eyebrows a cold feeling remains, as if there, where his gaze met you, there was suddenly a hole. Tanja stands over by the bulletin board with the girls. The Hannes mob moves through the door, the urchin gang chattering and making eyes at their foxes, only Tanja looks away at the posters and, once the pack is around the corner, looks back at you. But instead of her face, you suddenly see David Voss. P-p-puke, he gags, rolls his eyes, jerks his head and hocks on your shoe. C-c-crap, Hinrich mimics him and farts. They both grab you and push you into the stink. Someone pulls away your legs, you taste the bristle of the fibrous carpet. For a long time, you hear the rattle of their ridicule echoing in the building. At some point, you lifted your head and looked for help from Tanja, but there was no one there.

Marga is gone, too. You jump up, toss the umbrella aside, it slides into the pond. Mama! you shout, the panic has no sharp edges, your cry is sleek and smooth as a bullet. A common teal startles and flies into the moor, its laughter echoing in the distance. You run through the reeds, stop short, collapse, under the branch you see only the deep. The pain, having let her out of your sight, having lost her forever, is like a gash through your body. You

tear off and stumble from alder to alder. The trees play with your fear, push it away and catch it again, every trunk shows you another image of the pond; first it's a puddle, then a raging ocean, first the gates of hell, then glistening light in which you immerse yourself and fall. As you fall, you see beneath you the abandoned house, the open patio door, the laundry on the line, the ashtray on the table that she always forgets to empty, until the wind scatters the cigarette butts. There's the barn, the fixed-up window, the holes in the roof, you don't know how to repair it and where to bring all the junk, her paintings; and where, if she's dead, to order the coffin, who will stand next to you at her grave, support you when you toss in the rose; but roses, it occurs to you, she's always hated roses, you both even once surreptitiously poured turpentine into Ilse Bloch's shrubs.

You run back to the stump, hoping to have only just passed her, to have overlooked her in the tangle of bushes; you already see her shadow rising out from the water as you prepare words of apology and fealty, but the pond stays smooth and hard, a mirror. You break into it up to your knees. The peat swells into your shoes, a soft, almost comforting feeling. You stare with pleading eyes over to the branch above the silent water. Never has the image that I'm showing you been as empty and truthful as in this moment.

She emerges, sputtering, fingering the leaves out of her hair. How long was that, she gasps and laughs. The minute that she was underwater seems to you like days and weeks, the pain is suddenly so old, the white feeling of the morning at the pond is dead and yellowed, it falls from you like a withered leaf. I'll devour it; you'll forget it. You take a step back, then forward, but relief fails to materialize, now something more like a weight is pushing you deeper into the ground. The rain grows stronger, wind bends the branches, sweeps the last mist from the alders. Didn't you want to undress beforehand, she grins, and doesn't notice how much you'd worried. You start to freeze, she folds her arms across her chest, edges you toward the bank and fishes the sinking umbrella out of the water. Pulls the towel from her bag, dries you off. You fight against the pressure in your throat, you can still hardly calm

yourself. You are glad for the towel on your face, she shouldn't see that you're crying. She thinks it's rain and dries it off, presses the umbrella into one hand and into the other, a corner of the towel to dry her with as you had always done when you were a child. In the past, there were common and private territories on her body; you swabbed her back and throat, she took care of the places that, on a mother, belonged to the father. Now you suddenly don't know anymore where to put your hands. Your throat burns as if you had been screaming, uninterrupted, for minutes.

What's the problem, she says, shakes you and the numbness from your limbs, pulls the towel away and bows. In the past, the child clapped at the end of the pantomime, now you stare at the trees, wish yourself back with her under the umbrella, in the warm bell of the towel, where the world would once again shrink into an intimate, long-familiar feeling. There you would have told her everything, the knowledge you'd acquired in the past few years about the life cycle of the dragonfly, from books and your observations in the moor. In the rhythm of the drumming and dripping rain and in long sentences that pearl from your mouth like the cords of water from the umbrella, you would have divulged the secret of the insect that spends a drawn-out and under-stimulated childhood on the bottom of the pond, until the exceptional but simultaneously most dangerous moment of its life, when it climbs up a rush stalk in the early morning hours, forces itself out of its skin and is thus delivered without protection from its enemies. The act of metamorphosis can fail when the young dragonfly, with its still-clumsy wings, gets caught in the molted skin or on a thorn. The first attempt at flight, the maiden flight, is graceless, the insect is feed for birds, for during this phase the adolescent dragonfly is called Imago, it is wholly concentrated on testing out its new body, which it can barely control. Yet the higher in the air it climbs, the safer and more elegant are its circles, soon it changes tactics around the bird's beak, spirals into the sky and flies soundlessly into the moor, where it, so goes the last sentence of your presentation, comes from and belongs.

Everything good again?, she asks, pulls the bathrobe from her bag and swaddles herself in the white, fleecy cloth. As you look at her, you notice that your eyes almost meet each other on a horizontal line, as if time had suddenly overtaken you — although nothing more had happened in the last few minutes other than that you'd lifted yourself from your tree stump.

You snatch your satchel. She grabs your arm and prolongs the kiss. Good luck with your essay, she says, It'll be an easy A, I know it, believe me, she smiles, Mothers have a sixth sense for these things. Five minutes before eight. You tear off and run across the Heidedamm into the village; what might it look like, you think, a supernatural maternal sense that makes you speak? Get changed before you go, she shouts from behind you, where the rain has already erased her from the scene of the pond.

The schoolyard is empty, even the latecomers have already abandoned the assembly hall. You trip up the steps, run through the courtyard, the corridor behind it looks dark and endlessly long. Chatter can be heard from the classroom, within it, Gorbach bellows his commands. It sounds like the start of the lesson. When you are finally in front of the door, your heart is beating so loudly that you can hardly hear the last bell. Then a different rhythm suddenly mixes in — shuffling, irregular, and familiar. In a yellow raincoat, Tanja hastens across the floor with a bouncing knapsack and dragging feet. She stands breathlessly before you, says: Aren't you coming in, too? You look for a long moment at the floor, at the bristles in the carpet, finally say, hYeah. She nods and slips through the door. You want to follow her, but the child runs back through the tunnel and out into the moor, through the rain and the silence, to me.

\* \* \*

She hangs the damp towel over the banister and the bathrobe on the hook. She has to take the laundry off the line, too; it doesn't look like the rain will stop today. In the kitchen

she stacks the dishes, in the cellar there's a mountain of clothing that still has to go in the machine. She can't forget the empties, the lemonade from the supermarket in Zeeve is cheaper than it is in Ilse Bloch's store, and besides that, she'll be left alone there — no whispering, no stares at her back. She fingers a cigarette from the carton. The matches are damp, they snap; with the third one, a small flame hisses. The filter clings to her lower lip and rips off the scab, with the first drag she tastes blood, then tar, the paper is moist, too. Lately she's been leaving the cigarettes outside on the table; since she's been forced to smoke on the patio she's gone through one less pack a day, at least that, she thinks, I've accomplished. Not really an achievement, as over in her studio, while she stares at the moving fog and her eyes sketch out lines that her hands can't retrace, the butt burns out in the ashtray, the next one already in her fingers, and so on, until the paint on the brush has dried up. When she decides to risk it — carefully, almost reluctant to touch the still, cold, surface, the way someone gently nudges a hurt animal with a stick to see if it's still alive — the carton is empty, and her idea, or the painting that in her head was a wild, beautiful beast, has long since croaked.

That is her morning, ten to twenty cigarettes depending on the tenacity of the cattle she has to wrangle. Yesterday it was long drawn out, a stubborn specimen. She'd thought that her idea was truly good, with soapsuds still on her hands she had left the dishes and gone over to the barn. After three hours her throat hurt, she had riddled holes in the canvas with her stare, her lower lip was chewed bloody — that bastard bit back. One last burst with her biggest brush, finally two black slashes on too much white, drilled at one more time with the palette knife, and then it was calm.

The permanent empty cigarette cartons and painting carcasses are proof that she has the desire but not the talent to translate her ideas into deed and creation, that is, cash. Marga Katthusen, snarled the half-dead animal, accept that you're a dreamer who refuses to work like every other person your age behind a store counter, in a field, during the northern frost, in the refrigeration factory, on an assembly line or at least in front of a stove, two kids in your

lap, the third in your belly, a hungry husband at the table — and now she smokes the second cigarette and contemplates the dripping clothes on the line, your underwear hugging her lacy underthings and her black fishnet tights, which earn looks from the village women.

She knows that you would rather be one of them, a grocer's kid or a farmer's boy, to have the pig breeder Karl Lambert as your father and a mother hen like Marianne, your aunt, who sometimes slips you an apple or a few fresh eggs with a devout mien and a hello to your mother, that hypocrite, she thinks, who back then whispered to everyone in the village about the shame that her, Marga's, marriage to Karl's brother, your father, brought to the family. Even her brother-in-law, Karl, who had it in for her house and the piece of land, if she had long since sold him the rotting wall then she wouldn't have had to go away like she'd been kicked out with a shopping cart full of property, a triumph that she doesn't begrudge him, the butcher who has her husband's death on his conscience, she had also run through such thoughts again yesterday, instead of taking, as they say, the bull by the horns. She glances at the clock, almost noon. Tuesdays you have class until the fifth hour, and then you come home and want to eat. She picked up a random brush, a random color, and once again stabbed blindly at the bloodbath on the canvas, where there was nothing left alive. Then she stood up.

The line was busy twice, on the third dial attempt there was finally a sullen male voice who shared the hours of the Hamburg-Eimsbüttel employment office: Tuesdays until 4:30 p.m. She had to make it. She opened the fridge: two bell peppers, an opened jar of mini bockwurst, pickles. In the basket under the sink she found onions and a couple of potatoes. The everything-soup was a small consolation for the boy, for the lonely afternoon, prepared in twenty minutes. An onion lightly braised, plus vegetable chunks and potato slices, the whole thing poured over with stock, salt, pepper, paprika, cooked over a small flame for half an hour, which she used to get ready, powder, hairspray, a spritz of perfume, then a line of kohl across the eyelids, accentuating her look, in case she comes across a man at the employment office. She painted the hollows of her cheeks as grimly as she had the painting. She wiped off

lipstick, which had too lewd an effect, but now everyone could see her scab, too unstable, she thought, it doesn't matter.

In her bedroom she rifled through her closet for the beige-colored costume that she thought was respectable, which is why she'd relegated it to the farthest corner, but it seemed to her like the appropriate outfit for a trip to the authorities. A burning smell wafted from the kitchen, she had taken too long to decide on a blouse, back to the oven, the mush stuck to the bottom of the pot, but you'd be able to eat the top layer. She loosened her hair from its bun, which now looked old-maidish to her. She quickly chopped up the bockwurst and pickles and stirred everything into the broth with a bit of sour cream. Done.

Writing the note to you took the longest. The truth didn't come into question, she'd be forced to explain, and besides that, she thought, children want to be lied to by their mothers, St. Nicholas, the Christ child, the stork who carries babies in his beak, and also the story in which your father lost his life in the peat bog shortly before you were born is only a part of the truth — for the cutting by then was already flooded and planted with alders, the pond at the end of the Heidedamm with its bark faces and fog spirits already long since a place of illusion and deceit. She decided on an emergency in the gallery, formulated the sentence in her head, but ruined it; distorted, as she always did when she was under pressure, the letters in the words, a learning disability that first drew attention when she scribbled her name on her desk tag and the new teacher from then on called her Magret, not *Magra*, as it was written on her little card, and soon never Marga or even Margareta, as her name was written in her passport. She was suddenly even Magret to the other students, the Magret who couldn't or wouldn't write. Magret was from then on the name for her denial of diligence and duty; it was even on her end-of-school report, black and white atop the corresponding grades that hardly qualified her for an apprenticeship, let alone college, while her cousin kept her, the only relative in Hamburg still living, who had just advised her to look for a job with room and board immediately. Because she, Marga, didn't want stay with her cousin-once-removed

anyway, cousin Frederike who incessantly played rummy with her neighbor and reeked of stuffed cabbage. On the day of her dismissal from the deaconess home she strolled in the direction of Altona, where she looked in the shop windows and discovered, in the glass door of a business with the name *Fashion House Siana*, a notice: Female Help Wanted.

She remembers exactly the red carpet braided with gold threads on the parquet floor, and the even redder and more golden gleam of the little lamps reflecting off the wood. She liked them because they radiated a warm light that gleamed from the fabric of the men's suits and made everything look expensive and high-class. The meticulously folded shirts on the shelves, the pants with their creases and the stiff lapels of the suit jackets formed a contrast to the decorative mirrors, the corner lounges with the plush pillows, the kitsch and trinkets in the windows and the gathered curtains in front of the dressing rooms, where the slits draped with bands of cloth drew glances but didn't let them in, and the fabric billowed in the draft when somewhere in the shop a door slammed and the laughter of a woman floated quietly from the back rooms.

Now she saw the gaunt shop assistant, who sat smoking behind a large mahogany desk with nothing on it, no cash register, no rack. What are you standing around for, the stranger called over with a harsh, raspy accent that sounded Russian to her, although she had never heard a Russian person speak. The woman, presumably the owner of the boutique, raised her copiously befingered hand and beckoned her into the room's depths, where the haberdasher, dressed in red and gold, leaned on cushions, so deeply one with the colors of her fashion house that a visitor couldn't say who had been first, the shop or its owner; how completely, in every detail, the perfect and artful, almost painterly collaboration and battle between austerity and ornamentation, extravagance and restraint, display and concealment, reigned, that it seemed to her, Marga, to be one of the most exquisitely colorful and complex paintings that would one day originate from her hand, later, in her future as an artist, of which she had often dreamed in her teenage years between the gray-flecked chalkboards of the home's dormitories

and classrooms, and when she filled out something like an application under the scrutinizing gaze of the strongly perfumed, pearl-bedecked woman, at the end her new boss took the questionnaire impatiently from her hand and skimmed it, which is when she, brittle, baring her smoke-yellowed teeth, suddenly burst out laughing and said, You are surely named Marga, not Magra, and the girl, who was your mother, knew then that this place was right.

But she had managed the note to you. Under the narrow lines she doodled a big M., it never mattered how she distorted it, it always looks the same and so it's become a sort of signature into which her ability to write was circumscribed. She delegated official and business matters to you, along with a 50 cent coin. She drew a heart around the letter. A secretary position, she thought, is out of the question. On the way to the car she went back to the barn and pulled the cloth from the pile of rejected work. Now she liked the black slash, something violent emanated from it and at the same time it looked to her like a flayed body, half dead. Underneath it, in empty white, she saw a face, pale, almost bluish, shaken up under permeable paint strokes and smudged swirls, as if deep underwater; perhaps, she thought, pinning the painting back up on her work wall, she could still make something out of it.

The motor stuttered, please don't kick the bucket yet, she groaned at the car, when I sell a painting you'll get oil and spark plugs and a new fan belt and everything you need, and in fact: the motor groaned and started. She flipped the cigarette out the window into Ilse Bloch's rose bushes and pressed down on the gas when she got to the school building; she wanted to pass it quickly. It was just before David Voss's *School's out!* battle cry, which ushered in the daily kicking and fighting games on the village green; there were still ten minutes left in math class when you heard the familiar noise and lifted your eyes from your algebra. A shadow shot in through the window that Trösch, the teacher, had opened because David had began aiming a deodorant spray at his neighbor, Thorsten Hinrich, who allegedly reeked of sweat. It was a blood-red darter that was now shooting over the crown of your

heard, an especially large, shimmering specimen that must have strayed into your classroom during its flight for prey. Heads swung back and forth, someone shouted: Air raid warning!, and threw an eraser at the insect. Trösch grabbed the textbook and fanned the air with it. The students rolled their workbooks into gun barrels, climbed onto their desks and started banging away. The dragonfly zig-zagged, panicked, down the rows. Hinrich crashed from his desk, Elke Niedeck stabbed the girl beside her with a ruler, and David Voss fired his can of poison gas. Only Tanja Deichsen sat still, the corners of her mouth quivering, at her desk. Eventually she stretched an arm in the air, not aggressively, but more as if she wanted to offer the creature her palm to land on. She looked over to you as she did it, shot you a smile and displayed her sharp, gray-stained teeth. Your gaze roamed about, eventually found footing at the window, on the flat horizon outside, with me. When the dragonfly finally found its way back to freedom and left for the wide open, you felt as though something that had belonged to you had been lost, never to return.

The class hooted and jeered. Trösch struggled to shush the throng back into the rows. Eventually, everyone was absorbed in their calculations again. You kept thinking that you could still hear the buzzing of the insect, and although you didn't at all want to, you turned toward Tanja again, as if to unite with her against a looming threat, but she was concentrating on adding up fractions. On the street, your mother's car drove past. Trösch yanked your presentation notes from your lap, they had been there since the start of class, Math, Katthusen, he snarled, this is math, not German. Then the bell rang, and David called forth the midday battle.

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She is down from the highway; the traffic grinds to a halt at the bridge over the Elbe. Shadows of cranes rise up from the fog. The window wipers shovel water from the windshield, hardly accomplish anything against the rain. Already a quarter to ten. The fashion

house opens in a few minutes and then Mr. Kaltenbronn will already be waiting in the corner lounge — a perfect, older gentleman in immaculate suits; hard of hearing, very rich, he usually wants very little and gives more than he should. Good morning Miss Mira, he greets her, help me out of this cheap rag and bring me something grand. What is he feeling like today? Use your imagination, he calls over, and waves the first banknote. She pulls a silk scarf from the shelf, he melts immediately, and she pushes the old man into the changing room. You, Mira, are truly a wonder, he sighs, and presses himself to the cool fabric. The boss, Siana, places great importance not only on the elegance of her customers but also on the cut and conduct of her employees, and the so-called pen names of her girls separate them in sound and style from the countless Gabys, Rosis and Mizzis who sit in the bordello windows on Herbert Street.

In the middle of the bridge the procession of cars comes to a standstill. Over there on the quay, blue light, sirens, an accident. She curses, stares at the big, gray river, at the docks where cargo ships maneuver awkwardly around an enormous cruise ship. She'll miss the appointment, she left the house too late, she took the laundry down too quickly and the red dress that she wanted to wear again was not completely dry, even after the hairdryer, she felt the dampness around the collar. She had stuck it in the machine yesterday for a quick wash. Had the boy noticed anything? Siana, who seemed to bathe in her perfume, instructed her girls to wear nothing or only unobtrusive scents so that the customers' wives don't get a whiff of anything, but traces of aftershave cling to her in the evenings. Maybe her message wasn't a good excuse, the alleged illness at the gallery that has to always stand for everything, at some point, she thinks, Ute will blab or say it how it is: Are you feeling better?, you'll ask the gallery owner at her next visit, but she was never sick, she'll reply, and your mother will see your perplexed face, disappointment and rage in your eyes, then the man behind her honks and rips her from her thoughts.

She steps on the gas, the engine floods. Lately she's become careless, makes mistakes,

forgot to call yesterday, bought an expensive dress although the boy thought she was at work; when she undressed, she noticed that the American's cigarette smoke still hung off the fabric, it was his first time at the fashion house and he hadn't known all that well what he wanted, he let her show him this and that until long after five. She turned the key all the way and gunned the engine, please don't give up now, or I'll have to forget the job entirely, the last bus back leaves at six, she'd have to walk from Rhase, cut across in the dark, through the moor.

You smell so clean again, Miss Mira, Kaltenbronnen said dutifully as she bent over him. The country life, she smiled back, God knows it's not clean, her troubles and days in Fenndorf since her husband, your father, Dion, spirited her away to this hole, a prison made of brick mice and pig stalls. Every morning she brings you to the peat cutting just like other widows do their children to the grave, grits her teeth, jumps in the cold water and plays the grieving mother. What's true is that her doctor, due to her susceptibility to fungal skin infections, recommended moor water as a preventative because of its high acidity. And so, as frequently as possible, she climbs blithely into the brown brew where your father died. When she swims, she claims, she feels him close again, as if she were the girl from back then, barely twenty and pregnant by a man she hardly loved, which you shouldn't know; it was more that she had flirted with the promises he made to her, of a prosperous life in which she could concentrate wholly on her work, on her painting, well, through him she had envisioned all of her work and accepted that his family was part of the deal, the pig breeder clan who she despised even then, Marianne above all the rest, your aunt, who, as a young woman, had set her sights on your father until she then, because it was already a done deal, married his older brother Karl, and despite that, she remembers, her rival had still skulked around the house for months, had planted something in the garden here, cleaned a few things out of the barn there, or dropped by in the evenings with the freshly-baked bread that he, your father, apparently loved to eat, surely, you, Marga, don't have so much experience with housework, and she slipped you the recipe while inspecting the kitchen and making recommendations for

decorating the room that was squalid from the bachelor life.

When she complained to her husband about the meddling, he defended the sister-in-law, who also had her good sides. Such sides, your mother sneered as she nudged up to the buses, only rarely approached once she got pregnant, luckily. With the little body germinating in her belly, she decided the farmer was a physical success. Be a little thankful, he rightly admonished her. She could have even loaned him to Marianne for a night, she thinks now, to get a break from them both. But insinuations in this direction sharpened his distrust of her, where do we start with her, Marga, the new one in the village, she recalls filthy jokes in the village pub to which Dion's father couldn't, or wouldn't, respond.

She always says and thinks *Dion's father*. The term makes him a non-person, though he's not inhuman; even so, she now still sees him as nothing more than the progenitor of her son, a man who had believed he could make her happy with an old farmhouse and the child growing in her belly. She had detested his peat business from the start because of the bookkeeping, which she was supposed to take over. The writing of a simple invoice had cost her fifteen if not thirty minutes of wrestling and doubt. She could have taken down the figures, sums, and payouts, but drafting all the letters, reminders, correspondences — that would have soon brought an end this marriage, in any case. At some point she would have had to tell him the whole truth, which she is reluctant to talk about even today — and so, for her, his death was convenient. In the village everyone knows the story of his accident in the peat bog, and everyone tells it differently, depending on the teller's sympathy or ill will toward the deceased and the amount of schnapps downed at the village pub, which distort what's remembered in one or the other direction. In all variations, the culprit is eventually your mother, who spurned his love or the life he offered her; in every telling, the thunderstorm breaks loose several months after the wedding and after a short phase of so-called happiness, on a summer night when he doesn't come back from the pond. With his brother's help, he had intended to lash down the peat briquettes, which lay in stacks in the meadow, ready to be

hauled away, assert those who support Karl Lambert's version. The jealous pig farmer could have used the opportunity to take his little brother, the casanova, down a peg, argued the handful of others who'd always found the wealthy farmer and his greed for land and money to be a thorn in their side. All are united, however, in the opinion that your mother had already worn him down with her cold-heartedness. Let's say she had snapped at him when he opened the door to go protect the valuable turf from the storm — it's all just dirt. We live off that *dirt*, he hisses in the Lambert opponents' variation, and that's when she grabbed him and shouted, *your family* lives off it, not me!, but he shook her off him and ran to his brother's farm, in every story this is the place where lightning flashes in the sky over the pond, where your father, they say, was wrenched into the water by an alder branch that came crashing down; wrong, counter the others, although a branch did splinter off and hurtle down, it was the hand of the pig farmer that sent him into the water.

He was taken from us unexpectedly — the pastor united the divergent opinions at the funeral and a sob rose from the first row, where Marianne Lambert pulled her veil closer to her face. After tossing a clump of dirt into the grave, as your mother passed the shovel to Karl Lambert his fist shook with grief, say some, with wrath, say others, but your mother, so it goes, heavily pregnant and inheritor of a considerable if also barren strip of land, swiftly turned away from the burial ground and took the bus to Hamburg the next day.

Only the muffled sounds of the city reached, if at all, from her grief down to you in the abdominal cavity — fragments from strangers who you admittedly don't remember anymore, but sometimes believe you hear in dreams: the hiss of bus doors, the tangle of voices and drone of traffic in the streets, they ambled through her, into the boutiques where doors jingled and saleswomen purred, and you felt the sudden pressure change as she fastened a narrowly cut dress or corset around her lower body and laced you deeper into the closeness of the imageless dream, in which you toss, a heavy darkness without escape, her voice coming from far above or from outside, faraway and garbled as if spoken through water, and then all of you

in your beds open your eyes at almost the same time and listen in on the others, from room to room in the still of the night, all the way out to me.

When she remembers the dream that she woke from that morning, she shudders again. She had almost forgotten it, but here, on the bridge across the Elbe in the traffic jam where time is dilating, the images flash past — she took you dreaming in her belly through the city once more, you weren't as you were then, the unborn little person, no, you were the thirteen-year-old, your arms and legs shooting out like the other parts of your body that already show the man, who in this dream, more like a nightmare, in the middle of the job — she was, she remembers, busy with Kaltenbronn — began to force his way out of her, so that she reached down in alarm, touched your wet face and pressed her hand to your mouth so that you wouldn't scream, now that you'd suddenly seen what she'd concealed from you for a whole life long.

At that point she woke up and listened while her body shook; it only slowly subsided. She still felt the uneasiness, the shame that lingered from the night like an echo that was just now catching up with her, as if there was someone there who was secretly reading her thoughts and whispering from Hamburg to Fenndorf, across a distance of a hundred kilometers, what she's thinking and feeling, and she sticks her nose in the collar of her dress and smells on her skin, instead of the bubble bath she'd taken that morning, a whiff of the rusted water of the pond, the country scent so esteemed by Kaltenbronn, the moor.

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