

Karl-Gustav Ruch

Behind the Wall

Thursday, 3rd Sept.

It's impossible to tell exactly where it's coming from; all I know is: it's in the old wall, which separates us from the next house and at the same time joins us to it. Is it coming from the third, from the fourth floor, or does it carry up by way of unfathomable channels from the first floor or the ground floor? There's a quiet scratching, as if someone on the other side is rhythmically rubbing the rough plaster with a pencil; then it's more a delicate scratching, scraping or scrabbling, then a muted knocking. It wanders back and forward in the wall, sometimes it's close to hand, then again so distant and weak, that I'm not sure whether I'm really hearing it or only imagining it. I look up dictionaries: scratching, scouring, scrabbling, scrubbing, chafing, filing, rasping, rattling, pattering, clattering; but I fear it's a noise that one can't get a handle on with the familiar words. Then I remember my mother, who simply invented a word, when she didn't find a suitable one – and that happened in almost every sentence – and write in my notebook: ruskling, pattling, chifling, scratchrasp, rattlepatter. I underline scratchrasp. But it has the wrong colour. I take all the words back.

It is reassuring to live next to a protective fire-wall, whose inner life one knows. Apart from this new noise, I am not only familiar with most of the sounds in the wall, I also know the faces that go with them. There's the coughing widow, Maria, on the third floor. Every morning at 8.30 she

puts the dishes in the chrome steel sink – right behind my desk – and starts to rinse them. There's a clattering, rattling, clinking, the drainpipe rumbles cosily, and when she lets a heavy pot tumble into the sink, then the mortar trickles in the wall. After the washing-up she begins to cough, puts her crutches on the tiled floor and hobbles panting into the living room. The dull thuds of her stick coming down on the floor become more distant. The television comes on. Chat shows, soaps. From about 12.30 she's directly behind the wall once more, coughing a little and busying herself in the kitchen. At 2 p.m. there's the cosy clattering in the sink again, then the crutches striking the stone tiles, coughing, the television comes on. The same thing is repeated in the evening. At 9.30 there's clattering, at 10 it's all quiet on the third floor. Around 11 a slight vibration, the widow is snoring. Her bed, too, in which she was born 79 years ago, is up against the firewall, because that's where one feels safe, that's where one feels happiest. In 1939 on one of the heaviest nights of bombing shortly before the end of the Republic, the eleven year-old stood pressed up against the wall under the wooden crucifix with father, mother and little Manuel, it thundered and whistled, the flickering of the conflagration came through the burst windows, choking smoke everywhere, then a bomb struck the air well, everything around collapsed, but the fire wall, it stood sure and secure and held the beams in their sockets, the adjoining rooms and the stairwell remained intact and the wooden crucifix hung a little crooked above Maria's head.

Every morning at 9 the piano begins somewhere. Scales race threateningly through the wall. Major, minor, semitone scales, whole-tone scales, chromatically transposed they spiral up to dizzying heights, fall to droning depths and rise up again to the reassuring starting note; thirds and sixths detach themselves from the wall, whirl through the air, flutter back

and rumble to a standstill in the masonry. There follow a few bars of a Bach fugue; it breaks off, starts again from the beginning, and the piano works its way step by step through the score to the liberating final chord in D minor. At 10.50 the swirl of notes breaks off abruptly and the piano lid bangs shut. The maestro has put his morning training behind him, his fingers are working smoothly and he believes in his imminent breakthrough once again. The piano lessons begin at 11. Every hour on the hour is rung in with scales, fast, then slowly with misfires – teacher, pupil – then Chopin etudes, Bach preludes, the beginning of a fugue, slowly, rapidly repeated, sluggish echo – pupil, teacher, pupil – then it breaks off, the maestro bangs the piano lid shut.

Between 9.15 and 9.30, in the pauses of the piano playing, one hears the drainpipe whooshing, and a piercing tenor voice usually begins at the same time: *Qui presso a lei io rinascere me sento, e dal soffio d'amor rigenerato...* That's Alfredo, that's what I call him after his favourite part in La Traviata, he sings, showers, the water gurgles cheerfully in the pipes, *Vivere io voglio a te fedel. Dell' universo immemore io vivo quasi in ciel, io vivo quasi in ciel ...* After his morning shower he grants us, his neighbours, a short intermission. Then a door bangs. Like a young man Alfredo bounds down the stairs to the letter-box – I can hear it through the window to the air well – and there he looks for the long-desired news, because years ago Alfredo wrote an opera and year after year Alfredo sends his score out into the world, to music publishers and competitions. But usually he only finds a couple of special offers in the letter box for a new washing machine or the pizza delivery service, and sometimes also a reply to his hope: Alfredo skims over the text until he finds the crucial word: *unfortunately. Thank you for sending us your score and we have examined it with interest. Unfortunately... You were kind enough to*

entrust your score to us, unfortunately... We looked at your score with great interest, but must unfortunately tell you... then Alfredo climbs the stairs as an old man, and for an hour one hears nothing more from him. At about 11 it starts again: Snorting with rage Alfredo's voice runs up and down the scales. That lasts about twenty minutes. Then there are light steps on the stairs again and Alfredo disappears from my field of hearing. In the afternoon I sometimes see him in the underground station at the opera. There he turns into Orpheus. He cries arias and recitatives at the tiled walls, which here in the underworld cry along with him and call back so wonderfully, that it's a pure pleasure, *Cortese Eco, cortese Eco amorosa, che sconsolato sei*, and when a train comes in or pulls out, the intensity increases and he hurls a particularly virtuoso tirade at it: *In cosi grave mia fiera sventura non ho pianto però tanto che basti*, his bright tenor mingles with the squealing of the brakes, the buzzing of the accelerating electric engines, the pounding of the wheels, and at these moments he, Alfredo, Orpheus, feels his soul merging with the roar and thunder of the world.

From the attic apartment, too, I can hear noises from time to time. Roughly every half hour or so there's a brief whooshing or gurgling in the pipe, which links my bathroom with Alfredo's shower and the kitchen above it. An Austrian writer of about 50 lives up there. He came about three years ago, rented the attic room and settled down at his desk. I've never seen him on the street or in the café, but sometimes I meet him on the stairs, always with a thick envelope under his arm. He nods, says *Servus*, quickly pushes past me and retires to the roof again. Once I planted myself in front of my door and addressed him: Hello, how's it going, how's the scribbling? Taken aback he stopped, tossed his grey ponytail behind his back, stroked his beard and cleared his throat, as if it

had been a long time since he had squeezed any sound out of it.- What, I beg your pardon, scribbling? I don't scribble, I write literary texts.- OK, I said, how's it going with the literary texts then? – He had written five plays, hundreds of poems, also a volume of stories, but it all stayed in his drawer, he didn't throw his pearls before swine, the whole German-language literary business, the whole literary scene was a fat down-at-heel whore and he avoided it like the plague, no the comparison was not unfounded, as a writer one had to keep one's distance from whores and the plague, the devil was another matter, one had to feel the devil behind one, and here he was in the right place in this country and up on the roof, admittedly – he cleared his throat and attempted a grin – only there, amidst and yet above the roar of the big city, did he find the right seclusion for demonic inspiration etc. He ignored my pointed glance at the envelope he was holding under his arm and which I suspected contained a manuscript addressed to a publishing house. What was he writing at the moment? He was searching for a new style, a cacophonous synthesis. The magnum opus, which he had been working on for eight years, consisted of hundreds of micro-stories, which he wanted to fit together in a cacophonous symphony in sonata movement form; but it was just the cacophonous fitting together which was the difficulty, and for years he had been occupied with nothing else but this cacophonous synthesis, which was supposed to join the individual elements in a higher diabolic-cosmic whole without uniting them, without resolving the contradictions, or precisely without harmonising... I didn't understand the rest of his verbose speech and I hurriedly took my leave on some pretext. I am glad that since then the Austrian has returned to his laconic *Servus*, and nor do his cacophonous flushing sounds disturb me in the least, on the contrary: they give me a kind of acoustic feeling of security, and remind me that that I am not all alone by the wall.

Friday, 4th Sept.

The strange noise irritates me, it disturbs me in my cosy home. I put my ear to the wall. It is not a homogeneous sound and is probably caused by more than one person. Persons? Perhaps it's mice or rats or a locked-in cat. It comes and goes without any discernible regularity. I can remember what the new noise sounds like, but I can't ascribe it to any comprehensible activity. It remains a noise without a reliable history.

A thump. The wall shakes, the mortar trickles. That was the door of the neighbours downstairs on the third floor. *Me cago en la puta*, croaks a hoarse voice. There's a bang. A foot kicks the wooden door. *Hija de puta, que te mato!* Was it Joan, the son, who breaks into cars and steals motor bikes, was it Jordi, the husband, who drinks away his unemployment benefit in the bar downstairs, or was it both at once? Cries are as hard to distinguish as kicks against a door. Angry footsteps echo in the stairwell. Then the house door bangs. A slight aftershock under my feet. Now it's quiet in the apartment under me. Too quiet. A quiet which begins to whimper, to sob, to weep, to wail, comes to a crescendo and then fires away like a machine gun: *Malditos, gilipollas, sinvergüenzas, hijos de puta, malcriados, gandulos, subnormales, basura, no pueda más ...*

That's Pepa's solo, which she only starts when she's left alone. Blows on the door again. Pepa is hammering with bare fists and her slippers on the same door, which her husband and her son bashed earlier, before they stormed out of the apartment. Finally the blows grow weaker, the shouting wanes, Pepa is exhausted.

I go downstairs and take a look. It's silent in the apartment. Because of the many blows there's a crack in Jordi and Pepa's door, through which a

yellow ray of light gleams at night. I press my eye against the crack where it's widest and can see Pepa's high-heeled shoes, her son's trainers and her husband's slippers on the black and white checked pattern of the floor-tiles.- *Me cago en la puta!* A voice suddenly cries from the apartment. I start and press myself against the wall next to the door. *Me cago en la puta!* That's Rocco, Pepa's parrot, the only one in the house who always enjoys the row. I look through the crack again. Lying on the living room threshold is a bundle of black hair. Pepa's hair? A wig thrown on the floor? Downstairs the house door creaks and falls shut, steps echo. I look down into the stairwell. A hirsute hand is winding swiftly up the banister. Asthmatic wheezing. I climb upstairs without a sound and slip into my apartment.

Sunday, 6th Sept.

Sunday peace. Apart from the periodic rush of water in the pipe it was quiet in the wall all morning. It can be assumed, that most of the residents of the house have taken advantage of the fine weather and gone on an outing. If I press my ear to the cold wall, there's only a monotonous hiss. Ssssssssss. I take my ear from the wall. The whistling continues. My own ears whistling? I must see an ear specialist next week.

After lunch, when, like everyone who has remained in the house I lie down for siesta, the wall sleeps too. It snores. It coos. It sighs. At about 5 p.m. it begins to groan: ah, oh, in two parts, overlapping, then at intervals, question, answer, rhythmic panting, falling, rising, *te quiero, te quiero* and finally two liberating cries in unison.- *Eeh, eeh*, Rocco echoes them, *Me cago en la puta!* No one in the house knows exactly where the two of them are doing it: in the front house next door, in the back? We only ever

hear them on Sunday afternoon. Perhaps they go to a flat which friends have kindly made available to them for their Sunday pleasure.

In the early evening a hard drumbeat thuds through the wall. That's the student flat on the fourth floor. A rhythmic bass line enters, a synthesiser howls waspish shreds of sound, then a voice begins to a reguetón beat: *Aunque madrugue, ni Dios me ayuda, quiero gritar y salir de mi sombra, en mi pozo solo el eco me nombra ...* and Rocco seems to be particularly cheerful on this soulful Sunday afternoon: *Eeh, eeh, me cago en la puta!*

Monday, 7th Sept.

This morning Pepa asked me on the stairs whether I could hear the strange noise in the wall too.- It sounds quite peculiar, as if someone was constantly scratching the plaster with a nail. Sometimes it seems more like a knocking or rattling.- Exactly, called Olga from the first floor, who was just coming panting up the stairs, knocking and rattling, like with a chain. Let's just hope... just imagine – and she waved a newspaper and pointed at an article with the headline: *Kidnapped bank director still not found*. And underneath: *First clues point to ETA*.- They put a gun to his head in Café Ferran, babbled Olga agitatedly, in broad daylight, pulled him onto the street, and they're supposed to have hidden him here, here in the Old Town, because they can't get far, say the police. It's all here! Olga brandished the paper so wildly that it was impossible to read a word.- Let's hope they ... whenever I hear that noise over there – but Olga didn't finish this sentence either – Just imagine: Rattling, chains rattling... perhaps the police should be – *Me cago en la puta!* Rocco shouted out of Pepa's open front door.- You shut your mouth! Shouted Pepa and pulled the door shut from the outside.- Police? Not at all, there

are no police coming into my house. They'll just arrest you, because they'll think you're crazy.

And I imagine: On the other side the bank director, in tie and made to measure suit, back to the wall, his chafed wrists tied behind his back with a thick chain, the chain attached by an eye-bolt to our fire wall which one foot thick protects us from each other, and with every movement the chain rattles, scrapes against the plaster, every time he turns or twists it strikes the wall and pulls at the eye-bolt, and the fire wall transmits the unseen drama to our living room, and we calmly drink our tea.

Wednesday, 9th Sept.

Phoned the caretaker. He laughed, when I told him about the curious noises in the wall.- There's scraping in the wall? Ever heard of termites? The whole city is contaminated, the centre is completely infiltrated by the creatures, they burrow from house to house, bore their way into the old beams and door frames, they eat their way by the thousands through plaster and masonry, and when they're eating you can hear them, if you put your ear to the beams.

I look up an encyclopaedia: *Many species have a white or a whitish-yellow body colour. As a rule termites grow to between 2 and 20 mm. They penetrate human habitations in large groups and destroy wooden fittings, completely eating away the inside, but leaving the outer surface unmarked, so that apparently intact objects collapse at the least shock.*

So thousands of these white insects are eating their way with their mandibles through our old fire walls in the search for a wooden beam and boring passages for themselves up, down, over to the neighbour and

across to me, undermining us and burrowing and eating, until one day the wall is hollow, collapses and pulls us all down with it.

I don't dare put my ear to the wall.

Thursday, 10th Sept.

I cannot believe that the noise is caused only by termites. Perhaps the scraping and gnawing of the termites is mixed in with the acoustic medley, but there must be something else in or behind the wall, Pepa also confirmed that today: A quiet whimpering runs like a thin thread through the ribbon of noise; clearly audible, if one presses one's ear flat against the tiled wall in the kitchen. Perhaps a locked-in dog or cat after all – or a child?

Sometimes I imagine that on the other side of the wall there's another person sitting, someone who, like me, is listening in on the wall, listening to my life and making a fool out of me. Walls have ears. And the longer I think about it, the more the other becomes an obsession.

Friday, 11th Sept.

Yesterday Pepa talked to a friend in the next door house. There are illegal Romanians there, gypsies in fact. They're living at my level, on the third floor. One can never say for sure with these people whether there's one or more families. The stairs are swarming with gypsies, they cook over an open fire in the living room, the common stairs stink from top to bottom of stale smoke and fried fish, the crying of children has also been heard from the flat, but the children are not allowed to leave the apartment, they are alone and locked in all day, and the adults hang around on the streets and are involved in shady business. The children scratch and scribble on

the walls with their fingernails and screwdrivers and other objects which they happen to get hold of, they don't go to school and don't have a slate, hence the noises in the wall.

Olga on the first floor thinks they aren't Romanians. She refers to the hairdresser on the ground floor, who says there are negroes living there, black Africans, black as the night. She sees them when they go into the house next door. Immigrants. Like most of these poor creatures they came over the sea in a rubber dinghy, no doubt belong to those families, about which there was a report on television only recently: the engine damaged, the boat drifted for days on the open sea, eight adults and five babies died of thirst, but they could only throw the babies into the water, the bodies of the adults were too heavy for them to be heaved over the side, so they were lying on top of one another when they were found, the living on top of the half-dead and the half-dead on top of the dead and during the rescue operation in a stormy sea three more drowned, they can't swim, after all, the poor wretches. The women are prostituting themselves now and the men are working as pimps.

Saturday, 12th Sept.

A neighbour who lives opposite told me in the café that they were dark people, not negroes though, but Arabs or Pakistanis with beards, Moslems in fact. They were constantly coming and going. He assumes, they've got an illegal mosque here. Some even come with their own prayer rug. They all have sores, scars and even open wounds on their foreheads because their heads strike the floor when they're praying. Then he emphasised once again: Pakistanis, Arabs, Moslems – and after a pause: Just imagine, if they're preparing something here... it wouldn't be the first time, that they cook something up, and no one suspects a thing,

instead, the state even pays for their housing and subsidises their mosques. Only the Socialists can be that dumb.

I go to the house next door and look at the names under the bells. There are three flats on the third floor. I ring 3, 1 first. Hissing. Then the intercom crackled. – *Si!* Coughing. That's the widow. I say nothing, then I ring 3, 2. A child's voice calls: *Si, quien?* – I want to see the immigrants, I shout into the intercom. No reply. Where do the immigrants live? – The Chinese on the ground floor, or the Filipinos on the second floor? – Are there no Romanians or Blacks here? – No, but Pakistanis or something, they live on the third. – Which apartment? – I think, third door. I ring 3, 3. Crackling in the intercom, hissing, silence. I ring once again. – Omar? says a woman's voice. Omar?

I go home, switch on the computer and look in the on-line Telephone Book for the street, number, floor and house number, name: Omar. A telephone number appears on screen and a name: Omar Al-Sharar. I dial the number and let it ring for a long time. Steps behind the wall. I hang up. Now quite clearly murmuring and knocking. Moslem prayers? It could of course also be the widow talking to herself, but I can't get the picture out of my head any more: the rhythmical raising and lowering of the heads in the direction of Mecca, the heads striking the floor, *Allah is great, Allah is powerful, Allah is with the faithful.*

Sunday, 13th Sept.

In the morning I tried to phone again a couple of times. At the third or fourth attempt there's a crackle on the line, the voice at the other end in broken English: Hello, you Jack? I reply: Yes.- Call this night. I say: OK. Then he hangs up.

The neighbours have stayed at home because of the bad weather and the wall is saturated with noises. Impossible to think of a peaceful afternoon nap. The widow is clattering with her dishes in the chrome steel sink, in syncopation there's the reguetón from the student flat, *Aunque madrugue, ni Dios me ayuda, quiero gritar y salir de mi sombra, en mi pozo solo el eco me nombra*, there's a homely whooshing and gurgling in the drain-pipe, the writer in the attic is flushing his cacophonous notes down the toilet, Alfredo is showering and cheerfully singing *Qui presso a lei io rinascere mi sento, e dal soffio d'amor rigenerato...*, the pianist has stayed at home too and is whirling scales through the wall, major, minor, chromatically up and down, rhythmic panting, ah, oh, *te quiero, que te quiero*, rusty chains rub against chafed wrists, bloody children's hands scrape at the plaster, dark-skinned Moslems wound their foreheads striking the wall, *Allah is great, Allah is powerful*, there's murmuring groaning singing rushing gurgling knocking rapping creaking whining rasping and snoring – then a crack in the wall, the terrible eye of the other stares out, thousands of white termites crawl out of the hole, crawl around me, pull me into the wall, I am a termite and crawl around with my fellows, we dig a tunnel through the wall with our mandibles, burrow our way through plasterboard, crumbling mortar, eat our way through rotten beams, crawl through slits, pipes, electric cables, we dig, gnaw and clear a way across, across – *Me cago en la puta*, a door slams. The bed shakes, the wall trembles.

It's quiet tonight, very quiet. I pass my hand over the cold wall. Then I dial the number.

(Translated by Martin Chalmers)

