

*Gunther Geltinger*

*Extract from a novel*

Translated by Katy Derbyshire

When the snow comes, the silence turns to motion. The sky dissolves the clouds, deleting the horizon; only the crows remain in what is white, as last remaining strokes, soon swallowed up. Above them, the mist forms a second layer, the birches rise swathed in frost, fleeting interlaced structures made of cold and light. Then the wind dies down. Here a rustling comes out of the waterlogged woods, there the crack of a dead branch from the other side of the ditch, behind which everything seems to come to an end: the children's games, the summer promises, the autumn with its brittle sounds. Both here and there the hushing of all of the echoes under the thin sheet of ice formed on the water overnight, a low gurgling within, bubbles rising to the top, a tiny cavity under the ice, the eyes of winter. Finally the staring of the bubbles into the blind sky, the laments of the crow thrusting out of the reeds with a piece of carrion in its beak, the flap of its wing, the black mark in the snow clouds, and then nothing more, only silence, slowly, very slowly beginning to fall.

That's how I remember it now: the moor after the first nights of frost, the calm before the snowstorm when they came for Marga, under a revolving light that flickered on long in the darkness, blue and mute. There seemed to be no need to put the siren on again – there was no car in the way on the rural night road, no one in Fenndorf drove anywhere after ten o'clock at night. They took her away, quietly, discreetly, almost secretly, as if even the ambulance workers were ashamed of her. One of them pulled the grey blanket up to her neck. I remember precisely the red protective suits with silver reflector stripes, which flashed in the volleys of light for longer than the moment, and which for all the following days and nights were to fuel my dreams, in which Marga is sitting in the barn again, painting or at least trying to paint, or simply squatting, staring and drinking until the last bottle rolls into the corner, along with a lost pill, and the white canvas before her eyes begins contorting and disintegrating into

flakes, snow that unleashes the storm. But doesn't the wind that picked up again that night tug far more strongly at me now than I felt at the time?

At some point the blue lights twitched out of sight in the distance. The assembled villagers went back to their houses, their faces hidden in hoods turning back once more to me, prompting me to look at the ground, at my bare feet beneath the hem of my pyjamas, which had already taken on a colour and a sensation like ice. Doris Felber was the only one left by my side. Now, I see my aunt smaller and more hunched than the boy saw her back then. I was an anxious child, to whom she appeared gigantic and threatening, already out of shape like an old crone although barely forty, in her greasy dressing gown and the felt slippers she'd dashed out of the house in when I'd drummed at the door. She came even closer, grasped my head and pressed it into her armpit with its scent of sourdough, as if I were not to see the tyre tracks in the rimy leaves on the ground, the stretcher transported away, Marga's mouth caked in vomit with the breathing tube in it, an image like a shard of shattered happiness that had already bored deep into my body and begun to kill everything there, for this night at the latest was the beginning of a long, perhaps lifelong coldness, if coldness is a description at all of the condition in which I have since been petrified.

The frost, at least, had come early, after the storms that used to sweep the last leaves from the trees around the end of October, leaves so porous that they broke apart on the ground, and I heard the sound, drew my head out from my aunt's embrace and saw her face contorted by shock or secret gratification in front of the blue-ish glow on the horizon, which refused to extinguish and perhaps was the first light of dawn, trapped in the twigs of the willow that had been bobbing in the wind and shaking off last leaves a moment before, but now stretched its branches naked into the sky, as if the tree were dragging down the silence to dress itself in. And really: it began to snow.

All this is now blurred contours, hesitant strokes on the sketch of a picture that I now have to finish, although I don't know where it will take me and why it's me who has to complete it. Marga might have painted it, using her very own technique, which never allowed for a specific form and rarely clear colours. As

soon as something was outlined on the canvas or one of the pigments she mixed herself blended with another into a colour that a child of this region might recognize – a buttercup yellow or the crimson of a dragonfly – she wiped her sponge across it or applied a swift new layer, obliterating what had just been identified.

I remember sometimes getting impatient and even angry when I watched her painting, while I pretended to be playing in the junk all around. She was like a magician, holding out a toy to me and whisking it away up her sleeve as soon as I reached for it. She treated me the same way as her pictures, all my convictions. On one of the previous evenings she'd been standing smoking on the veranda, in a negligee despite the cold, me before her with bushels of cottongrass in my hair and my mouth. The old man mimicry, my limping about with an umbrella stick and white tufts of beard on my top lip, had always made her laugh again before. *If it wasn't for you*, she'd said, *I'd put an end to everything*, and I'd shrugged in annoyance; *everything* wasn't a colour either, just like black and white, everything was nothing, empty like her pictures often remained or muddied up by mixtures in which they ended up slumped.

Perhaps that was just what she meant: her struggle with her painting, which really did seem to mean everything to her, or her work in the gallery in Hamburg, which she had stopped going to because she was off sick, so she claimed, although she didn't seem at all sick to me, not like with the flu. I was not to understand what this sickness really was until much later, nor that one couldn't call in sick for something like that at all, at least not back then. At the time I thought perhaps she wanted to give up smoking again; at that moment she was staring in disgust at her cigarette and stubbed it out, but I'd heard plenty of that kind of announcements: I'm giving up tomorrow, and then wham, bam, light up the next smoke. Or perhaps she was fed up with housework, the toothpaste stains forever in the washbasin and all that cooking for me, although in the past few weeks there'd been no potato stew any more, not even boiled potatoes, only bread and butter, with plenty of cinnamon. She still wanted cinnamon. I considered all manner of things, apart from one: flashing blue lights, ambulance

men, the vomit in my bed that stank out of the mattress for weeks to come and turned my nights into deserts, sour, full of dead life, like the moor.

That evening she'd blown the cottongrass bushels from my top lip, bored; her breath had smelt bad – she must have had enough of the constant tooth-brushing. She pursed her lips, expelling heavy air, or was it her last sigh already, a death rattle that ought to have told me how onerous everything had become for her: her painting, her job in Hamburg, and that neither of them paid properly, the village women looking askew and gossiping, the ramshackle house, a child inside it forever unfinished, an apron-string-tugger and speech-cripple, who she now grabbed by the arm, saying: *But you are here*, words that were both consolation and accusation, and because I didn't know quite what she meant again, I just carried on playing the Old Man, miming the grandpa without his teeth, sucking in my lips and mumbling: *You'll be rid of me at eighty*, and not stuttering at all and for a moment even thinking that my whole dilemma with speaking might be down to my teeth, which were growing pretty skewed in my mouth at the time.

But then she did smile, the next day stretching canvas over a new frame, making potato stew, with sausages even, pacing across the yard with a cigarette as usual – only then, two days later, having swallowed a box of Vesparax and whatever else, to climb into my bed. Her lurching, the strange pallid face, her expression in the semi-light as if crazed, the firm grip of her fingers stinking of cigarettes and turpentine, the saliva-soaked, almost choked up *But I love you so much!* before she passed out, which I didn't notice because I must have fallen asleep the next moment. Then at some point a jerk under the bedcover, her body cramping, a moan I thought I heard in my dream, more a bubbling, as if she were taking one last turn across the pond where she'd once so loved to swim. Suddenly the stream of vomit on the pillow, my panic, hands everywhere, her arms floppy now, as if without bones, her eyes closed, even when I shook her and jiggled her. Even after the slap round her face that echoed through the room the eyeball in its lid bed stayed perfectly white; it was the first time I hit my mother, and then right around the face.

Seconds in which I didn't know what to do. An indescribable fear that rose like fire from my stomach along my throat and turned to ice at my temples, a trembling cramp or feverish shivers until all I wanted to do was sleep. But then I did go down to the telephone. The dialling tone in the silence a black hole that swallowed up everything, so I hung up again; I wouldn't have got a word out anyway. Instead it was over to the Felbers' farm, barefoot, stones boring into the soles of my feet, the pricks almost outside of my body, even then a kind of phantom pain. Stumbling, more stones, the somehow consoling idea of a trail of blood along Heidedamm, but perhaps that only came much later, over the years. The darkness between the tractors was almost liquid, a lump in it the watchdog that didn't bark, only gave a tired rattle of its chain, already deaf back then or recognizing me. An eternity before anyone opened up. It was Andreas, the eldest of the Felbers' sons, his hair crumpled from his pillow. Stuttering, stamping, silence. He looked at me, annoyed, turned around and called out: *Mum!*

I couldn't get a word out to Doris either, but she must have seen something in my eyes; despite her weight and her drowsiness, she was very swift all of a sudden. She threw on her dressing gown, rummaged in a drawer for a key, perhaps a torch, but why a flashlight? The road was dark but it was her own land that she'd walked so often, Heidedamm. Suddenly she sped around, shook me by the shoulders and called out, *Boy!* Just that one word, echoing through the hall unrestrained. Uncle Karl appeared on the stairs.

The night colder now than only minutes before. Back over to the house, the flapping of Doris' slippers, a low curse, perhaps a stone in her shoe. She stopped, bent down, caught up again, the torch in her hand after all now. The ray of light crept across the gravel, dim, disgruntled, as if it didn't want to light the way. When something rustled in the bushes it jerked away, across the ditch, vanishing into the moor. I began to shiver. In the hall, the telephone receiver dangled from its cable. I was sure I'd hung up, hoped she'd come round again, called an ambulance herself. But she was still lying on her front in my bed, her face turned to me on the pillow, sleeping, as beautiful as ever. In front of her, like a glass wall between her and the boy, the smell of vomit, children's sleep,

death. Doris bounced back and called out, *For God's sake, Marga!* Angrily, as if she'd seen it all coming. She dashed over, heaved her upright, her head drooping forwards. Doris held her chin, stroked her hair back from her forehead. Her hands on Marga's heart, on her wrist, seconds of breathless silence, then she called out: *A pulse!*

I can't remember where I was standing at that moment – still in the hall, in the doorway or by the bed? For a while the boy doesn't appear at all in these images, as if he'd slipped into a hole in time, through his fanned-out gazes into his own head: there's the house, seen from the moor and now brightly lit, jagged roof, sooty bricks, dabs of light above it, almost like a fire in the moonless night, mown down by clouds heavy with snow. On the margins of the picture, where it frays and gives way to the next one, sleet is starting to fall. Doris' voice comes out of the open front door. She calls out the address several times into the telephone, standing as a silhouette in the hall; three or four times she repeats the directions to a house in Fenndorf, which she ends up describing as *the last building after the stables*; officially, there was only number two on Heidedamm, the pig farm, and after that nothing but the moor.

When she came upstairs she seemed calmer. She stopped in the doorway, motionless, almost in awe, the way one sinks into an unexpected view for a moment from a hill or a tower. Only her bosom swelled and swelled; she seemed to be breathing only in but not out again. Suddenly the boy's back in the picture again, standing outside the door to Marga's bedroom, which he's closed because the torn-open Vesparax box is lying on the bed. Doris shoves him aside, pushes the door open, says, *Oh my goodness!* Between her fingers crackles a blister pack, the information leaflet, *Read it out, I haven't got my glasses*, she says and presses the paper into his hand. I stared at the tiny letters dancing before my eyes, wrenched my mouth open, the smell coming out as sickly sweet as at seven in the morning when Marga woke me up and gave me the kiss on my forehead with its whiff of last dreams.

In my throat now though no logjam of words, not even a stammer, only my tongue stabbing at the gap in my teeth as I read under *Indications* the reasons why Marga had wanted to put an end to everything, and was almost relieved not

to read my name there or anything like an acute potato stew allergy, though that too is more an idea from now than the child's real thought, a helpless attempt to bring light into a tunnel of muteness and fear. *Come on, tell me!* called Doris and ripped the leaflet out of my hand. She stared at it, then pressed me into her fat and sighed, *My poor boy*, words only Marga ought to have said. She'd hardly been gone before my aunt had pinched them for herself.

She rushed back into the room and dragged Marga onto her side. She exchanged the pillow, covered her up and went into the bathroom. I heard the water running and in the running the *Oh my goodness!* again, thought of the toothpaste stains and that Doris would never have put up with that kind of thing in her house. She came back with the cleaning bucket and started mopping up. Again, the boy's not in the picture for a while. In my memory all I see is the wooden clock on the wall, painted with the head of a dragonfly by Marga, which said half past seven, seven twenty-eight to be precise, and had done since one day in autumn when the hands must have stopped moving above the bubble-like compound eyes. Marga had meant to get batteries in town but hadn't been there since. Everything had changed since time had stood still in my room: the days had got shorter, the sun rarer, endless nights because we didn't go to the pond in the morning any more and slept through until noon. She didn't sleep in my bed any more, but over in her room, behind closed doors, where it began to smell. I dashed into the classroom as the break-time bell rang. Punishment essays, my first E for my homework because nobody had given me the sheet of paper with the instructions, so I missed the point of the exercise. Grumbach, the German teacher, wrote one reprimand after another for my slowness and unpunctuality, which Marga didn't sign, nor my tests. Once she simply growled: *I didn't have a mother for all this crap*. Then the appointment with the headmaster, which she didn't attend. I found an old clockwork alarm clock in a drawer, its morning call cold and shrill. I yearned for Marga's lips on my forehead, her whispers, the hair that tumbled over my cheeks and tickled me up into the day. But when I woke with a start it was only the dragonfly staring at me with its blood-red head.

Because the moor too turned its coldest shoulder on me, I spent a lot of time back then, that late October, in the crack, the secret place between my bed and the wall. Before I went to sleep I squeezed my penis into it and trickled it out with clenched teeth. But the crack had changed now too, got wider, more boring, no longer a narrow chasm leading to incomprehensible depths, just a gap opening up gradually towards the foot end, a grave for dust, spiders, dried bogeys, childhood puzzles. Often the trickles didn't go away, gathering on the bumps of the woodchip wallpaper and flowing onto the edge of the bed before I'd quite finished shaking it off. Was the moor pushing up in resistance from below now?

Outside, the water rose with the constant rain, spilling out of the ditches onto the fields, gurgling under my shoes at every step, lying in wait at every turn. The pond had swollen, a metallic-glinting bulge between the hillocks, the cottongrass flattened, the alders submerged up to their first barky faces. Soon our road was attached to the village by boards to stop it floating away, makeshift catwalks made of construction planks that Karl Felber put down so that the tractor didn't slump too deeply into the mud. My walk to school was a ribbon of puddles winding into the village, suddenly a murky lake gradually eating its way up to the house. At some point the swill made it into the cellar, then even the toilet was blocked, my shit wouldn't flush away, the swollen nuggets floating in the toilet bowl. I was ashamed and did my business at school from then on and the rest behind the barn, where the rain flushed and flushed away. I don't know when Marga took a shit; perhaps not at all what with the few morsels she was eating by then. Now she smoked during meals too, spoon in one hand and cigarette in the other, but she'd done that before as well, when she was as if absent from hours of staring and dabbing or in a rush to get back to the barn, to Hamburg, back into her world. Sometimes she confused her cutlery with her cigarette; it looked funny when she pursed her lips but then raised the spoon to her mouth rather than the filter or shoved the cigarette between her teeth; I grinned, stuck the handle of my knife up my nostril and said, *h-yummy. Your mother's retarded*, she slurred, acting the idiot. We laughed and went on eating.



It was actually all the same as usual, except that this *usual* seemed to have changed in a way I couldn't understand. In each of Marga's old familiar gestures, in all her jokes I'd heard so often, that I laughed at because I'd always laughed at them, the last time was lying in wait. But I didn't know that then and I can only now claim to know it. The boy's feelings have long since sunk into the moor, the end of my childhood a mess of melted oil paints and snow. But what to do with all these pictures, my memory addiction? Where to put my mother, her vomit-encrusted mouth, the icy kiss she presses on my eyelids in my dreams? Perhaps I've ousted her from my own life in retrospect, had to oust her so that I could go on at all. Or was it Karl Felber, after all, who had her picked up and taken to the asylum? Perhaps he even poisoned her to get rid of the old shack at last, the crazy sister-in-law holed up in there, the contaminated scum of their shared past? Now the tubular hoop barns from Holland he always used to talk about are lined up along Heidedamm.

He really was suddenly in the hall. He was wearing a peaked cap, a sweater with a Norwegian pattern, over it overalls, as if he was going to the stables. Only the dirty slippers on his feet disrupted the image of the evil neighbour who tips rat-poison onto his rival's well by night. He seemed to have been woken from his slumber by the events as well. He blocked Doris' path as she was lugging the bucket back to the bathroom. *What's up with her?* He gestured at the room. She swallowed this stuff, said Doris, throwing the box of pills in his direction. My uncle cast a glance at it and pointed at me; *I told his father right away that she was no good.* Doris pulled herself up to her full height in front of him, a gush of water splashing to the floor from the bucket. Now they both fill the screen, almost larger than life, the pale faces disfigured by tiredness and questions, sebaceous, pockmarked skin on Karl's cheeks, their hair tangled, already greying at Doris' temples. *You told him she should go to hell, she hisses, and your brother along with her!* And she makes an agitated gesture towards the edge of the picture, half forwards, half upwards, into an imaginary sky. Then she's gone all of a sudden and Karl's alone. He leans against the doorframe, bending his knees involuntarily. Now the gurgling of the toilet flush in the bathroom, once, then a second time a few moments later; my mother's vomit,

the contaminated kith and kin down the drain and out into the moor. But the toilet, thinks the boy in the corner, the toilet's blocked, and he sees the vomit spilling out of the toilet bowl in his mind's eye, the black water of the ditches seeping into the house.

The strange thing is that of all the images I'm conjuring up, the clearest in my mind is that vomit. It fits least of all into the image of my mother, to which I still cling. Even on the stretcher she was still lying in one of her scraps of silk that never covered anything much. I'm sure she'd have found the blanket insulting. She always burned matches when she used the toilet, she bathed and powdered herself every day, always walked around every cowpat with her nose upturned, and then this. What child has ever seen their mother vomiting? Mothers throw up, if at all, in secret. No mother wants to envisage herself floating in her own stomach contents in her child's memories, and Doris, as a perfect housewife, cleaned it away as quick as a flash.

When she came back with a towel she walked past Karl without a word. *She was funny in the head*, he called after her, *from the very beginning!* Doris wiped down the bedpost, then Marga's mouth, unfolded the towel. It whipped through the air – *Will you just shut your trap, arsehole!* Karl darted forwards, whirling her around. *You!* he called out, *don't you talk to me like that!* Doris lifted the cloth against him like a weapon. *Oh no?* she jeered, *but her arse* – and she gestured over at the bed – *you don't mind that, do you?!* She tore herself free, lurching for a moment, and then exit.

Enter the boy. He stumbles out of some corner or other to the bed, straight into Karl's hands. *Mama!* he calls, struggling in his uncle's clutches. The strong body sways beneath the blows fended off by his belly, kicks into nowhere, a scream suffocated in his large hand. In the end the slap, followed by a brief black screen, as if someone had tried to cut something out of the film or add something in. *Don't you hit him and all!* shouted Doris, drawing me away from Karl and pressing me against her smock. The sourdough smell, the black, flickering screen, then Karl's snorting in it for several seconds, perhaps a quarter of a minute, in which I thought about how I'd have to ring the strict woman from the gallery the next day to tell her Marga would be sick for a while

now, sick again, still sick, an idea that choked me; was it was the thought of having to talk on the phone that bothered me, as I always stuttered so badly on the phone, or the fact that I'd have to either lie or tell the truth? There seemed to be nothing else between the two now, no way to undo anything; only the black screen in the bosom of my aunt, who would now take me into her house, where I'd have to chew meat in aspic and be a new brother to Martin, Thorsten and Andreas, getting shot in the back playing cowboys and Indians, and the longer Doris stroked my head, the more unbearable my longing became for Marga's sponge cake, for its cinnamon coating, for cinnamon itself. I could have eaten cinnamon until the end of my days, sprinkled it like Marga did on yogurt, bread and butter, my index finger, I'd even have tossed my potatoes in cinnamon, and if we'd ever run out of money for potatoes I'd have crunched up the cinnamon pot between my teeth with relish, done anything for her to open her eyes again, wink at me and say, *Good morning my darling, shall we go to the pond?*

But instead, when Doris finally lets go of the boy, the siren in the distance, or perhaps no siren, no sound at all, just outside the window the snowstorm and the red men suddenly in the room. Perhaps they came without alarm bells on the way out, just the flashing blue light, in deference to the sleeping children's dreams.