“THE WANDERERS” NOVEL PROJECT

By

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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In

International Studies

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The title of the novel is “The Wanderers.” My objective in writing this book was first and foremost to create something personally meaningful, which might connect with readers by touching on something in the cultural zeitgeist of young Millennials coming of age in an era of drastic change and globalization. It was also my goal to create a manuscript over the two semesters of the Honors Novel Writing Workshop that addressed international themes and which would qualify as an Honors Thesis in International Studies. To prepare for the project, I read twenty novels assigned by my faculty mentor, Michael Gills, in order to obtain a grasp of the fundamentals of the novel writing craft. I researched a variety of subjects related to the content of the novel, including background research on the cities of Kiel, Germany and Copenhagen, Denmark, where Act 1 of the novel takes place. The manuscript was composed primarily between the hours of four and six in the morning. As per the structure of the novel writing course, I was required to complete ten pages each week and to periodically submit my work for review. I also took part extensively in revising and critiquing the work of my peers in the course. By the conclusion of the course I was able to successfully complete the rough draft of a full length novel, which was roughly 319 pages and 83,000 words in length. Act 1 of the manuscript has undergone its first revision and is presented as my Honors Thesis, and the revision of Act 2 is forthcoming.
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My motivation in writing this novel was not primarily to satisfy an academic requirement. When I learned about the opportunity to take part in a year-long novel writing workshop through the University of Utah, I felt compelled to sign up, regardless of how well it would fit, or wouldn’t fit, in my plans for graduation. Like many students—and especially my peers who applied for and participated in the Honors Novel Writing Workshop—I’ve always dreamt of writing a novel, and I felt that the program would provide me with the impetus (at academic gunpoint, no less) to finally do so.

The Honors Novel Writing Workshop was far and away the most difficult course I took at the University of Utah, and indeed, speaking as a transfer student, it was also the hardest of my entire academic experience at three different universities, including a course in philosophy that was taught entirely in high-brow German at the University of Kiel. The class was difficult not only because of the academic workload, which was tremendous, but also because of the emotional investment involved in writing a piece of fiction that at times mirrored and represented events and characters from my own life. To write anything is to make yourself vulnerable; to write about real people and events and feelings—even when combined with invention to form the creative hybrid of fiction—is to make yourself even more vulnerable. It is likely that, given the immense hurdle involved in producing a lengthy and personal work of fiction, I would not have had a chance of
completing the task without the support and spurring-on from my peers in the novel writing course and from Professor Gills.

During my interview for the class Professor Gills warned me, as he warned all of the applicants, of the tremendous commitment involved. Each one of us admitted to the course signed contracts stipulating we would adhere to an extraordinary regimen: During the summer we were to read through a list of ten classic novels--spanning the history of the craft, from Don Quixote to Ulysses--and two books on the art of novel-writing. In addition we were to read ten contemporary novels during the semester. Once class began we would be required to wake up at 4:30 AM, Monday through Friday, and to sign in on Canvas to demonstrate that we were working. We were also expected to produce ten pages a week, to be submitted on Fridays before class for the review of our peers.

During class periods--three brow-sweating hours each Friday afternoon from 2-5 --we would configure logistics, discuss the novels assigned for the course and the writing techniques we were going to “steal” from them (because great writing is theft), and most importantly, critique the work of our peer writers. According to the rules of the class, when a writer’s work is up for review she or he is not allowed to speak. This sometimes proved rather difficult, and sometimes made being workshopped a rather intense experience, but the rule was important for fostering an environment of open debate without the defensive interference of the author. In our criticisms, we were encouraged to go beyond superficialities like “it sucks” or “I like it”, and to try to really empathize with the project of the other. The criticism was always unflinching but never unfair--ultimately, I feel that such criticism was crucial to my personal development as a writer and to the successful completion of my project.
Coming into the course, I had little knowledge about what I would be writing. I had been required to submit an outline of my intended work in order to apply for the course, but I had kept that sufficiently vague as to allow myself room to explore—For me, the impetus to write a novel was based more on a gut feeling than on a potential narrative. Since leaving home for college, I had started on a journey for a deeper understanding of myself and my place in the universe. I had met people during my time at Claremont Mckenna College who shared my existential restlessness—together we had discussed various political theories and the Asian-influenced philosophical thinking of people like Alan Watts, Aldous Huxley, and Jack Kerouac. When I transferred to the University of Utah, I again fell in with a group of philosophical seekers—people who like me were deeply unsatisfied with the mold, with the life course that had been set out for us by society and which seemed to be followed by everyone without exception. I felt that I had tapped into a zeitgeist, into a deeply significant up-and-coming cultural movement—whether or not that was truly the case only time will tell. I had also found spiritual meaning through the study of Eastern religion and philosophy—Buddhism, Taoism, and Vedanta Hinduism—and had gained a deeper sense of oneness with all humankind and with the universe itself. This may sound like hippie nonsense, but it was nonetheless this feeling that I had access to something new, profound and larger than myself that inspired me to write.

It was with this mindset that I entered the course. My first thirty pages or so—three weeks of consistent predawn work—were frantic and undisciplined. Inspired by the Eastern Philosophy I had come into contact with, I decided to cultivate a “zen” style—that is to say, I would put on a playlist of weird Tibetan-bowl meditation music and type
essentially whatever came into my head. The style was interesting to me but did not go
over particularly well in peer review—or with anyone other than myself, really. Thus the
importance of criticism.

After the initial phase of wandering I was admonished by Professor Gills to find a
plot—as he told me, memorably, “You can’t play tennis without a net.” We discussed
structuring in class, using massive rolling sheets of paper to draw boxes representing
scenes and to connect them into a spiderweb of intricately premeditated plotlines. By
week five I had formulated what would later become Act Two of my novel. The gist is
as follows: a college junior named Arthur West, plagued with existential restlessness and
a slew of unanswered questions about his family and his future, teams up with his long-
haired hippie friend John Henry on a road trip to California to confront his disappeared
beatnik uncle and to find the answers he needs to put his soul at peace.

The events of the novel are fictional—but the conflict with the uncle is inspired by
real life, as are almost all of the characters. As such, I found myself in the deeply
uncomfortable position of writing “too close to home”, and was for a time highly
reluctant to share my work with my friends and family. This was another obstacle in the
writing process which was overcome in part through the guidance of Professor Gills, who
informed me that if a certain person ever read a certain story of his, it would come to
blows or worse. In order to continue to be willing to write something that would be
shared with the public, I had to come to terms with what was likely the most difficult
lesson of the entire process—that all honest writing is an act of self-exposure, and requires
tremendous gutsiness—gutsiness that I didn’t have to begin with and had to develop
painfully over time.
My writing style also changed significantly over the course of two semesters. The inscrutable stream-of-consciousness style that characterized the first fifty pages gave way to a sort of wildly energetic satire—as if in sarcastic rebellion to the reaction that the first style had received. Later, as we approached the end of the first semester, the style returned to seriousness and experimental rule-breaking. Sometimes the prose would randomly break into long sections of rhymed poetry or screenplay-style dialog. In hindsight, I feel the erratic experimentation of the first twenty-odd weeks of writing were part of an attempt to find a voice that would render the existentialist philosophical content digestible to an audience.

I found that voice—or the closest one to it so far—around page 201 when I started Act Two—the act which would become Act One in the first revision. (And which I am considering turning into a stand-alone piece after graduation.) This second act wasn’t planned for during the aforementioned structuring phase—it simply arrived one morning when, after 200 pages, I wrote what I had intended to be the end of my novel. At the original conclusion, Arthur has found his long-lost Uncle Neil at a bar in California and the possibility for a renewal of their pseudo father-son relationship is left open. He has fallen out, with his best friend John Henry and has still not found the inner peace that he’s been striving for throughout the nove—At the last sentence, Arthur’s future is symbolically in the balance: he nearly crashes while desperately driving home in the middle of the night. There’s a further suggestion of circularity, the idea that Arthur’s world repeats itself as he falls into the same patterns of behavior, and that it will continue to repeat itself so long as he struggles against the very fabric of his existence.
Having written this ending I was deeply unsatisfied. Gills had consistently reminded us throughout the course that we were producing a rough draft, not yet a final product, and that we shouldn’t paralyze ourselves with the burden of trying to be perfect. That said, I truly felt that I had failed to adequately convey the feeling that had inspired me to write in the first place. Additionally there was the matter of the “International Themes” stipulation in the approval of my novel for use as a thesis. Strangely enough, this arbitrary constraint actually led to my most productive period of writing during the course, during which my writing became much more grounded and accessible.

I started a new act, moving Arthur West to Kiel, Germany. There, while searching for personal meaning and fulfilling that iconoclastic role of “young man traveling through Europe”, he meets a cast of memorable international characters, discusses philosophy and politics, tours Germany and Denmark by train, and falls in and out of love with a strange and naive Russian jazz singer named Natasha. Along with the scenery the writing also changes in this act, it becomes more somber and explicit. Instead of rolling vagaries and beatnik stream of consciousness, it focuses in on the moment-to-moment details of lived experience.

The new writing style seemed to arrive on its own that morning when I reached the end of the first act. Neil Young often remarks that his songs seem to arrive from an unknown source--similarly, my best writing of the year seemed to show up out of the wind. Except, of course, that it didn’t: Writing, like any other skill, can be honed with practice. The class had been a crucible, a veritable boot camp for the written word. I had improved immensely.
The new setting and the new style challenged me to experiment with language, in part in order to convey the upside-down sensation of living in a foreign country. It struck me during my time in Germany that other languages don’t just say the same things differently, they say different things altogether. I think that’s why I made the decision—again spontaneously—to more often than not translate foreign dialog literally. It was not a rule that I could always follow—sometimes the tricky nature of German grammar on a specific sentence would render it completely baffling if I didn’t get looser with the translation. But for every foreign-language sentence spoken in the act presented here for consideration (predominantly German, some Spanish and Mandarin and I believe a little French) I first constructed the sentence in its native language and then playfully tried to bring the strangeness of cultural difference alive, whenever possible, in the English translation. Thus much of the German dialog occurs using the archaic “Thou” tense. Language buffs will probably recognize that this is the way I chose to convey the informal “Du” in German, but I also employed it in an attempt to do justice to German’s archaic strangeness, which at times reminds one of the more confusing bits of Shakespeare. I also, whenever possible, brought to bear what German is literally saying—for example, “citizen path” for sidewalk, “main rail haven” for central station, and “farewheel” for bicycle. The wordplay isn’t intended to be an inside joke for the odd bilingual German speaker—the foreignization of the language as a whole is intended to emphasize the sense of displacement and identity loss on the part of the protagonist. As is the case for everyone who travels far from home for any length of time, the strangeness of his new surroundings brings to light the strangeness of his existence as a whole,
intensifies the yearning refrains of the eternal questions within him, and deepens his sense of isolation from all other human beings.

In this “European Act” of the manuscript, included in the following pages, I also aimed to capture, to the furthest extent I could, the sense of “being there” at a certain time and place—specifically, Kiel, Germany in the spring and summer of 2014. While the bulk of the novel concerns the struggles of the individual--Arthur West’s quest for love and for self-understanding across several years and two continents--I also tried to suggest the concurrent societal and political struggles occurring in the background, the overarching march of history against which individuals enact their lives. I tried to make the characters in the novel discuss the grand dramas of nations along with the mundane details of existence without losing a realistic balance between the two.

As Arthur relates with characters from around the world, international views of America frequently arise, usually in exaggerated fashion--a French girl describes America as “a land of extremes”, probably eliciting a distorted opinion obtained through media representations. Stereotypes about Americans are also played to humorous effect by Arthur himself, who jokingly claims that in America, one can “waltz to Walmart in the middle of the night in sweatpants and buy a machine gun.” In another amusing instance of negative stereotyping, a conspiracy-theorizing Greek economist claims that the Eurozone Crisis was engineered by the Angela Merkel and the Germans in a sinister plot to steal Greek beachfront property. While ridiculous, the character’s viewpoint is actually representative of the broader tensions between Southern Europeans and Germans that I myself witnessed in my experience with Kiel’s international community.
One scene in the novel takes place during the raucous street celebrations following German victory in the 2014 World Cup. The win was described as a “national moment” by many in the press--a chance for Germany to celebrate not only its sports prowess but its restored international status, especially in the economic arena. But in Germany, all expressions of nationalism inevitably conjure reflections on the nation’s darkest historical moment. In the novel, while drunk students sing the national anthem and wave an enormous German flag in Kiel’s Drieckplatz, Arthur’s intellectual East German friend Markus Friedrich jokingly remarks, “Oh god, German flags and mass chanting, a poor sign.”

This scene is indicative of a larger theme within the novel--times of triumph are also times of loss, signs of hope are contrasted by simultaneous reasons for despair. Arthur is, in a sense, in the joyous pinnacle of his life--by his own admission, he is “young”, “in Europe”, and “free”. But he is simultaneously suffering his life’s greatest setbacks: the collapse of his family, a deepening sense of isolation and alienation from humanity, a waning sense of reality, and a heartbreaking, unrequited love. This theme of duality extends outwards to the societal and historical levels: Professors’ claims of European progress are contrasted with an undercurrent of violent skepticism that decries internationalism as an elite-driven scam. Germany’s resurging wealth and relative societal harmony is contrasted with scenes of extreme poverty and urban decay. The uniqueness of the present era allows for Arthur to befriend interesting young people from four different continents while studying abroad. But through his interactions with those people he is also reminded of the continuing misfortune all over the world--the turmoil of the Egyptian revolution is narrated through the character Omar, an eyewitness and
refugee; the outbreak of war in Crimea troubles Arthur’s Ukrainian friend and causes
spats between Russian and Eastern European students. The entire globalizing moment in
history is portrayed as a unity of drastic opposites.

Alongside the ambiguity of life I also sought to emphasize its transience. The
epigram at the start of the novel is the last stanza of the Buddhist “Diamond Sutra”,
which describes the fleetingness of the world. The first line, “In a rainy city by the sea I
loved Natasha and I loved in vain” is meant to convey the blink-of-an-eye rapidity of
change in our lives. And the novel ends as Arthur, having said goodbye to Natasha,
overhears a stranger greeting someone with, “Hello, my love.” This seemingly mundane
and discontinuous final line is meant to convey the constant, moment-to-moment nature
of experience--that there are no endings that are not also beginnings.

The Honors Thesis is intended to serve as the culmination of the undergraduate
experience, and indeed, the work I’ve completed has challenged me to draw from all
areas of my knowledge gained during my years as an undergraduate, both in and outside
of the classroom. In researching and writing this novel I have further engaged in the
subjects that have most fascinated me--philosophy, literature, history, and international
politics. It has increased my fluidity and comfort with the written word--which may
prove especially useful should I continue to move towards a career in journalism. Perhaps
most crucially, this creative process has required me to cultivate a tremendous self-
discipline, as well as the courage to surmount intimidating obstacles to accomplish my
goals. The year as a whole has, thanks to the unique opportunity offered me through the
University, been a year of unprecedented personal growth, creativity, and self-
actualization.
THE WANDERERS

A Novel

by Trevor Stott
For those I love

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to real life persons or personal events is purely coincidental.
Part 1

“Thus shall you think of all this fleeting world:
   A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream,
   A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
   A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.”
   --The Diamond Sutra

Chapter 1

In a rainy city by the sea I loved Natasha and I loved in vain.

Kiel, Germany, 5000 miles away from home. They bombed the soul out of Kiel in the latest Great War and all the buildings are modern concrete eyesores propped up in the ashes.

I got to town in a bus and it was rainy and windy and it was grey. Seagulls squawked discontent and shat on cold men who had their hands in their pockets. That’s Kiel most days. The bus depot was decorated with cruel jokes. There was a Döner stand right there with a naked Turkish lady stenciled on it, just a hijab and dark sunglasses, bright purple lipstick, enormous golden-brown breasts. It made me think of Lorena naked and the image hurt me the way all beautiful things do when they are gone.

Tried to check into the Berliner Hof in starter’s German, big tubby guy in a sweater vest interrupted me Englishly during an umming pause, “Vill you be staying for de vun night only, Mister Vest?”

I said, “Ja, danke.”
I had to show him my American passport, that naivety blue eagle-crested affair—he checked it and touched his left breast and said, “I hope you will be enjoying your stay.”

I dragged four fat masculine cases all by my onesome, climbed the stairs up, came to a room the size of an elbow. I think it was called Economy Plus. Sounds of emergency sirens and the jackhammers of progress, muffled through the walls and windows. A city’s lullaby. Here in the curtained-off dark, not my world, not my problems. I lay face down on the bed with all my travel clothes on and felt the heat of my own breath.

I was so jet-lagged I slept for six hours in the middle of the day. When I woke up I was terrified, I thought I was going to choke on my own heart. The room became weird and too real, the old television set showed the blackened reflection of my face and the broken drapes shadowed my figure against the white wall. The roses on the bedsheets twisted into thorny focus. What if I die here in the threshold before life begins?

I tried to breathe deeply and to hum the eternal syllable, “Om,” but all that did was shake my chest. The sharp pain of the soul was flooding in through all my pores, knotting my stomach, sweating my brow. I tried to lose myself masturbating but when I was done the room was empty.

I walked out into the street. The sun was setting. A petty whirlwind kicked the shreds of newspapers and cigarette butts into the street. Two Turkish women with crows’ feet and headscarves, one pushing a stroller with a brown-eyes child thumb-sucking. They were saying something I couldn’t understand. The older one was smiling.

A trio of drunk German dockworkers stumbling on the sidewalk, a blur of striped sweaters. I left my glasses in the room because blindness is comforting. One of them was
singing a song about a girl. His voice was raspy and out of tune. I put my hands in my coat pockets and walked through them.

I walked through an intersection and a car stopped a half meter away and blared its horn. I jumped. I think someone yelled “Full idiot!” but it might have been the wind. My heart beat and I felt angry. How could you condemn me when you don’t know my story? I said, “Son of a whore” to the wind in German.

I turned around and started to walk back. I passed the German sailors again. They were smoking cigarettes by a light post with Anti-fascist posters on it. Smell of tobacco in my wind-cold nose. I didn’t follow their German but I thought I understood what they were saying—The one had said, “The life is hard, the life is hard and it is bitter, and full of suffering,” and the other had agreed, “The life is not the yellow of the egg, my friend, one must every desire eliminate.”

I was walking quick and then I was behind the headscarves of the Turkish women. They were stopped looking at some sign in the window and the older woman was pointing at it. She said something in Turkish. Maybe it was, “Do you see this, do you see this misery that they’re selling? We must trust in God and never buy the fleetingness they sell to us.”

I couldn’t sleep and so I ordered room service schnitzel and a wheat beer and ate alone. On TV there was some sort of misery in Ukraine and a few shows about catching law-breakers. The sound of news in German started to frighten me and so I turned it off and ate in silence.
I came downstairs the next morning and a lady at the desk said in German, “Sir, you may not leave the hotel. There is a suspicious suitcase in front of the bank.” She said it smiling and so politely that I wasn’t sure what she meant, and so I said, “Ah, of course, thank you.” Out the glass door there was a police woman laying out yellow tape. Five parked minivans that said “Polizei” on them.

I went back to my room and drank a mineral water. Sat and stared out the window and wondered if I could escape so I wouldn’t die when the suitcase exploded. Wiped sweat off my brow and tried to get my right leg to stop shaking. The engine on a dumptruck roared to burning life and I swallowed my spit.

I called the Hausmeister at the student apartments and told him I was going to miss the appointment to move in. He sighed and said, “Ah, well, I suppose you think I have all the time in the world. I will give you another chance but you must take it, neh? Have you a pen? Write it down so that you won’t forget.”

“Thank you,” I told him.

The hotel was full and I had to find another one. I spent most of the day rolling two hundred pounds of possessions over the cracks in the citizen-path. I wished I hadn’t brought anything. I checked two more hotels in the downtown and they said there wasn’t room for me. I started to get afraid I’d have to sleep on the street. When I found a hotel it was overpriced and I felt ashamed to spend my parents’ money.

Met the House Master the next day—portly lowlander in overalls, balding and limping a little on a stiff knee. While we walked he jingled the keys and talked the whole way. “You forgot your appointment, hmm? You students do it always like so. You must learn always to pay attention to time. You cannot make it far in this life, not in America
and not in Deutschland or in any civilized country, if you are not always, punctual. This is an important lesson indeed. Now, what’s very important, you never lose this key, you never forget this key which every door unlocks, or there will be consequences, neh? So then, schon recht.” I didn’t listen to him, I just nodded and said “Ja, ja”, because I hadn’t eaten except for trailmix and my stomach was sick.

I said tschüs to the hausmeister and opened the door. A kid with blonde hair and glasses at the table and a dude in a soccer jersey cooking onions. I tried to tell them that I existed in German and the blonde kid started talking to me in English, said he was an ethnobotanist from Michigan. I asked him about Kiel and he recommended the beer and the public transportation. He said he had a flight over the big ocean that very day—I shook his hand and he walked out of the door and I never saw him again. Soccer jersey guy went upstairs to eat his onions.

My room was bare and the floor was cement. The pillow they gave me was a dishrag with cotton stuck to it. Somebody left an Ikea mirror in the closet. It looked like they’d thrown it in the ocean to reflect North Sea sharks. My face was neck-stubbled and stranger-eyed behind whirls of dried salt water you could read omens in.

There was a balcony made of subway grating and I stepped on it with my bare feet. It was damp and freezing and pushed aching patterns into my soles. I leaned against the railing and looked out over a green field with huge leafless trees waiting for spring, their arms outstretched and swaying to God and the North Sea wind.

Beside me there were rows of other balconies, other perspectives at strange angles, up and down and sideways from me. It was a huge industrial eggcgrate of a building and there were hundreds and hundreds, too many to count.
There was no school for another week so I took the Deutsche Bahn to East Frisia to see Jonas Klamp. He’s an old best friend of mine, he lived with us as a swap-out student in Utah for a year. Took the bus down to the main-rail-haven. Couldn’t figure out how to buy a ticket and so I asked a young Arab with gold-chains and chest-hair dangled in the gap of his collar. I couldn’t understand his answer and so I thanked him figured it out myself.

I leaned across two seats in the train and tried to sleep but the window was too cold. A brick wall ran along the railway for a few miles. The lines of solid separate bricks melted together in the velocity. There were drawings of shouting soldiers and crowned kings and women topless and goosebumped in the cold air, and hurried messages in wide-sprayed black and yellow disdain. Nazis get out! Mine is longer. No more Muslim-hate. Lick my ass, Deutsche Bahn. The Universe Might As Well Be Upside Down.

The wall disappeared and we were on a bridge over grey city. We ran close to a clogged road, frustrated wheel-hunchers stopping and going and honking at no one for no reason. They slid past the edge of my irises and ceased to be. The city’s grey turned to the blurgreen racings of hedgerows and the red whirring rooftiles of farmhouses.

When I changed trains at Hamburg Hauptbahnhof a gypsy woman came to me with a bouquet of white roses and started telling me that the children in a hospital somewhere needed money for their harelips. I was confused and I asked how much. I think she said, “Two Euro”. I took out my wallet and pulled out a five, she took it and then asked for ten. I said I didn’t understand what I was paying for and that I spoke English. She gave
me the flowers and said, “Ten euro, ten euro.” I couldn’t tell what language she was speaking. She just kept whispering softly like she was singing a lullaby with no music, maybe in German, maybe in some language that everyone else has forgotten. When I looked lost she drew the number ten with a finger, over and over on her wrinkled palm. I nodded like I understood and said, “Thank you” and left. Once I realized she’d stolen my five Euro I threw the flowers in a waste bin.

I checked my watch and added eight hours in my head. I had four minutes to catch the train to Emden. I started to hustle, I played this-side that-side to dodge an old man in a hurry, I said “Sorry” and he yelled, “Fully unbelievable!” maybe at me or maybe at himself.

At Oldenburg a bunch of German university girls got on. I smiled at them and they didn’t notice me. Two of them were very excited, talking fast. I started to dose resting my chin on my suitcase. Their voices were sweet and trilling feminine, singing Oo-sounds and caressing French R’s. Richtig schön. I was tired and I stopped hearing their words, and instead just listened to them the way you listen to birdsong. When I shut my eyes I saw an image of clear blue sky and I felt the presence of a girl I loved sometime in the future. We hit a bump and the loudspeaker loudspoke, “Something-dorf Hauptbahnhof, aussteig, richtung rechts.” And I opened my eyes again. The girls were standing up now and maybe the one said “This train symbolizes life, seest thou not, Hilda?” and maybe the other answered, “Jo, jo, its velocity and direction are unavoidable.”

I made blue eye contact with a young brown-haired woman bracing for balance in the aisle. The train turned and the soft parts of her wobbled and she smiled at me. I
thought right then that the world was huge and good, filled with infinite beautiful humanity and endless chances for love.

The train stopped at a town called “empty” and the blue-eyed girl got off. After her an ancient woman struggled limp-caned to come off the train at the station. Then we got moving again. The fields of Ostfriesland opened up green-yellow and the sky was robin blue again in the egg of my eye. I was young and I was in Europe and I was free.

Got to Emden. Jonas Klamp was red-cheeked and waving in aviator sunglasses, with his girlfriend Katje smiling in her silver braces. I hugged them both, Jonas talked to me in English. He has a very deep voice and a strong accent and talks the way a Great Dane would talk. He said, “Hellooh there buddy!” in English. “I was afraid you get lohst, and maybe go to Amsterdam and fuck hookers, or not?”

I made a fist like I was going to punch him in the stomach, “A fuckingk vise guy, hmmm?” I said. “Zer vill be no more visecracking, arsehole.” We loved each other.

We got on the infamous Autobahn in a fat Volkswagen with some of the upholstery torn out. Jonas was driving and he grinned at me fat-cheeked in the rear view with his cornucopia sunglasses shining the world in shades of harvest orange. Katje in the front seat leaned back over the middle console and smiled bracey, she was thinfaced and sweethearted, she asked in German, “So Arthur, what thinkst thou of the pretty German maidens? Do they please thee? Hmmn?”

“I think that they very pretty are.” I answered.
She turned back forwards and said, “Jonas, I reckon, Arthur will fall in love here and he will never leave, and then we will always (she looked back at me) stay here with us, and will teach our children English, what thinkst thou schatzi?”

“I hope so,” Jonas said in English. “It is really so bad-ahss that you are here, buddy.”

“Thank you buddy.”

“You’re welcome, buddy.”

I watched out the window and Katje started to ask Jonas about something with her parents and a horse, I think. Jonas said, “Nein, simply, nein!” and shook his head. He must have seen I was daydreaming and he said, “Ahrther, do you remember the speed-limit on the autobahn?”

“Don’t you do it, you kraut son of a bitch.” I said, and I was only half-joking. He started laughing and floored it. Katje grabbed her seat and laughed in a scared way. Cars going 130 Ka-eM-Ha were standing still. Relativity in action. The engine roared and the world blurred and gears shifted, and my window was creaked open and so it hurricane-whistled in the space between. Cars switched lanes in front of us, blinking serenely like Hindu cows, let us expand outwards into the horizon with suicidal speed. My hands grabbed the fabric beneath me and sweated into it. I didn’t think of dying, my mind kept repeating the word “life”, louder and louder, soundlessly.

An hour later we were drinking tea with Jonas and his Oma. The porch looked over Oma’s little side-house and the big green yard. There was a pond orange-silver with koi and a long barn noisy with West African Gray Parrots. Purple flowers and a half-
broken porch swing dangling, a sun-dusty greenhouse and over it the tips of an apricot orchard reaching for sky.

More sugar, pretty please. Oma was so old she could only speak a dead language. Plattdeutsch, East Frisian Low Saxon. She said, “Stahba stahba de hooten kratza” or something like that. I said, “Yes, thank you.”

Jonas said, “Oma thou must High German with Arthur speak.” Oma grumbled in Low-Saxon, “My German is high enough, verdammt.” Then she explained to me in High German that it was a cultural experience. I smiled at her. Before we saw her Jonas said she was depressed because Opa died last year, and that I shouldn’t ask about the war because she saw it.

Jonas stood and frizzed up Oma’s gray hair, said, “Who is a good boy?” in fetchdog’s Platt.

Oma yelled, “Jo-nas!” and said to me, “Seest thou, youth is always only trouble.” Jonas made a gasp and said, “Thou hast me dear, isn’t it true Oma.”

She said, “Mark my words, boy.” Jonas went inside to fetch beers and it got quiet. Oma looked at me and frowned and then turned her head to stare off into the sky. You could hear the wind in the orchard and the sound of the Koi sucking in the water. A grey parrot said, “Jonas!”

I laughed a little. My head started to buzz from the Frisian tea and I asked Oma if they talked.

She mumbled towards her stomach in Platt, might have said, “A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”
Jonas came back from the beer cellar with a pair of room-temperature Flensburgers. They have a lever on them so you can pop them open without an opener. We popped them and drank, Jonas started to ask me about girls from high school that I’d forgotten about. Then he asked about Lorena and I told him she’d finally given up on me a month before I flew away. He said it was for the best and I agreed. He looked away.

It started to get dark. Jonas leaned back in his patio chair and drank gulps and then breathed out “Ehh!” He smiled at me slownoddingly and said, “In Germany we say, ‘Wir sind in Erinnerungen vertieft.’ We are in memories deepened.” I said it back to him and he said, “Yes, that’s good.”

Jonas’s papa Otto came back from the Volkswagen plant, stepped sadly onto the porch, loosened his regulation tie and poured himself a purple bowl of Bordeaux. He asked me about the flight and noticed that I could speak German now. Jonas got after him to borrow a hundred Euro. Otto watched his thumbs rub the winestem and said, “I have no money more.” Jonas complained and Otto snapped for a second and said—”Jonas I can do nothing for it!” and then stared off over the farm.

After a few glasses he was alright and relaxed again. He watched the fish lazily. He asked me to drink with him. He poured me a metric gallon of wine and Jonas popped another Flensburger, we all said “Prost” and made careful eye contact with each other before drinking. Old German tradition. Otto finished his glass in gulps, said “Ehh!” and then started to sing Neil Diamond’s “Hello Again”, but he only knew the title and half the tune. I sang with him anyway. A parrot wolf-whistled from the barn.
That night me and Jonas and Otto drove a dirt road through the moonlit moor, visited the Kirschner’s homestead to eat the steer they slaughtered. Lena the full-fat mother doted on me and made me eat plates of beef and boiled potatoes and gravy made of Frisian mud, though my stomach was still beerqueasy. She asked me about the breeding and general demeanor of Utah cattle—said they tried to raise Brahmans once, but there was too much kicking with them. I wondered who was kicking who.

The old man Tomas Kirschner came in with dirt on his hands and on his overalls. He bit into the dead ox and remarked that King Minos tasted a bit stringy. Still chewing he stood and pulled down a bare bottle of cherry liqueur and poured prost.

We must have drank eight rounds. After the third, Tomas said, “Knowest thou why one always looks in the eyes when one says “prost”?”

“I know not,” I said, but I already knew.

He said, “If thou dost it not, it is seven years bad sex.”

I said, “Better than no sex at all,” and he laughed broadly and filled my glass again.

He said in stilted English, “It, is, better to loved, and losed, than to never loved.” His expression was serious and I raised my glass solemnly.

The liqueur tasted like cough syrup. Things got misty and slow. The world was real but I wasn’t there in it, I was watching myself over my own shoulder. The limegreen chandelier over the table cast a half-shadow on the old man’s face. Lena’s browsweat glistened and her round cheeky laugh echoed against the walls. The window was open to a black soup of trees and fences and a tiny moon. On the cabinet a kitsch rooster was ready to crow. Where am I, I wondered.
I must have disappeared for a while and the talk got dark and the two old men switched to Platt for privacy. I understood bits and pieces. Otto said, “Sure, grandpa joined the Nazi party, for his career, but he had nothing to do with the killings, nothing to do.” Old man Kirschner noticed I’d woke up a little and poured me another drink. When we prosted his eyes looked intense and far away and through me.
Chapter 2

On the train back I looked out the window and thought about Lorena. She was gone past miles of ocean and miles of time. I tried to remember what it was like to be near her. I saw a scattered image that I couldn’t hold in place. Wasn’t really her. Can’t live off the memories of love.

The cart came by, a wrinkle-eyed woman smiled on purpose, said, “Coffee juice or tea?” I burnt my tongue on coffee and the tip went numb. When I finished it my leg started to shake. A woman ran up the aisle past me and her hips moved in her dress. I remembered the last time with Lorena, in the car a month before I left. Broad daylight and the smell of perfume on her sweater. She had to keep telling me they couldn’t see us through the tint of the windows. When we were done there were sweat beads sliding on the rear window and she started laughing and her teeth were white.

Now it hurt and my tongue hurt and the miles hurt. Out the window against the grey sky there were white windmills waving in long circles, hello and goodbye forever. I don’t know what’s the point in regretting anything. After the last time in the parking lot she said after five years, she finally knew I’d never love her the way she loved me. It was true. How she said it was so calm and tired-sounding that I started to cry, and I said that life didn’t have meaning without her. She said it would be alright, and that I had faraway places to run to. She would always just stay in the place where she was born.

I smiled sad out the window because it was funny I’d come all this way to ache about the same things.
Another cart came around. This time an Ethiopian man with a gold earring.

“Someone would like coffee, juice, or tea?” A middle-aged man in front of me asked for
earthnuts. The man said, “We have only cashews and almonds.”

He said, “A shame.” He turned to the guy next to him and said something and they both laughed a little. Did he say, “I eat the earth and shit peanuts?”

Life is a river. I asked the cart for a pen and he gave me one from his pocket. I wrote on my napkin, “It could be this life is a swift river and there is no changing course. Why then do I doggy-paddle?”

Near Hamburg I had to shit. I put my suitcase on the chair and went to the room that said “Herren.” On the first the red switch said it was possessed, I excused me down another aisle of elbows. The room was cramped and blue. I wiped piss off the seat with a bit of toilet paper and sat down. It was cold. The walls shook from the speed of the wind and I wondered what it’d be like if the train crashed right then. The toilet flushed and there was a roar like a jet engine and I jumped in place.

If I’d’ve come back a day later maybe I wouldn’t have loved Natasha. I don’t know what difference that would have made, either. Maybe instead I’d be telling you a story of French Revolution with a girl named Juliet, how we spent 30 hot nights of Thermidor under the sheets in Paris. Or maybe I’d be a North Sea Fisher, or maybe my soul would know peace.

That afternoon back in Kiel, I caught the bus to a city tour for new foreign students. I met a group of Polish postgrads on the bus. One had a brown moustache and glasses and was always smiling. Another was blonde and serious and started
complaining about the Eurozone and socialized medicine. “In America you have it mostly right, I must say this, we are on a path to ruin.” There were five of them. Mikolaj, Aleksander, Antoni, Dominik, Konrad. I remembered the names but I couldn’t remember who they belonged to.

We met a German historian at the edge of the harbor and he marched us around where the historical treasures used to be before they were blown up by war and replaced with shopping malls. “Here was a great church,” he said, “And now it is a very nice Aldi. We move on now.”

The sun had peaked out timid from the clouds but the wind was whipping ice cold. Blew people’s hands into their pockets and turtled their necks back into their sweaters. I kept meeting beautiful strange women.

“Hello, I’m Arthur, I’m from America.”

“I’m Eva, eh, yes, I am French, ow ave I not met you before?”

When will we meet after?

“I am Fritzi, I come out of Salzburg, but I vas an American vonce.”

I was once lost.

“Yes, hello. Arthur, ees it? I am Teresa, I am from Athens. Did you know that all drama comes from Greek? This is true, and time does not matter, two thousand years and nothing is change.” Everything is change.

I met two dozen people, Poles Croats and Serbs, French Danes and Austrians. I was the only American.

Natasha called my name from behind. “Are you Arthur? Hello, I am Natasha.”
“You’re Sasha?”

“Yes, Natasha.”

“Oh okay.” I was smiling forwards, didn’t look at her, hardly noticed her.

She said, “What do you study?”

I said, “I study languages.”

Her eyebrows went up and she pointed at her chest and said, “I also study languages!” Like it was an exciting thing.

“Oh, cool,” I said. Then the French chick came up and took my arm and asked me to meet a Serbian who’d done exchange in Boston. He said, “What’s up man, yes I’ve been to fuckeeng America, it was fuckeeng sick bro.” I learned his name and forgot it.

The wind stayed cold. We got to the inner city and there was a whorehouse with red hearts painted all over it. Running House Kiel. The intense Polish libertarian –his name was Aleksander–he nudged his mustached friend and said something in Polish and they both cracked up. The guide explained, “So this part is not so nice, but there are many sailors? So here there are some hoowers for them. But it is a, safe place so that is good and eh, rational. We are moving on now.”

We walked up the street and Natasha nudged my shoulder. “Arthur,” she said, “Which languages do you speak?”

There was something like a child in the tremor of her question.

“Spanish, German, French, and a little Chinese. And I’m okay at English.”

“Wow, I see,” She said, and she nodded seriously.
The wind galed and swallowed everyone’s conversation. While we walked this Danish girl Astrid started to talk loudly about her and the two Finnish girls going to a German sauna: “And we didn’t know this that when you go to a German sauna you have to get nekked, right?”

Aleksander nodded overeager, said, “Yes, yes, right, go on.” The mustached guy bent over and opened his mouth like he was laughing but it came out silent.

Astrid said, “So Elsa and Oona and I we are there in the place, completely nekked. And it is all just older men with their old sacks, but there was this young guy and he is just staring at my tits, and I just give him this look to say, ‘Excuse me, who the fuck are you looking at, you fuck?’”

All through this the Finnish girls Elsa and Oona were quiet and smiling. Astrid told us how they’d just met and were best friends already.

We got to the St. Nikolas church and the guide was explaining how this was the only old building that wasn’t strategically torn apart in the war. It was probably a miracle. There was a statue in front of it of an angel with a sword standing on top of a wild dog with its hair standing up. Probably from the wind.

Astrid held out her phone and asked “Will one of you please take a picture of the three of us?”

Teresa the Greek girl was trying to light a bitter cigarette in the wind. She said, “Don’t you want to get naked first?” But Astrid didn’t hear. I laughed and looked Teresa in the eyes and she smiled with the cig hanging from her lips.
That night there was a movie for international students. Before it started I met a blue-eyed Swiss guy with a mountain-climber’s body, he said he was doing some modelling and studying law. He asked me about the death penalty.

I said, “Well, I don’t think much about it either way but I’ve heard you guys hate it.”

He said, “Buddy,” and he pointed to his head and said “Think about it, this is not the right way to show people that you shouldn’t murder.” I nodded and said he had a point.

I noticed Natasha was sitting behind me and I smiled at her. The movie was a German comedy about an old Communist woman who didn’t know that the Berlin wall had fallen, and nobody had the heart to tell her. It was hard to follow the German so I kept squinting to read the subtitles--they were in German too. Halfway through my leather jacket fell off the back of my chair and Natasha picked it up and draped it back over my shoulders. She whispered in my ear, “Your jacket, it fell. Here it is.” I looked back and saw her face flickering blue-white in the dark and she wasn’t smiling, her eyes were wide and sincere like she was feeding a stray dog. I think that was how I started to love her.
Chapter 3

I met my neighbor Markus Friedrich out in the shared kitchen and we somehow got to talking about the nature of being.

It was dark inside and outside, and I was alone and hungry, lying on the backache cot and staring at the bare ceiling. Through the shining space at the doorbottom I could hear pots and pans rattle ironly against each other and something sizzling in grease. I just listened to it for a while and didn’t think about anything. Underneath the kitchen sounds a laptop orchestra was playing Beethoven at mezzo-piano. Then I could smell something like cream sauce and decided I would come out. I hesitated for a few bars, I felt nervous because I hadn’t talked to anyone all day who wasn’t behind a desk. Finally I felt my body drag its heavy self upwards and outwards, I watched us pass through the doorway to sudden light and humid air--there was a guy in a draping polo shirt cooking pasta. I shook his hand and told him what I called myself and where I came out of.

“Out of far-away America, eh?” he said. “Authentically cool. How dost thou find Kiel? One had no expectations, yes, but yet somehow it is remarkably disappointing.” He said this with complete seriousness, like he’d just realized it himself.

I said I agreed, and he smiled and looked up within himself like he was thinking about how much it amused him.

He asked, “And what is it that brings thee here, of all places that one could go in the world, how so didst thou choose Kiel?”
I said, “I know not, I had simply wanted to go somewhere, perhaps in Europe, perhaps in Germany.”

“How long hast thou studied German?”

“Three months, very intensive.”

He nodded, “Thou hast authentic talent, then.”

I asked him if he was a vegetarian because there were only mushrooms and things that grow from the earth in his pasta. He nodded forcefully and said “Yes, but not because of the suffering of the animal.”

I laughed, it was the most interesting thing I’d heard all day. The only thing I’d heard all day. I said, “If one lives, one must unfortunately destroy other life.” He seemed to like my answer; he started talking fast, I think he said he was a climate scientist and he was studying the overwarming of the planet, and that if everyone kept eating meat we would all die of hunger. I thought he had a point.

I sat down and hoped that if I didn’t ask he’d share his dinner. For a minute I watched him silent like a floor-dog. He was dark-eyed and sharp-angled. His right hand stirred and the left counter-clocked his hair in philosophical circles. After a while he looked back at me and offered me a plate. The sauce was gray but it tasted good with some pepper.

The way he talked, Markus--I had to chew my German, every time I stopped he’d hit silence with a hundred words like doorbells. I couldn’t think of the word for doorknob and suddenly he was on about Friedrich Nietzsche.

“So understandably his ideas have very strongly influenced me, especially during a time in my life when I thought that all of my deeply-rooted habits and actions could be
immediately transformed in the course of a day by pure willpower--but then, yes, sure--Olaf from the newspaper staff says the übermensch was in line with the Nazis and all that quatsch, it’s honestly quite irrelevant and a distortion of everything.”

It was fascinating, the way he could keep seven different topics rising and fading and then rising again, in no particular order, like the song of a wind chime. I must have listened for an hour, just nodding, watching the fluorescent light that danced doubled in his head-shook eyes, following the conductor’s rhythm of his hands. I figured it was good for practicing German, and it was interesting. Finally I felt the need to talk. I told him I felt I didn’t exist, because there was only really one thing. He didn’t follow at first, he rested his talk for the first time and asked me to explain what I meant. I tried to explain but it was beyond me. I said, “It is like, it is as if, one must think of it like…” and then I got frustrated and finally said it all in one burst, “I speak not--when I speak, my mouth speaks, when my mouth speaks, that is only the universe, which has so many mouths.”

He laughed and nodded, looking over my head. It looked like he might have got it. I told him it was a very old Taoist and Buddhist and Hindu idea. He smiled and said, “I can’t help but find the whole idea rather komisch.”

This made me feel alone for some reason. I laughed and nodded slowly and then I was quiet again. He started to get into Nietzsche’s eternal return of the same--how your life and the whole universe would just keep happening, from big bang to big crunch, conception to destruction, again and again, and you always had to say yes to it. I was tired. I looked down at the wooden table and all the lines of brown age started to vibrate
weary in my eyes. I interrupted him with the question, “So will this evening disappear or will it always come back?”

He laughed and started talking quickly, tilting his head to the left argue yes, of course yes, and then to the right to argue no, on the other hand not at all.

He looked at the time and then we started to leave the kitchen--instead of goodnight he said, “Until we meet again.”

I woke up with a stiff neck. The pillow they gave me had no stuffing and so I used my leather jacket. The blanket was too thin and so I slept in my pants and sweater. I stood up and looked in the mirror, the jacket zipper had left a red line in my cheek. I went to the shared bathroom to piss and then I laid back down. The doorbell rang and it was Natasha there in the threshold.

She asked, “Do you like strong cheese?” and held out a block of gouda, half-unwrapped.

I laughed and looked away and said, “Yeah.”

She said, “Would you like to have some tea with the strong cheese?”

She lived next door in the student home. Same sort of apartment as mine--four bare-floored rooms with subway-grate balconies, two of them upstairs and two downstairs; two cramped toilet rooms and two showering-closets, and one cluttered kitchen. I sat in her kitchen and she made the tea. When she was filling up the kettle in the sink I looked at her ass for no reason. She was so thin. Her arms were skinny and there were red goosebumps on the back of them.
I asked her where she was from. She grew up some place in Siberia and then somewhere else in the Ural Mountains where the continents divide. A meteor had hit a few years ago.

“Did it scare you?” I asked.

She sipped her tea. “I was eating my breakfast. There wuhs a great flash of light and a terrible roar. The lights went dark and even the heaviest things fell from their places. I knyew then that it wuhs a nuclear weapon.” It sounded like she’d told the story before.

Her eyes were dark and far-away brown. While she was talking I lost track of her in the strangeness of deja vu.

She caught me drifting, she stopped talking and smiled curious with her mouth closed.

“Arthur, are you okay?”

I said, “Yeah, I just got some deja vu. Do you know deja vu?”

“Yes, I know it.”

“You ever get it?”

She paused and looked at me. She said, “Of course I do.” I felt like I knew she would say that, and in just that way.

“I wonder why,” I said.

“I think I know why.” She said.

“Why?”

She started and stopped herself and then laughed and put her blue mug in front of her face. “Nevermind, it’s not impourtant.” I nodded that it was okay.
The tea started to get cool enough to drink. I told her, “Well Natasha, I’m glad you fed me this cheese. I don’t know how to cook anything but eggs, and I don’t have even have a pan besides--I’m always forgetting to buy food when the stores are open.”

She sipped and nodded.

I said, “They close at fuckin’ five o’clock here and all day on Sundays. In America you can waltz to Walmart in the middle of the night in sweatpants and buy a machine gun. I guess I’ll get used to it.”

She smiled. Her eyes peeked at me girlish from above the rim of her cup and through the curling steam. “I too cannot coohk,” she said. “I wanted to make spinach the other day but I did not dare. I skyped my mother and she lahved at me.”

I laughed at her too. There was something innocent in her, llike she’d never thought about herself from the moment she was born until now.

At some point we started speaking German, she said she needed to practice. She stood up and started washing dishes in the sink. She asked me, “How does one say spinach in German?”

I said, “I know not, I think it’s spinat.”

She nodded said, “Should I cook the spinat?”

I said, “I know not, I fear for what will happen.”

She said in French and then German, “I love the...spinat.”

While she started to heat the pot, in French I answered, “Who are you, the sister of popeye?”

“Quoi?” She asked over her shoulder.

I said in English, “You don’t know popeye?”
She looked me in the eyes and said, “Nou.” Any time she said a vowel it sounded like there was a u at the end of it.

I asked, “Have you ever had a peanut-butter and jelly sandwich?”

She turned and said, “Eww, peanut butter and jelly? What a strange combination.”

I laughed my ass off. She asked why, I said it was an essential part of American culture.

She said kind of frustrated, “I have had all of this cultural training in school, and still I do not know this.”

“Don’t feel bad, there’s too many things to know.”

She said, “And still I do not know how to cook spinach!” And she laughed by herself. Her laugh sounded a little like she was choking.

With her laugh that way and how thin her arms were and her innocence I thought right then that she was unattractive. For some reason the thought made me uncomfortable. My leg shook and the tea had cooled and was starting to bitter.

We ate the spinach and it tasted like nothing, and then she came over to put the cheese in my refrigerator because she didn’t like it. She wanted to see my room. She asked if she could show me something on the internet, and so I gave her my laptop and we sat down on my bed with our legs touching. I wondered if it meant anything. She showed me a video clip of her from Russian TV--the camera was following her around some frozen campus, a woman narrated for her in Russian, then it showed her singing jazz in a smoky club in a red gown. It was the most exotic thing I’d ever seen. I asked her what it was about and she said they were honoring her because she won a scholarship.
“Wow Sash,” I said, “You’re kind of a big deal.”

“At my university, yes,” she said, “I am one of the top students.”

She stood and I followed her out through the kitchen.

“So you can sing,” I said.

She said yes.

“Is there something we can both sing? Do you know the Beatles, maybe

“Yesterday”?”

Of course she did, it was probably the only song we both knew.

“You can start it,” she said.

I did. I went low and she went high. The harmony was pretty beautiful. At the 

second verse she tried to repeat the first and we stopped and she laughed.

She said, “Wow, your voice also has a very nice quality to it.”

I said, “Thank you. Will you sing something in Russian?”

She did.

When she left I went and sat on the edge of my bed. I got out my laptop and her

video was still up. I closed it and started to write an electric letter to a college girl I used

to know, Nadia. She was studying anarchy in Copenhagen.

The most recent part of our conversation was this:

Nadia wrote, “Loooolll….Honesty, I can appreciate that. You want to fuck every

woman on Earth--direct quote from Arthur West. I would want an open relationship,

MAYBE. An open marriage. But I’m afraid it wouldn’t last.”

I wrote, “Yeah, I’m the same. I wouldn’t even mind my spouse fucking other

people, it sort of turns me on.”
There was nothing from her for a day and I wrote, “That was an awkward place to leave off.”

This morning she’d written, “Hahahah it's okay, Sartre and Beauvoir had an open relationship. I think it's a neat thing to love someone so much that you trust they won't love someone more than they love you, and to love them so much, that if they love someone more, then they should be with them instead not you, since they will never be happy with you. I had that situation in Orlando, and I didn't even realize I had it, because I didn't NEED the person I was seeing as much as I normally NEED my sig other.”

I liked it. I wrote, “That’s the thing about love that I can’t have, this holding on to someone who is going to slip away. I’m not afraid of love but I’m afraid of the holding. It makes me afraid to love girls, because they want such things from me.”

I stepped onto the balcony and the wind was blowing.
Chapter 4

In the morning I sat in a big lecture about European Progress, but I didn’t follow. The prof was young and wore stubble and a black turtleneck, his hands rolled nonchalant over the life-or-death details of his continent. He was giving a slideshow--pictures of famous people I didn’t recognize kept popping up next to flags I didn’t know. A picture of Angela Merkel with her hands folded together and the professor must have made a wisecrack because everybody laughed. A round type in the front row half-raised his heavy arm and asked a question through his nose that wasn’t a question, and some people laughed again.

After that I had a class about the philosophy of life. This one was more interesting but I understood less of it. This guy was monkbald, he pinched and swept ideas through important air. His microphone kept cutting in and out and I could only hear fragments. “And so we have in no uncertain terms...philosophy of life which is both positive...in a similar fashion to Dilthey...everything is an expression...the stream which permeates but does not permeate…” I liked him, he seemed like he was excited about something.

Outside in the grass of the main campus the wind was blowing. The wind teased the flow of the big fountain, swept the dust off its concrete foundations. I sat on the odd end of a free-air picnic table for a while, a stranger watching strangers. A group of smiling arm-punchers with baguettes asked me if the empty places were full and I smiled softly and left.
Later I took the city bus to nowhere. It was overfull through the university because it was raining. I had to stand and hold the rubber handloop. My feet were narrow together and the driver refused to acknowledge the curves in the road, so my arm got sore from holding me up. At the uni-sport stop another whole flock of umbrellas stepped in, red and black, collapsing into themselves and laughing about the weather. Once they were in we were packed too near each other and there wasn’t much talking. I was shoulder-pressed against a blond girl in a rainhood with wet glasses and her perfume smelled delicate. I smiled at her and she smiled and looked out the window. On my other shoulder there was a tall boy in a suit jacket. He had earbuds in and his eyes longstared grayly. I could feel them both breathing and I wondered who they were. After two stops of silence some girls in the back started giggling nervously and I wondered if someone had farted. One of them said, “Overfull!”

I looked out the window and there was a hooded child slow-riding his bike this-side/that-side, and his tongue was stuck out to lick the rain. I wondered how many eyes were out there to lament the gray rain, and how many tongues out there to taste it.

The bus hit a bump and the girl lost her place and stepped hard on my foot, I said, “Excuse me,” just to say something and she said “excuse me” in an embarrassed way. I liked the way she was embarrassed, and I smiled and thought I might say something to her but I didn’t.

Then there was a stop where everyone but me got off all at once, like they’d coordinated in advance without me knowing. I was standing by the door and so I was an obstacle to everyone, they had to find their ways past me. When they were gone I sat
down. There was one old woman left in a faded purple shawl and she looked like she was chewing something.

There was a long sign on the wall above the windows that said, “Blackriding makes us see red--40 Euro money-punishment.” There was another that asked, “Need you a taxi?” I used the camera on my cell phone to take a picture of myself. I checked it, my face was so disinterested that I laughed at myself. I took another picture of myself laughing.

I sat quiet for a while. We passed the Bootshafen where the lipsticked signs of whorehouses blew kisses in shorefog. Purple triple-Xs and silhouettes of sailing-gals like stenciled homesickness on the side of a bomber. Hearty Welcome to the Garden of Earthly Delights. A window half-draped and a red-lamped staircase disappearing into shrouded paradise above. I swallowed. I checked the old woman to see if she saw me looking but she was staring over my shoulder at nothingness. I wondered if it was wrong to pay someone for sex.

The inner-city was raining too. There was a lonesome crowd of hoods and umbrellas hurrying in strange and opposite directions. A car horned. On the steps of the Sophienhof shop-center three young Turkish grins with wet black hair blew smoke and watched women. I walked past them, cycled through a revolving door into warm dry air. There was a room full of whitepurple flowers and Easter bunny cards. A gray-yellow haired woman in a black jacket was walking an obedient beagle, she let it stop to smell the roses for half a second, then they moved out into the rain.

In the food court I ordered a plastic bottle of Coke Lite and something over rice from a Hindu woman with a mark of wisdom on her forehead. We both had trouble with
German and I don’t know if I got the same thing I asked for, but it was good anyway. It had German cabbage in cream next to it. The customer’s always right. It was spicy and I had to blow clear snot into the napkin, and then I drank the soda too fast and it made me feel sick. I stood up and got another.

There was a beautiful arab woman with green eyes and a blue headscarf, she was making a choo-choo train for her baby boy. Her husband had strong curls of black hair, he tickled the child’s belly and it laughed white teething.

Away from them there was a man eating across from a young woman in a wheelchair. Maybe his daughter. He chewed tired and said nothing. Interrupting the space of my stare an old man with a heavy bag cast himself from my eye’s starboard shore to fish plastic bottles out of the wet trash. One of his eyes squintwrinkled and the other regarded me with suspicion.

I looked away. I scooted some crumbs off the table and rested my head on my folded arms. I burped with my mouth closed. I was tired but I was waking up, I felt something like my own blood rushing. I started to daydream about sex, and then I saw Lorena and it hurt a little. It occurred to me that if I wanted I could go to the Garden of Earthly Delights. The thought made me nervous. How do I ask for that in German? Do I have enough money? Do they have an ATM?

I stood up and started walking towards the north door that was closest to the Bootshafen. I came out of a dark long tunnel and the gray daylight blinked my eyes. I crossed a few narrow cobblestone streets, I passed a sunglassed cigarette-talker committing slow suicide against the lean-slope of a BMW bike, I stepped to avoid his red-skirt cigarette woman.
It was city-quiet and the rain had stopped. I stood at a crossroads where I could see the glittering doorway. The Garden of Earthly Delights. I thought I saw the shadowed arm of a woman in one high curtained window. On the street an old couple shunned slowly past it on their afternoon walk, the old man looking over his shoulder and the old woman nerving ahead.

I tried to take another step forwards. My feet felt heavy and my legs felt soft. My heart was beating and my lungs were breathing. Across the thin street a door was propped open.

A man behind me spoke loudly and I thought he was talking to me. He wasn’t, but I felt afraid and so I turned around and put my hands in my pockets.

When I got back to the Sophienhof I sat down at the same table again. I looked upwards, towards a great palace of glass skylight, prisming uncatchable rainbows out of a stuccoed sky. This is how they replaced the bombed-out cathedral. I stared and then my sore neck nagged my gaze earthwards. I rubbed the crossroads where my dizzied head met my yearning shoulders.

I noticed my hands and the veins you could see in my wrist. Suddenly things came into focus. There was an old scar on my thumb.

A human laughed. The sounds of echoed talking got louder and more indistinguishable. The Turkish lovers’ secret whispers sounded urgent. There was the tremor of pain in their voices, like broken promises. Did she say there is no escaping?

I was afraid and I trembled. I stood and started walking somewhere. In a lightning vision I saw a nightmare that woke me when I was a child. I was in a church and the stained glass came shattering down. I think I was praying in the dream.
I wanted to start running but there was a crowd of human beings. Their animal faces full of blood and wind and grease and pulp, the individual light-prick hairs between their brows and the black dots on their snorting noses. They were throwing frog sounds from their horny throats. Their bubble-fat eyes met and discarded everything.

I had to get somewhere else. The clouds burst over the city and so will I. The bombs will fall again like rain. My eyes will supernova into sunflakes; the iron of my dead blood will harden baby’s milk; I will be the soft of night.

I was outside now. Loudscreech of busbreaks stopping short of everyday carnage. Dark people shifting through earaches and scratching at budding cancers in their breasts. In the cross of the street outstretched arms handing out pamphlets for salvation. The hour is getting late.

I walked onto the bus and sat down and cradled my face in my fingers. The doors closed and I watched change through wet glass, the bus and I started to rumble over rainslick road, we huffed our narrow sidewind on a wobbling bicyclist.

My parents will find out if I die here. Arthur West age 21, the world has killed our oldest son. In the handsome prime of his journey brief, no words can speak our eternal grief.

Quiet now. Hand warmed air in my cold nose. For a while I listened to my own breathing and watched the speckleblue seatback in front of me hold its relative place. Out the wet window the sun was setting orange, on top of cargo ships out in Kiel’s bay, painted-lady navel on the ocean’s round belly. A sunglassed woman stepped on at the sailor’s haven. She sat across the aisle and her fishnet legs folded. She must have been a
hooker. She looked tired. I watched her put her sunglasses in her purse and I tried to
look into her eyes. She caught me and I looked away.

When I got back to the house the room was dark and my laptop was open. There
was a message from Natasha, it said she saw me returning through her kitchen window,
and did I want tea?

In five minutes I was at her door. Through the window I saw her drying
something with her back turned and I knocked on the cold glass. She jumped and walked
quickly over with her hands worryfolded--she opened the door and said, “Please never do
that” and shook her head like she was scared.

I said, “Okay, I’m sorry.”

She had tea ready. I sat down and she sat down across from me with the long
table between us.

“How are you over there?” I asked. My voice sounded weaker than I thought it
would.

“I am fine,” she said, “How are you?”

I said, “I’m good, I’m good.”

She sipped and swallowed and shook her head a little. “Tell the truth.”

“What?”

“Be honest, you are not good. Nobody is honest.”

I looked down at the table and nodded and sighed. “Okay, I’m kinda shitty.”

“I am also shitty.” She said. “This whole month has been terrible.”

“Yeah? What about it?”
“I thought I could handle it. But I have never been by myself for so long. When I was in Berlin with my cousins it was different. It was not so bad. But here I am so alone.”

I nodded to show I was listening.

She said, “I have so much work for my home university. I had to translate a poem three months ago and I still have not finished.” She cupped her teacup like she was trying to warm her hands. I drank from my cup and it was too hot still.

“Do you like the tea? It is peppermint tea.” She showed me the teabag, it said “Pfefferminze” and had a lighthouse on it.

“Yeah, it’s great.” I said.

“At least I did not burn the tea.” She said.

I laughed a little because she sounded pathetic.

She said, “I burned some cookies earlier.”

“That’s okay,” I said.

“It is not okay.” She said, and she shook her head. “This month has been terrible.” She looked off behind my shoulder.

I said, “Has it been a month?”

“Yes. Today is the fifteenth of April.”

I flew in the fifteenth of March. “Well fuck me running. Where does the time go?”

“I don’t know.” Everything she said rose like half a question.

“Life is a river and no one can change its velocity.”
“That is beautiful. Who said that?”

“I did.”

She laughed. “Ouh.”

I shrugged, “Well, the Taoists said it too. They have this idea, life is like, you’re floating in a stream. The more you resist the more you wear yourself out. If you just let go, good things will happen to you.” I put out my arms like I was floating in water.

She said, “Okay.”

I said, “So don’t worry about your test or whatever. Just do nothing and it will happen. Do a shitty job--you’re smarter than most people anyway, your shit job will be better than their good job.”

She nodded like it was true and sipped bitter peppermint. “I like it. I never knew why anybody would care about philosophy. But now I see it can be useful.”

I laughed, “Well, usually not but in some cases, sure.”

We were talking and after a while she smiled down to herself and said, “I’m glad you are my neighbor.”

I felt a little embarrassed and said, “Me too, Tash.”

I was afraid then that she might fall in love with me and that it might hurt her. After a quiet she said, “I have one other good neighbor. He is a Greek and his name is Apollo. He taught me some Greek but I cannot remember it.”

I said. “Huh.”

There was another quiet.

Words came to her. “Mmm--Actually I have a sort of philosophy.”
“What’s that?” I asked.

“I don’t like to talk about it, because most people think I am crazy. My mom thinks I am crazy. But maybe you will not think so.”

“Spit it out.” I played.

“What, spit it out?”

“Uh, just say it.” I scratched my head.

“I do not know “spit it out”. Is it like, ‘Hurry up?’”

“No, just hurry up and say it.” I opened my palm upwards to receive.

“Okay, okay.” She laughed and drank more tea for time. Then she said, “When I was little I remember taking a train to Moscow. I remember it so vividly. I can still see the forests passing through the window. But when I asked my mom about it later, she said, ‘We have never been to Moscow.’ I thought I was crazy. But then I read a very important book.”

I thought it was funny but I asked sincerely, “What was the book?” She said what it was but it was in Russian and so I can’t remember.

“It is about changing dimensions,” She said. “When I was a child I had such sad thoughts. And the world was sad. My father was away and working all the time. But then, I must have been about 8, I thought to myself, I will not live in this way. And I tried to imagine my father was home and that everything was happy. And it happened.”

I nodded.

“There was no other explanation. There are many dimensions and you can choose which one you will inhabit. If you want the world to be sad it will be sad. It all depends on you.”
“So we create the world with our thoughts?”

“Yays.” She nodded and her eyes were dark and wide and thoughtful.

I couldn’t help it and I laughed and said, “Mama told me Russians are crazy.”

She smiled embarrassed and said, “I think Americans are crazy.”

“Are we? I’m just kidding, I don’t think you’re crazy. Everybody’s a little crazy, Tash.”

“Some more than others,” she said.

It got late. I stopped talking and just listened to her. I didn’t have my glasses and my eyes were tired, she looked blurred and far away. The fluorescent lights buzzed and the air conditioner breathed deeply. She was telling me some story about her mother. While she talked I started to think of when I was on the flight over, looking down at the great shadow that the Earth casts on itself, how over the brimming Atlantic you could see the divide of night and day.

She asked me, “Are you tired?”

I said, “Yeah I’m a little tired.”

She looked at her phone and her eyes widened and she said, “It is three in the morning.” Her face worried, “I have to keep working on translation tomorrow.”

I said, “Don’t worry about it,” and I stood up to leave.

She stood up too, looked in the sink like she was going to wash something and then came near me.

I said, “Goodnight Natasha” and I opened my arms. She hugged me. Maybe it was because it was late but we held each other for too long. I started to feel my heart beating
and my blood rushing. When we parted she laughed and I inhaled and walked out the
door without saying anything.
Chapter 5

There was a grilling-party for international students. A couple Austrians were turning bratwurst and the smoke was white and delicious and there was one-euro beer. You were supposed to bring your own meat and I didn’t have any. This tall Polish archaeologist, Wiktor, he lent me a pork-chop.

We sat down on a long picnic table and he started telling me about how peasants ate.

“It used to be they only had one fork, and they would yoos it to grab the meat and then eat with their hands, hah.”

I liked this guy. I said, “I wanna eat like that.” And he laughed and said yes.

His buddy Antoni came over, I shook his huge hand and he sat down. He was tall and widowpeaked. He bit into a pork chop and asked Wiktor something in Polish. Wiktor said, “Uhh, steak, I think.”

Antoni said with a low voice, “Thees steak is really goohd.”

I said, “Fuckin’ A, man.” And he laughed.

Wiktor said, “One time, we found an old sword.”

“That’s badass,” I said.

Antoni asked, “What’s a badass?”

“They’re quelque chose cool.”

Wiktor said, “Ah, yes it was pretty, uh, badass.”

I ran out of porkchop and I went and got a beer. When I was back there was this Polish girl with orange hair, Zofia, she was in law school.
She asked me smiling, “So Arthur, what does it like in America?”

I said, “Everyone has a gun, and if you bump into someone on the street you have to have a duel.”

She sidebobbed and smiled and said, “Ouh, okay, I believe you.”

I said, “Also we eat cheeseburgers for breakfast and we fuck on horseback.”

Antoni said, “I would like to try thees.”

A short Sicilian girl--Vittoria--Sat down and started talking to me. Her eyes were black and wicked. She told the table, “I love meat—in Sicily, there are no vegetarians.” She was beautiful and I listened close to her talk and I started to want her. Then she said she had a boyfriend in Sicily, mentioned it like she wanted me to know, and I smiled and nodded away over the grass and the blue sky. I excused myself to get another beer and when I got back this tall lean stranger had sad down in my place and smitten Zofia. She had her chin rested on her doublefist and couldn’t unsmile. The guy handshook me--firm, not oppressive. Hermann-- He had blue eyes that went through everything. I asked where he was from-- he said “I’m German, but I grew up in China.”

“Your English is good, perfect accent.”

“Thank you, I went to an American school.”

I asked him something in Mandarin and he answered better than I asked. I said in English, “What do you think of the communists?”

We really got into it then and when I glanced back at Zofia she rolled her eyes at us.

Hermann put his hand on my shoulder and said, “Arthur, I’m going to get a beer, will you walk with me?”
I did. He started in on globalization, “I think what we need is for more
government at the international level accompanied by more autonomy at the local level.
On the one level we become citizens of the global community and on the other we
become more integrated in our towns and cities.”

I said, “I like that--I hope that’s the inevitable march of things. It’s a chaotic
mess, sure, but with the internet and the web of commerce we have a unique opportunity.
We could end war, we could end hunger, we could make a humane world.”
At every pause he nodded excitedly and said, “Uh-huh.”

We ran into this group of sideparty smokers and so we stopped talking revolution-
-the Greek girl Teresa was there, and the French girl Eva.

Teresa was saying, “I told him, I don’t even know what ees the point of men.
They are good for two things only--one, they are strong and can do work and two, they
have a deek and you can fuck them. And if you are cheating on me what good is your
deeke, fahck you.”

Hermann said, “Girls, calm down, we’re not all heartless bastards who are here to
ruin your lives.”

Eva laughsmoked and said, “Maybe not all, but most.” When she smiled her
cheeks were round and pleasant.

Teresa smoked and said, “Mm, I do not know, if you find a man like thees you tell
me, I will fuck his brainceout.”

I shook my head and laughed, “Christ almighty.”
Hermann went to get another beer. This smug Croatian dude came up--him and the shaved-head Serbian I met before. The Croatian guy talked with a put-on British pub accent. He kissed the girls on the cheeks, “Hello my lovelies.” His name was Marko, and the tall Serbian was Andrej--like “Andre”.

Marko said, “Girls, I have a question, why is it that you like it when men are mean to you?”

Teresa said, “Because then it satisfying when I murder them.”

Marko laughed, “Come on, you know it’s true. Girls say they want the good guy who’s a poet but then they fuck the guy who sells drugs and has a motorcycle, am I right?”

Andrej said, “Shit, man, fucking right.”

Eva said, “Well I don’t want im to be a poosy, but I also don’t like this with the motorcycle.” She waved smoke.

Teresa said, “I want him to have a deek and to keep it in pants except when I need it.”

I thought this was funny and I laughed.

Marko said to me, “Hey, what’s your name bruva?”

I said, “I’m Arthur, I’m American.”

“Merrican!” He said, trying to copy me.

I said Texasly, “Yer gaddamn right boy.”

He said, “Yer gaddamn right.” And he laughed and shook his head and thumbpointed, “Get a load of this guy. I like him. He’s always thinking and stroking his chin like that--see?”
I had my hand under my chin. I kept stroking and said, “I’m a thinker, Marko.”

He said, “Me too bruv, but you’ve got to get out of your head sometimes, if you want to find some real action, know what I’m saying?”

“You mean like jerking off, Marko?” I said. I raised an eyebrow and stroked the air.

He half-laughed and said, “Jerking off! Hey, I’m a thinka toow man, I used to be all shy (he scrunched his shoulders) and in myself, man. But you can’t get laid like that. You’ve got to come out and be in charge, be the fuck-ing alpha man.”

I nodded and felt tired. I said, “You’re probably right. Instinct, probably.” I stroked my chin, the girls weren’t paying attention anymore. I patted his shoulder and went off to get another beer.

I got sort of drunk. Hermann introduced me to this other French girl. Her hair frizzed out brown and wild and she had an American accent. She was Julie.

“I haven’t heard that accent in a while.” I said.

“Yeah, well, I lived in the states for ten years. But I’m French at heart. I love baguettes and I hate guns and the death penalty.”

“Hey, I kinda like Europe too,” I said, “I like paying more for gas.”

She laughed into the mouth of her beer bottle, said, “You should move. Fuck America.”

I said, “Hey, yeah, fuck us.”

“I converted you quickly. Where’s your American patriotism?”

“They wiretapped it out of me,” I said. A beernumb tongue is clever.
She laughed, she was trying to squint away the sunset. Cheekfreckles and eyes like bright leaves in the afternoon. She said, “So what do you do with your life, Arthur?”

“I drink beer and shit on America. Sometimes I ponder existence. What do you do?”

“I scuba-diva and look for sunken treasure.”

“What would you do if there was no such thing as money?”

She nodded, “Good question. I would eat and travel to warm places and have lots of sex.”

“What a coincidence,” I said.

I should have loved her instead.

Hermann put his hand on my shoulder and turned me away, “Hey, let’s exchange Facebooks, just let me know and get together sometime, keep up this conversation.”

I said, “Sure brother.” Fiddling my number into his touchphone in the smoke of the grill I saw Natasha smiling at a round-cheeked pair of bifocals--he looked vaguely Romanian to me. Her eyes were excited and her eyebrows up, I thought maybe he was her lover or he was trying to be. I looked away. I said “aufwiedersehen” to Hermann, that’s the old-fashioned goodbye; he waved sincere blue sky-eyed and tugged his grey sweater back into place as he turned to leave.

I stood alone and the sun was setting. I had an empty bottle, I put my finger in its mouth. My stomach ached and I felt strange. I saw Eva cheek-laughing at some shoulderjoke of Marko’s--Julie was next to her, drinking social beer with a secret smile and looking at the sky. I felt strange and so I walked out of there without saying anything to anyone.
Right outside the barbecue, past the hedgerow, there was a cracked sidewalk in
the shake of windleaf trees passing narrow off down to shady nowhere. I was afraid
again and still drunk and so I just walked. After three blocks there was a group of
hardhats in a circle and one was jackhammering, it seemed like they just liked to listen to
their own noise.

I walked for a half-hour, maybe. The wind picked up but I didn’t mind. My
hands were in my jacket pockets and I could feel my pulse through the fabric. After a
while the jackhammer faded and I could hear my footsteps lonesome on the concrete.
The air came in cold salt tides against the sweat of my bow, the invisible offspring of the
sea pushed here by the fare-thee-well of waves.

I got to the edge of the ocean. There was a concrete wall and a bank of hard
benches: At the busstop windwall a cigarette call-to-arms said “To smoke can deadly
be”, but above it a burnfreckle woman was teethlaughing at sunset.

I stood watching and it started lightly to rain. Back at the barbecue the grills must
be wash-sizzling and the talkers must be crying out and ducking their tongues. A bare-
nipped beardman with a hip-anchored tattoo biked his farewheel side to side and gritted
himself to suffer wetcold. Where am I, I wondered. He groanyelled something, for-
damnit to the North wind and the cold rain.

I turned back and started for the uni. Kitty-corner from the bayfront crossing a
fishbiscuit stand was closed for Resurrection Sunday. A seagull on the step complained
that he was hungry. Go and fly my brother wrapped in white. Go steal soulshells by the
seashore. Oh God-- poor boy, you’re nobody here are you, and no one knows your name.
And fodder for the skull-sand on that rocky beach you’ll be, same as me and the dead
Duke of Schleswig. I was shivering cold now. Are human words all same as Greek tide-rush to you?

Back at my unmade room at the student apartments I tried to skype mom and dad but they didn’t answer. Maybe the wind was blowing too strong on their continent. My desk faced the dark window and I spied the orange tip of Markus Friedrich’s cigarette blazing and graywhite wisps rising from his mouth like the soul leaving the body. I raised a low hand to him—he saluted with two fingers and turned his back as if to hide the habit. I don’t know why.

Later I caught him in the kitchen and I told him I didn’t care for parties.

Grimfaced and flatvoiced he said, “And why, I ask thee.”

“Everyone thinks about themselves, they talk about themselves and they don’t listen.”

As calm as if he were talking with himself he said, “Naja, everyone in the circle has to take their turn and throw in a little part of themselves—dost thou understand? But I too am not such a man for anonymous masses.”

“I am now rather introverted,” I said.

“Hm, I would have thought it was always so.”

“Nee, I was once before extroverted, full exaggerated really. Things change, neh?”

“Ja, perhaps it was the situation, and after all one is every day a different person, but also...I think that always under everything there is this fundamental melancholy.” He headshook the feeling away and swallowed down his narrow neck.

I nodded because it was true and said, “Yes, I understand.”
He continued after a pause and his voice was deflated. “No matter how far you come, when you’re alone with yourself you feel it. I think sometimes...yes, I think that it’s the constant human condition, always to be a little with everything un-at-peace. And it has sense from an evolutionary perspective as well, if one considers it.”

I said, “The Buddhists say, ‘The life of man is hard’ or...the life is full of suffering. So they want not to desire, and thereby this suffering to escape.”

“Thou hast it a few times mentioned. I ask thee--and of course I do not understand very much of the Eastern tradition, which is a real shame, but I ask thee, why does one need to escape desire? Would life not then lose its color and its flavor, and become just a hollow image of the thing-in-itself? To me it does not sound appealing, better to experience pleasure and pain and to go through the full spectrum of life.”

I nodded and said, “I think, it’s just a possibility, if one wanted to escape desire, one could.”

He stroked his narrow chin and said, “Heh, interessant.”

There was a second of quiet and I said, “Dost thou want to drink some wine?”

He looked around a little and said, “Ja, sure, why not.”

We were a little drunk later, he said, “Seest thou, I have always been rather thin and breakable. I have tried to drink various protein powders and such but nothing works.”

“For me it is the opposite, I was a fat young boy. They made fun of me in school.” I smiled at old pain.
“Hah--*Interessant*. But now--you are not so fat, I would say, you look like, as you said, you have played American football.”

I laughed and patted a bicep “*Danke, mein Freund.*”

“But my girlfriend, Bianca, she doesn’t seem to mind it. It’s rather for my own personal self-feeling. It’s quite primitive and egocentric, if I really think about it.”

I said, “Do what thou must. One can’t overcome feelings with logic. In life it has no sense to try to be always logical.”

“I say too”--he pointed, “Thou art a real intellectual, not like these types in climate research. They’re interested only in facts and figures, for them if it cannot be measured than it does not exist. But as we have already discussed, this *tisch* (table)--this *tisch* is a *tisch* because we make it a *tisch* in our minds, it is not objectively a *tisch*. They would try to find *tisch* molecules if they could,” He knocked on the *tisch*. “Naja.”

When it was midnight here I skyped my parents in Utah’s morning. Sun rising over the red hills, quails cooing at every-day Mojave genesis.

Pops round face was red and wrinkled and his eyes squinted. Pops said,” There was a starm last night, like *Jesus Christ*, blew shit everywhere. Mom got out there in the freezing dark to save the potted plants.”

“That’s just her I guess. I would have staid in.”

“You wanna see the dogs?” He said.

“Sure, I’ll see’em. Ah, look, *who’s* a good bwoy.”

Pops was following the fat heeler Buck. Buck was limping away on his three good legs.
I said, “You hear me Buckaroo? How have you been, you still lickin’ yourself daily?”

Pops said, “Haheh--Well you know why they do--because they can.”

“I know I would,” I said.

He laughed.

“I’d never leave home,” I said.

Pops got distracted by something and his grey eyes looked where I couldn’t see.

“Huh, where’s Zeus?”

I said, “Where is the king of Oloompus.” I mispronounced it Germanly.

Pops said, “Maybe the wind blew’em away.”

“Where’s mama?” I said.

He sighed, “I dunno, maybe she snuck off to smoke somewhere. Ah, there she is.”

The door opened and you could hear the fountains going and the windchimes bell-clanging frightfully.

Mom said, “Hello there my long-lost son!” She looked tired but she was smiling.

I said, “My long-lost mom.”

Against the sound of the wind she started to ask me about laundry and if I had been able to draw out money from my account, all the practicalities of life. It made me feel alone for some reason.

Mom said she had to go do something and she walked off the side of the screen and ceased to be.
I breathed in and blew dust off the keyboard. Pops redface returned, too close to the screen. He said, “So how is it that.” And then his face froze in place. His eyes were shut and his mouth was half-open. Here one second and gone the next. The machine that wasn’t living said the connection was lost. I tried again, nothing. So it goes.

I felt a little empty. On Facebook I swept downwards through careful smiles. Trips to the mountains on ATVs. Someone killed a deer and was happy about it. I wasn’t looking at anything really. There were messages from Nadia complaining about her Danish boyfriend. I looked at them and didn’t answer. There was something else new-blue from Jenny Mulligan--New York Irish girl who was studying in Madrid, half-suicidal depressionist painter. She was sorry she didn’t have time to visit Kiel after all, asked me how I was holding up. I didn’t say anything. She used to be a true love of mine.

I knew I shouldn’t but I looked at Lorena. It said she was engaged to get married. I felt a flash of heat and gutache. There was picture of some bearded mountain-type bending the knee up on the sandstone over St. George. I laughed a little. So it’ll be Lorena Kozlowski.

I went out on the patio. The air was still and dark. The trees had black leaves on branches tilting slowly. Someone was playing guitar through an open window--I think it was “Wonderwall” by Oasis with a Saxon accent, but you couldn’t be sure. I had a pack of cigarettes I bought. I stepped back into the light to get them and I came out in the dark and smoked. After half the cig the music stopped and the soccer guy upstairs shut the window. Sorry buddy.
My bare feet were cold. I got dizzy and leaned against the railing and it was cold on my hands and my stomach through the shirt.

I started to sing. “If I had wings like Noah’s dove, I’d fly the river to the one I love.” Long and slow over the nightgrass fields, an audience of critical owls and captive mice and prickling hedgehogs.

I stopped and listened to the echo of the last syllable and then to the quiet. I pulled more smoke into my thoughts. From the inner cloudiness the question: Who is the one I love? The lack of my wisdom tooth ached a little and I put my tongue in the hollow. In the place where there used to be Lorena there was nothing. Let me love, strange world, let me love someone again the way I loved her.
Chapter 6

Day before Easter I was in Ostfriesland in front of a bonfire. My face was hot from it and the smoke made my eyes water. I licked my fingers and wet my cheek with spit and then fanned it. Old man Kirschner was passing around self-brewed fruit liquor—one for Oma Klamp, even, she threw it back like nothing and licked her lips. Half the neighborhood was there, mostly old folks. I took a shot from him and the glass glistened with fire and moonshine. We said “Prost”—it means “for your sake”, it’s Latin. I want to forget who I am.

There was a tree trunk on its side for a bench. I sat next to Katje. My drunk hands were on the bark pushing upwards. Jonas and the Kirschner’s kid poked the fire with long branches. There was a garbage bag full of leaves melting into the hell of it. I glanced over at Katje, down at her cleavage for no reason and up to her face. Her mouth was shut and lax-frowning and her eyes were twin candles. She looked at me and blinked and then rested her head on my shoulder for a while. She raised up and asked me if I missed America. I said no.

Jonas walked back over to us with a long stick and a bowl of whirled white dough. The smell of rich yeast and smoke. I scooped my fingers in it and molded some around the end of the stick.

“Like this?” I asked.

“Yes, and be careful, buddy."

I rubbed together my fingers sticky with bread dust. Me and Jonas stepped closer to the fire.
“Don’t get too close, buddy.”  He said and held out a hand.

“It’s hot as fuck,” I said.

“Yes, don’t put your dick in there.”  He said.

I laughed.  “Solid advice, brother.”

Steady cracks and pops of wood changing to dust and ashes.  The bread blackening and smoking and changing, slow-turning center of my dreaming vision. My face is hot.  My palms are hot and fumbling over the rough bumps of the branch-hilt. Smoke smell.  Sweat on my brow.  My arms and my belly tingling and floating.  The flickershadow of human beings in my eye corners.  Jonas’s dancing shadow on the gray nightgrass.  Somebody laughed and it became coughing.

Jonas motioned for us to turn back.  He said to wait for the bread to cool down and I nodded.

We sat.  He started blowing his bread cool and so I copied him.  He said, “Do you know why we make the fire, Arthur?”

“Why’s that?”

“We kill the ghost of winter with it.  Badass, or not?”

“I like that idea.”

We ate. I tugged the bread in pieces off the stick, it was crunchy outside and tender within.  There were plump bitebursting sausages and smeared curry ketchup to go with them.  Chewy fat-gristle porkchops on soggy paper plates. No forks or knives.  I sat and chewed and tasted, I was too drunk to talk.  I started to like the sound of German.

Solemn and old and unambiguous, a language for around a fire in a dark forest.  I have
much here witnessed, I am long-time traveled. Here am I, I thought in German. Here is this moment now and soon will it cease to be. Remember thee. Think on your last end.

Easter morning it was almost raining. I woke up thirsty in a strange bed and for a minute I didn’t remember who I was. The mattress was sprawled out on the wooden floor, the half-room was a right-triangle against the slanted Dutch roof. I opened the blinds and there were a thousand dust-specks floating like little suns in the still air, I waved a hand and sent them hurling.

When I came into the hall there were teacups clinking downstairs and chairs scooting; I heard Otto whistling “Hello Again.” I went to piss. There was a big window at a strange angle behind the toilet, on it there was a sticker with a little cherub boy farting out a cumulous cloud. I chuckled. I stood and pissed. The window was wet with last night’s rain, big drops fisheyed over the koi pond and bubbletwisted Oma’s house and her apricot trees. I hoped with a tired mind that nobody could see my humanity through the window. Not large enough for the distance between, don’t flatter yourself.

Downstairs, Jonas’s stepmom and his two little step-sisters were over--they were Hanna and Lily but I don’t know which was which. They were all painting eggs at the long table. Katje was up and Jonas wasn’t. One of the girls said laughing, “Something something, a teddy bear that English speaks.”

Katje laughed and said, “We have already a teddy bear that English speaks.” She pinched my arm and I smiled.

Jonas came down yawning and said, “Hello you bastards” in English.
The little girls searched the long grass for hard-boiled eggs, well-hidden and not worth finding. Katje was gone, Jonas and I sat on the porch and drank fizzing *Apfelschorle* from soft plastic bottles. Some warm bug buzzing in a tree. Birdsong on a flitting wind.  

They got us to play hide-and-seek. Me and Jonas were the seekers, we closed our eyes and counted to *Zwanzig*. I peeked a few times but there was just a tabby cat staring up at us, tail waving like it had a waltz stuck in its head.  

At twenty Jonas picked up the cat and said in German, “Ah Schnurli, thou hast luck it is not Chinese New Year.” I laughed, Schnurli purred.  

Jonas groaned and said, “I am sorry Schnurli, that’s terrible.”  

We walked around in silence and we couldn’t find the girls.  

I said, “Three days they’ll hide.”  

He said, “They’re in the growhouse, I’m sure Arthur.”  

“And be resurrected, everything’s a metaphor somehow.”  

“Wait--they’re not so clever, Arthur. I can hear Lily laughing. Here, come now.”  

We opened the greenhouse door and they got us with a thumbed-down garden hose. I laughed and cringing. Jonas said, “Nein!” and took the hose from Hanna and chased them away, they screamed and laughed.  

We went in and changed our wet clothes. Later on the tea table with Jonas and Oma I said, “I feel at home here with you guys.”  

Jonas said, “Aww, You’re always welcome here.”  

Oma said, “What has he said?”  

Jonas answered, “He said he feels at home.”
She said, “He never feels at home?”
I said, “I am home, Oma.”
She smiled quickly and nodded sad and said, “A good boy is always welcome.”
I said thank you. Clocks were ticking, I looked into the brown of my teacup and wondered if I was good.
Chapter 7

We went to Bremen, Natasha and I and some others--it was a trip for all the outland students through the Uni. In the morning I was at the bus stop and I thought she might not come. I didn’t like the way it worried me. I left my suitcase on the bench and started back to knock on her door. Around the corner a tall woman was crying. She said something in German to me about a suitcase. I thought she was asking if I’d stolen it. I said, “I don’t know, I’m sorry.”

She said something about Bremen and I asked, “Goest thou to Bremen?

She said, “Yes, and my pack is stolen.”

She had a strong Slavic accent and I asked her in English, “Do you prefer English?”

She said in German, “I just left it there for a minute, now it’s gone. You didn’t see anyone?”

I did see someone, a white-shirt figure from across the way. I said, “I don’t know.”

I looked down with respect and started walking to the stop. Natasha came running down, flustered. I said, “A woman was screaming that someone stole her suitcase.”

“What?” She said.

I told her about it. At the end of the story she said, “Oh” and frowned like she wasn’t sure what I meant.
The woman came back and her face was red and she was crying a little. Natasha asked her if she spoke Russian. They started talking and the woman laughed a little through tears. I watched her in that moment—Natasha. She cared about the suffering souls of others.

She convinced the girl to get on the bus and come with us anyway. The girl was Irena, she was Polish. I stood in the aisle as a hanger-on, watching them speak German without trying to listen. Eventually a phone call came for Irena, said the suitcase was back and the Earth could spin again--she put her hands together on her mouth like a prayer and then started laughing until tears were in her eyes again.

At the train station there were some faces I knew. Vittoria the Italian girl and Fritzi the Austrian. The Swiss mountain climber whose name I forgot. Natasha went to get coffee with the Polish girl and I leaned against a concrete pillar and looked out to where the tracks left the station and went around a bend and disappeared.

A handsome tourguide showed up with a clipboard. Stubble on his tan neck. He handshook and said, “I’m Rudolph, nice to meet you.” His English was prettier than mine. He introduced me to a fat Chinese guy who quick-nodded that his name was Sylvester. He smelled like cigarettes, said he was from near Guangdong province.

I said to him in Mandarin, “I speak a little Han language.”

He liked that, he said something back I didn’t understand and I smiled. He caught that I didn’t understand and he laughed and nodded. He said in English, “You know why I pick my name?”

I said, “No man, why?”
“Sylvester Stallone. You like Fuhst Blood?”

“Oh hell yeah, cool man.” He chuckled to himself and nodded and repeated the words, “Fuhst blood”.

I met a Cypriot named Lucas, I think. Stubbled and pale and frizz-haired and tall. He was saying something about the Turkish invasion when Natasha came back. Natasha shook his hand and said she was from Russia. The guy started flirting with her in Russian, he made her smile. I put my hands in my pockets. Sylvester called me over to meet some another Chinese grad student. He only said his name and shook weakly my hand. He stared off suspicious through everyone like a wolf of the steppe.

A machine woman’s voice loudspoke calm warnings that echoed off brick walls. I saw Natasha and the Lucas walking into the train together and she was laughing, her eyes were fascinated with him. I was jealous and I told myself I shouldn’t care.

I stepped on the train and sat down alone. The windows were dark. In front of me there was a curled magazine sticking out of the seatback pouch. On the warped cover a beautiful woman smiled and never blinked. Which type of seductive power have you? 74 Tricks for Breathless lust. So magical is the south of France.

Natasha appeared in the aisleway, she swung her suitcase onto the upper holder and sat down next to me.

“What time is it?” She asked.

It was 5:12 and she nodded slowly.

I said, “Should be five minutes, but das ist die Deutsche Bahn, after all.”

She nodded and yawned. “I hope I do not miss the connection,” she said. Train-sounds of popping and adjustments. There were little white hairs on her cheek.
I looked in the black window and saw myself smiling a little.

The train rushed out of the vaulted station into the sunrise morning. Dark clouds and pinkness of heaven standing still while the slow-coloring greygreen Earth slides constant. I felt Natasha’s head lean against my shoulder, adjust itself and be still. The warmth of her cheek. My image on the glass wasn’t smiling anymore. I felt myself breathing. I stared out behind the horizon where there was something half-sweet and half-painful in the dawning blue. I was afraid to move my head.

We switched trains in Hamburg. The transition was hurried. I’d fallen half-asleep and the loudspeaker woke me. I shifted in place and Natasha traded my shoulder for her chair, still sleeping. I touched her arm to wake her. “Tash,” I said, “We’re in Hamburg.” She groaned softly and blinked like she didn’t know who I was.

Walking with the tour group to the next train I lost Natasha. I wanted to be near her now but it was alright not to smother her. I wound up with Fritzi the Austrian archaeologist. She was busty and full-bodied and everything anyone said made her laugh or smile warm-cheekly. I started to talk to her in German and she laughed and said it was very good.

She told me, “Vun time ve found da...how do you coll it? Schiffbruch?”

“Oh, a shipwreck?”

She pointed at me, “Yes, dat vuhs it” and she laughed.

Sylvester showed up and I chuckled out the window. He kept asking Fritzi questions but she couldn’t understand him.

“Do you like waterski on the jetpath?”
“Excuse me?”

“Do you think that German guy become a more handsome Chinapopulation?”

“Vuht?”

He laughed, “He ho, isokay, isokay” and looked out the window.

Fritzi smiled daydreaming into the aisle and bounced with the train.

In Bremen the tour guide was a human being in a rooster costume. It spoke English in a high and lilting soprano. “And so the rooster--that’s me--the cat, the dog and the donkey, all of them had terrible masters.” Who were the masters? “And so they fled to Bremen, which is known for its freedom, so that they could become the city, musicians.” The rooster flourished and bowed. Free me from the rhythms of time. A few black hairs were sprouting from the rooster’s doubled chin; it was hard to tell if it was a woman or a man.

Short Vittoria in sunglasses nudged me, said hushed teeth-grinning, “Is eet a boy or a girl?”

I said, “I thought it was a woman.”

“A woman! Don’t be cruel, It’s a man, I’m sure of eet. Look, eet has hairs on his chin.”

“But she has kinda, breasts and she sings soprano.”

“I weel ask Rudolph.”

“Rudolph’s a boy, I think.”

She said, “Oh I know he is a boy.”

“He is,” I said.
Vittoria said, “But you are wrong. I know it’s a man.”

We heard the rooster stop talking. I asked, “What did it say?” I got a bad feeling from calling a human “it”.

We were passing through narrow cobblestone streets. Old fashioned signs for beer and chocolate swinging in the light wind. Intense brightness off the polished stones, intense shadows of old shops and face-fanning arms. My shirt was checkered black and it started to get hot.

Natasha was talking with another boy, a short Costa Rican named Arsenio. I interrupted and shook his hand and started to talk with him in Spanish.

“You are of America?” He said.

“Yes, I am of Utah, over there in the west, I have spoken Spanish since young.”

“Bueno, you speak very well. You sound a little Mexican.”

“Gracias, pues.”

We walked together. I started to get a headache from the sun. Natasha stopped to watch wide-eyed a pair of women jugglers.

I said, “Kind of tacky, aren’t they?”

“I love it.” She said. She half-frowned and didn’t look at me. I shrugged and kept walking without her.

We got to a plaza. A donkey, a dog, and a cat were waiting. The cat was tabby-haired and had a beautiful face behind painted-on whiskers. The bearded donkey with big tattooed arms got on all fours and they tried to stack on top of him. The whole time the
rooster was yelling “kikeriki”. They kept straight faces about it. They almost fell and I started laughing.

The next day went to a place called the climate house. Every room was a new world. The tour guide said it was a marvel of German engineering. In the Swiss plastic Alps Natasha was back yodeling with Arsenio and the air was cool and high. In the deserts of Tunisia I walked the sands alone, heard the songs of nomads on tape recorder. Looked up at painted stars.

In Antarctica she tapped my shivering shoulder. I smiled and didn’t say anything and she followed me. Me and her and Arsenio trekked together through the rainforest. It was dark and damp and mechanical bugs chirping. Arsenio was a tour guide back in Costa Rica, he said the real thing was wetter and darker and the bugs could bite you. Natasha’s eyes were brown against green and blinking wonder.

“This is the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen,” she said.

On the beach of Samoa I knew I loved her. There were ukelele singers chanting god’s sunbeach praises from a noisebox in the fake church. It’s funny--everything faded but the image of her twin wide eyes looking out at the wide world the way a child does. We descended into the shark-tank ocean and she couldn’t unsmile. In the fake-plastic Netherlands her blonde hairlets windmilled in man-made breeze. I wasn’t sure and then I was. I stared at her and wanted to hold her hand. She caught me looking and smiled. I’ll always remember right now. In a hundred years when I’ve forgotten world wars it won’t dissolve. Until I die she won’t disappear.

It was a dream and it was the only real thing I’d ever seen.
The day after we got home I asked her to walk to nowhere with me. She asked why and I said why not. We went out past meadows and horse-pastures. I teased her. I tried to tickle her armpits and she laughed. We got to a long bridge over the green-bush trickle of a creek. I looked at her and wanted to kiss her.

She asked me why I was looking at her that way. I said, “What way?” and I reached out for her arms. She pulled away. She went to stand against the railing of the bridge and look at the sky.

I felt a pain in my stomach and I laughed.

“Let’s go back,” she said, “I have things to do.”

“Don’t we all,” I said.

We turned and walked in silence for a while. The blurry sides of my eyes were green with peripheral forest. I watched her flat-shoed feet. My shoes were untied and I didn’t intervene. I chuckled at the ground and I touched her shoulder.

“Why do you keep touching me?” she said, “Stop it.”

“Jesus Christ,” I said, and I shook my head.

I started to look straight forward, nearsighted in the wind. I didn’t look at her. She started to talk to me or maybe to herself at double-tempo. “I have to do my laundry today. There’s just no time for anything anymore. My mother didn’t want me to come here until I had a sense of maturity and independence. I think I have almost proven it. Perhaps I will become an intern at the State Capital. But I’m not sure if they accept current students. I will have to review the application…”
I stopped listening and she kept talking. My foot rejected a pebble into the
hedgerows. After a few minutes I said, “Natasha.”

She stopped walking. “Yes?”

“Why are you talking?”

She frowned. “I need to talk--I’m scared when nobody talks. Even my mother,
when she doesn’t talk to me, I can’t stand it, I really become afraid.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Silence,” she said, like she was swallowing it.

I nodded and went back to staring ahead.

“What is it?” She asked.

I sighed, “It’s nothing.”

When we got to the student housing she said goodbye and I didn’t say anything
back. I slammed my door without thinking I would.

“Fuck,” I said. The kitchen was empty. The concrete floor had inexplicable
brown stains on it from before the wall fell. Someone left a pot of chicken feet on the
counter.

In half a minute she was knocking on the door. She asked me for quarters for the
laundry machine. I went and got them for her.

When the door closed again I said, “Who the hell is this girl.”
The night before we went to Copenhagen I told Tash I was crazy about her. I texted it to her in the middle of the night. It didn’t make sense and when it was sent I wished I could unsend it.

“Tash, I’m crazy about you.” It said.

She answered, “I see :)”.

I was tired and I didn’t know what to make of that. I went out on the balcony to smoke another cigarette. Markus saw me from his window and came out. I gave him a cigarette and the lighter.

“Naja,” he nodded, “All things clear?”

“Clear as… how does one say ‘mud’?”

“Mahd?” Eh, no clue.”

“Wet dirt.”

“Ah, schlamm.”

I said, “Clear as schlamm.”

He laughed and said, “You with your provincial American phrases” in English. He started off on something else in German—“Knowst thou, I find it truly komisch”—“Then there was a “hellou” from the balcony across the way. Natasha was up there waving long-armed at us.

Markus called across, “Hallo Natasha, all things clear?”

She laughed and started to overtalk in German. I smoked ahead and then sighed to my feat.
“You caught us,” I said in English. “We’re slow-suicidal intellectual types, Markus and I.”

She laughed and asked Felix when his girlfriend was coming. My forehead felt hot and I was dizzy. Markus kept answering her and I said nothing. I threw the cigarette off the balcony and watched it ember-twirl two stories into darkness.

I said, “I’m tired, Gute Nacht.” I nodded at Markus and at Natasha.

Markus said, “All things clear.”

A video call from American daylight woke me out of half-sleep. It was dad. He sighed.

I asked him what it was. He said that mom had relapsed.

I nodded. “What now?” I said.

She was going to California for rehab. I said that was for the best.

He kept talking for a while. I felt strange and I listened. When he was done he asked me if I thought he was doing the right things. I said that he was. He said not to tell anybody about it and I said I wouldn’t. He said it must be late there and so we said goodbye.

I couldn’t sleep. I stood and looked out the window. This is the real world, this is its weight on my shoulders. This is my strange solitary path through light and darkness.

When the sun rose I was hungry and there was nothing to eat. I played guitar softly for a while but I didn’t want to sing. When it was time I went to the bus station. Natasha was there. I looked into her eyes and said nothing. Her look was tired. I sat
down and shut my eyes. I didn’t want to talk to her. When the bus came I let her sit down first and then I sat away from her and stared out the window.

At the second stop Ezana the Ethiopian and Omar the Egyptian got on. I walked over to shake their hands. Ezana said, “I have met you, but it is nice to really meet you again my friend.” He was smiling and I smiled.

Omar shook my hand—”Hello my American friend,” and then he touched his chin and asked, “Natasha, are you alright?” She pointed to her throat.

He said, “You have lost your voice?” She nodded. “You really cannot say anything?” She shook her head. She gestured for him to hold on and pulled out a pad of paper. I looked out the black window.

Vittoria and Fritzi got on next. I smiled and shy-waved hello. I found a seat and closed my eyes. Vittoria said to Fritzi, “And so I don’t know if it is real, you know? I asked him, do you want somebody else? And he said no, Vittoria, I only want to be with you. But this is a lie. I know how men are.”

On the train the windows were black. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep against the headrest. We switched trains somewhere in the far north—some cold and roofless morning station in Flensburg, I think. When the sun rose you could see an ocean of pines against an ocean of water. Above them the ocean of the sky. I watched my eyelids sink slowly and wipe them all back to the nightdark from whence they came. Now I am become death.

I sailed through Denmark on the edge of dreams. I heard Omar softly narrate to Ezana some story of hope before the coup d’état. “I am not Muslim Brotherhood—but it
is an opportunity to work in the government. So I take this position, it was the most
exciting time of my life.”

I dreamt I smelled perfume and I was on a beach in California. Did they jump
from the pier? Lorena, my love, you want to sit in the little teacups? I could watch that
smile till the sun explodes, girl.

My eyes opened again to the greygreen forest--near trees blurring, far-trees
sliding, the sky orange-to-bluing. There was a drop of water searching backwards against
the glass. Ezana’s voice, “This is not the first time that you have been here, my friend.”

A bell chimed, the engineer chewed marbles in Danish. “Næste stop, rød grød
med fløde.” I saw lightning flash in a dark cave. The pinpricks of rain on my naked
arms. Some kind of hurt cold hollow in my breath.

Fritzi talking one-sided with mute Natasha’s notepad. “So you are from vich
place? And zat is not ze same? Vat are you? Zat says, translations, oh. And ver ver
you going? You didn’t hear? Ho ha. Vhere vere you going?

I opened my eyes and licked my lips. I looked at the sun and looked away
blinding. Sunlight warm on the blue chairs and bright off the twisted greyblonde of an
old woman’s hair. Off the rims of a fat man’s glasses. The loudspeaker announcing
Danish marbles again. Maybe he said, Good morning Denmark, don’t you know your
own native son?

In the national museum my stomach hurt and I thought I would die. I kept on my
feet and drifted. Pain behind my eyes. Omar asked, “Are you alright my friend?”

I said, “I’m tired.”
Ezana said, “You look like you are sick, my friend.”

I said, “I’ll be alright, thank you.”

We walked through a room with the swords of Vikings and samurai and killers of all sorts. I watched Natasha worry her folded hands and follow Fritzi, fleeting around the corner into an extinct herd of Aurochs. I’d forgotten that I loved her.

My soul was pain. A rottenness on the verge of vomit that couldn’t come. We came into the East Asia section. There was lord Krishna with his thousand arms, in a glass case with a smudge on it. And I beheld the mighty army of Pandu in waxing anger frozen. Bellied Omar squatted for a selfie with chipping-paint Shiva. Ezana laughed with a voice of victory. I laughed and then held my bitter stomach. Oh that my all-too-solid wax would melt. A sign in Danish over a gem-decked Hindu crown said “What use to me are the many uses?”

We came into an enlightened clearing where Buddha squatted with his stone eyes closed. Ezana said museum-laughing, “I think he is sleeping.”

I said tired, “He’s free from the back-breaker wheel of rebornings.”

Ezana said, “Are you alright my friend?”

I said, “I’m a little queasy, brother.”

He said, “Oh no, you will feel better my brother, yes, I am sure of it, here is a chair for you to sit.” I sat and slept my head against my chest and felt warm like I loved him.
Tried to turn in early at the youth hostel. The check-in man was a bald Greek who spoke eleven languages halfway each. Natasha’s child-eyes loved him, she leaned over the counter to hear better what she couldn’t understand. We got the keys to a 64-bed barracks and went to make our cots.

Vittoria the med student complained about “germi”—“Fritzi, how do you call it in English— it doesn’t matter, do you have the alcohol to put on your hands?”

I laid my black-marked suitcase on the high bed and Ezana took the low one. Opened his laptop and over his shoulder behind the wide frizz of his hair I read a list of quick-scrolled porno-titles: Big tits, big ass, Skillful MILFs of the 21st Century. I quietly-laughed, aren’t we all the same. He looked back at me secret-smiling, “Do you know this movie, this Wolf of Wall Street?”

I said, “Yes, it’s great, isn’t it?”

“I like this part with Matthew Mcconaughey,” he said, and he started thumping his chest and humming a stockbreaking battle-tune—bought low and sold high at the end with a “Woop!”. I laughed and joined in.

Vittoria came up shortly down the alley between bunk-rows: “What are you doing? Oh my god, there is too much testosterone here.” She pushed her black glasses smiling up her nose.

I laughed and said, “Come on now, you’re Italian, you’re used to it.”

I tried to sleep. There was a posse of Texas college tricksters drawling loud about fuck this and that. The lights turned off and they kept on. Finally some pissed off Brit said politely, “Would you take this conversation outside please?”
Under the thin sheet I shivered. I woke up in the middle of the night. I didn’t realize I’d fallen asleep. I’d slept with all my clothes on and so I just stood and walked into the commons. Vittoria and Fritzi and Omar and Ezana were there drinking and playing some sort of game.

I took a drink and sat next to Vittoria. Her face was flush. “I have never felt so drunk in my life,” she said. She kept putting her hand on my bicep and I sort of liked it. The game was silly—you laid down cards and when they matched you had to grab a little totem in the center of the table.

I was bad at it. “Come on, my friend,” Omar said. “This whole time I am thinking you are CIA spy, because you speak all of this language, but you are not so fast with reaction.”

I laughed, “Come on, man, I ain’t like that.”

He said laughing, “I remember when I first meeted you, you are talking about this politics and asking, ‘what did you do in the revolution’ and I think to myself, this guy is a spy. But now I know, you are good guy, my friend.”

I nodded sincerely.

He went on, “You know this, I must be honest, America government I do not like them. They are supporting dictatorship in my country. But you know, if the American beople were to meet my beople, and other way around, we would become friends. It is just this, fucking governments--in every country!--which are so greedy, those motherfuckers.”

I lifted my glass of fruity vodka and said, “You’re right completely, man.”
The next morning we were in a great green grassy park. Hills and ponds and ducks. Vittoria and Fritzi and I laid out on a picnic blanket. I closed my eyes and let the sun warm me. Vittoria said to Fritzi, “Fritzi, your boobs, they are falling out.” Fritzi smiled embarrassed and lifted her shirt up. I raised an eyebrow.

Just the breeze for a while. The sound of laughter and ducks. A little toddler came running over with chocolate on its face. Fritzi said, “Hello dere.” The kid stared brown eyed and started to smile with its eyes open.

Vittoria said laughing, “Fritzi, again your boobs, you see what happened, he is hungry.”

Then Natasha was in the street crying. Omar and Ezana and Vittoria went to comfort her. I shaded my eyes and watched. She leaned on Vittoria. I thought maybe it was because I’d ignored her all this time and I felt guilty.

Vittoria came back and Fritzi asked what had happened. Vittoria said, “It’s her voice, she is sick with the *laringite.*” Fritzi nodded slowly and Vittoria added quietly, “And also, she is kind of a little girl, you know how she is.”

“Yeah, sure,” I said. A breeze blew against my browsweat.

We walked through a graveyard. Weeping willows and people reading on the grass. On the path I stopped Natasha and said that I had trouble with my family, and I was sorry I didn’t say anything to her. She wrote me a note that said, “It’s okay” and I nodded. Then she wrote, “What is happening? Is everything okay?” I explained it to her and she nodded sadly. As we walked on through weeping-willow shadow of death I
wondered how I ever could have been angry at her, or at anyone else who was a soul in this suffering world.

After a ways I sat on a bench to relax. Natasha sat next to me and the others walked on. I stared off past the horizon. She leaned her head on my shoulder and I didn’t much care. She started sleeping and so I tried not to move.


“Natasha,” I said. She lifted her head, took us in and smiled. Laid back down.

Vittoria came back with Fritzi and Ezana. Ezana was smiling and taking pictures with an oversized camera.

Omar asked Vittoria, “I have a gwestion, what do Europeans think about death? Because here it is not...’violent’, and you are noht thinking about this.”

Vittoria said, “I don’t know, I do not like to think about this thing. When it happens, sure, it happens. And I will be a doctor so I must think about it.”

Omar asked, “Do you believe in God?”

She said, “I don’t know, I don’t think about it. I think it is nice to believe whatever you like to believe, as long as you don’t bother me with it.”

Omar laughed. “And Arthur,” he said, “What is it you believe?”

“I’m a buddhist,” I said. I felt heat in my neck.

He looked confused said, “Buddhist? I thought you were a grhistian.”

“Nah,” I said.

Ezana said, “You are not really a Buddhist, he is kidding.”

Vittoria said, “It’s okay, come on. Look at your reaction you two.”
Natasha got up and rubbed her eyes. She didn’t know what we were talking about. She and the others started off for some famous dead man’s grave, but Omar said, “I will sit, I will gatch you later.” I stayed too and didn’t say anything, just watched the wind move the trees.

Omar started speaking quietly, “Here I cannot talk about my belief. This is okay, because I am not in my country anymore. So it not for me to say something.”

“Must be hard,” I said.

“It is hard. Because I believe this--you know, that we are all created from God, and from the Garden of Eden, where He makes Man called Adam and woman called--

“Adam and Eve, yeah.”

“Do you know this story?”

“Yes, I know this story.”

He sighed out. “Oh well. Another time. Let us gatch with them.”

We stood and walked and looked at gravestones. I kept adding up their ages. Brief descriptions of Danish lives. What was this one’s profession? Highwayman and sailor, dam builder and space-ship captain. Twenty-six years as a horse-waxer and then a windmill decapitated him, a month before the World Fair. Born on a Mandag, buried on a Søndag. An engraved name half-eaten by time--Søren Kierkegaard’s great Aunt Signild?

We went to a place called Freetown Christiania. Anarchist community with no laws in the Copenhagen downtown. Reggae music was drifting on cool running wind, reverbering off of many-colored shanty shrines and upwards to blue cumulous God. A big
sign said, “You are now leaving the European Union.” The EU’s starry flag with a red cross through it, no supranational smoking.

Old men drinking beer at filthy picnic tables and smoking drooping joints. Under a camouflaged tent a man in a Guy Fawkes mask selling hashish.

“I like this place,” I said to Ezana.

Ezana said, “I would like to try this ‘cocaine’.”

I laughed and said, “It’s a kick.”

Vittoria said, “Arthur, you took cocaine? I would not have guessed this.”

I said, “Well, maybe there’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

She shrugged and said, “It’s true, I do not know you.”

In the bright sun merchants peddling rough turquoise and revolutionary t-shirts. The one in front had Edward Snowden’s picture like an Obama poster, and the word hero underneath.

Omar said, “I like this place, everyone who wants to do drugs gan go to this place and not bothering anyone. It is very smart.”

Ezana said, “I want to live here, and smoke marijuana every day,” and he started laughing, “I am just gidding.”

Fritzi behind me said, “I sink it’s nice to visit, baht…” Vittoria next to her shrugged in reply.

Ezana asked Natasha, “What do you think--oh, I am sorry, I forgot you cannot talk.” He was being honest and she smiled.

I drifted into the sound and the smell. “Friends, this is freedom,” I said. I felt my nose fresh breathing and the sunlight on the back of my neck.
Vittoria got started about her boyfriend back in Sicily. “So he comes to me and he says, I’m so sorry, I love you, and he has flowers and he is so romantic. But I say no, this cannot work, you know it. But he convince me to let him stay.”

Omar butted in--”So do you think you will marry this man?”

She said, “No, never. I do not believe in true love.”

Omar guffawed. Fritzi said curious, “You don’t believe in love?”

Vittoria put out a hand, “Okay, I believe in love, but nothing is forever.”

“Me neither.” I told her aside.

She answered aside, “I look at my parents. When they get married they cannot keep their hands from the other. But now they sit, each in their own chair, and they read the newspaper. They don’t talk. I will never be like this.”
I was in a sailboat in the Kiel Harbor. Old pirate galleons were surrounding us—
they’d sailed here for the _Kieler Woche_, Kiel Week, second biggest festival in Germany.
I was steering. Fritzi and a few Danish girls in their sunglasses and life-preservers
laughing about something. The wind was cool against my face.

The sound and sway of water.

Fritzi said, “Maybe you were a sailor in da different life.” I smiled wide at her
and she laughed.

The boyfriend of one of the Danish girls asks without an accent, “Arthur, how
long have you been in Europe?”

I said about four months, I thought.

“When will you leave?”

“I don’t know Anton, maybe I’ll stay here forever.”

“Now that would be something.”

I settled into a nice rhythm. Those summer months, unless I made an effort, I
couldn’t remember that I was in Germany. Sometimes it even took a minute to think of
my name, I was so contented.

I’d drink espresso at the student cafe in the morning and watch people come and
go. Afterwards I’d walk down to the botanical garden and meditate on sunflowers.
Watch bees pluck ceaseless desire from wilting buds. I’d sit and wonder how long I had
left to live.
I took the city bus to the ocean. I stood and hung to the rail and I felt weightless. In my yellow pocket notepad I wrote, “Life only makes sense in freefall.” I looked into a blue-scarf old woman’s eyes and she smiled.

At the Bootshafen a stinking bum got on and sat across from me. His leg was in a cast and it reeked of piss. He asked the old woman with the blue-scarf, “Where goest thou?” And she didn’t answer. He said again loudly, “Excuse me, where goest thou?” And she mumbled something in reply. He smiled and said, “Ah yes, this is the best way to get there.”

She was quiet for a while and he said, “Too good to talk to me, huh? Is that it?” She looked out the window. He said, “Can you hear, you old bitch? Lick me in my ass. Do you hear me? Lick me in my ass!”

I didn’t say anything, I wasn’t sure if the two of them were friends. No one said anything except the old woman, she mumbled something about no manners to the window. The bus stopped and a tired old man stood to get off and pretend it wasn’t happening. I stepped over the shouting bum’s leg and got off too. I stood there at the wrong stop and wondered if I had been a coward, but then I thought that there was nothing I could do about it.

When it was warm and the soccer games were going a Ukrainian girl called Veronika asked me to go to the beach.

I dared her to come in the water. It was cold and she shrunk her shoulders and her brown stomach goosebumped. She laughed and she was beautiful. I splashed her and she splashed me. Then there were jellyfish. Stupid floating, beautiful blue.
She asked, “Arthur, are they dangerous?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “They’re freakin’ me out a little.”

“What?” She said.

“They’re scary I said, let’s go back to the beach.”

“I will touch one, I want to find out if they are dangerous.”

“Come on, V, don’t die on me.”

She waded towards one of them. “If I die, you will tell my mother I love her, okay?”

“I can’t promise that, I might just forget my name and wander the Earth.”

“Oh, Arthur.”

“Don’t break my heart, Veronika.”

She touched it and went, “Ehh!” and then said, “It is not dangerous. But I am cold.” She wrapped her stomach in her arms.

On the beach I shook trickles of sand from the hollow in my acoustic guitar.

Veronika flapped out a towel and laid on her belly.

“Let’s sing something,” she said.

“What should we sing?”

“Do you know, ‘If I Were a Boy’? By Beyoncé?”

“Come on, V. No.”

She laughed, “So you are not secure in your masculinity, that’s okay.”

“Not that secure, honey.”

She turned and propped herself up on her side. “Pick something, anything.”

“Let It Be.” I said.
We sang. I on my back and she on her elbow. A group of pale arms and bellies clapped after the first song and me and Veronika laughed.

When we were done playing she asked me, “Arthur, have you ever been in love?”

“Yeah, I think so.” I said, “And you?”

“I don’t know. Once I think it was, but later I knew I wasn’t.”

“Who?”

“This Russian boy. But he was stupid. And I was stupid.”

“All love is stupid and we do it anyway.”

“Haha--You are a writer.”

“You are too.”

“The advantage of our free capitalist society is that you can fail in love and keep trying, and it doesn’t matter. Just if you get over the hurt and keep going.” She said it like she was reciting a translation.

“See, you’re a writer too.”

“In Russian, maybe. Nobody would want to read me in English”

I gestured at her, “I’d read you in English if your picture was next to it.”

“Oh, stop. You Americans are supposed to be gentlemen.”

“Don’t stereotype, I’m offended.”

She laughed and laid back flat on her belly with her head towards me. With her eyes closed she asked, “What do you want in a girl, Arthur?”

I listened to the ocean for a moment. “Someone who understands me,” I said.
“I see,” She nodded a little with her cheek against the towel, “Nobody understands you, Arthur darling.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

She paused. “Eight barefoot shoes?”

“What?” I laughed.

She turned over and pushed her hair back-- “I can’t understand your American accent. It’s like, ‘Raw raw raw.’”

“Well, sheeit partner.” I said. She just rested. I sat with my hands pushing me up behind my back and watched the ocean. The water was dark and blue and the sky was open and free. They embraced each other. A strange thought-- Here I am at the blue-eye center of my life. We always come here for this meeting, she and I, at this pre-planned time between the middle and the end.

She sat up and started brushing caked sand from her stomach. “What are you thinking about, Arthur?”

“The sea is blue, and the sky is blue, and the whole world is like the blue eye of God.”

She was quiet and she nodded just slightly.

I said, “The ocean is as endless our lives.”

She raised an eyebrow smiling and said, “You have a lot of fancy words.”

“I guess I’m fancy.”
Walking back to the bus stop on the stone path through trees. Our sandals flip-flopping against the Earth. The shade of branches and sky passing over her wide brown eyes.

“You know, I liked an American guy once.”

I swallowed. “Is that so?”

“I tried to make the first move, but he didn’t catch on.”

“Unlucky boy.” I said. I looked off at the ocean.

“Yes,” she nodded, “What a poor boy.”

I wondered if it was supposed to be a hint. I wanted to find out. But I felt like she could see through me into something empty.

She said, “Did you love someone also?”

“Yes, an American girl, far away.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s always alright.”

At the bus stop she asked, “When will you go back to America?”

“I don’t wanna go back to America.”

“Where do you want to go?” She asked.

“Everywhere, anywhere. I want to never stop moving.”

She smiled and nodded sadly. “I wanted this once. But now I wish I could go home.”

“Well, me too,” I said.
She answered a phone call in German—*Hallo, mein Liebling*—and then it was the trills and dips of some mystery in Russian. Some boy on the other end? No, wrong tone, a girlfriend.

She smiled at something I couldn’t hear, asked a question that was pretty noise to me. I looked into her staring-off eyes and tried to imagine looking out of them. To be the light behind those dark windows. In the light and shadow of now she was beautiful. I watched her and I knew she would disappear.

The night the Germans won the world cup I lost Natasha in the crowd. She and me and Markus Friedrich walked down the avenue of victor. Cars were stop-going on parade through drunken chanters. People were standing on their hoods and waving flags. Someone was shooting off unlawful bottle-rockets over our heads.

Markus said, “*Naja*, seest thou Arthur? The anonymous mass must release its repressed tribal instincts. It’s truly frightful.”

“Everyone needs something to shout about.” I said.

Natasha came near my shoulder and said, “I love it, everyone is so excited.” I smiled and nodded at her through the noise.

Veronika was there with some Ukrainian friends. A firework scattered orange light on her face and on the beer she was holding. I introduced her to Markus and he said, “Charmed” in English.

Suddenly a bottle rocket blew up next to a girl’s ear. She dropped her bicycle and started screaming. Another one landed a few meters away from us and exploded, my ears rang loudly. People started scattering and we went along.
“Verdammt!” said Markus, plugging his ears.

I said, “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Veronika took a sip of beer and laughed. “Come on Arthur, darling, it’s stopped now. Don’t be so afraid.”

In the triangle square a mass of people were singing something to a waving German flag. Markus said, “Oh god, German flags and mass chanting, a poor sign.” I laughed and drank my Flensburger.

Markus looked around—“Where is Natasha?”

I looked and there were just darkened figures porting bottles through laughter and shouts and explosions.

“I don’t know.”

“Should we find her?”

“Nah, let’s go before they start to hunt for the intellectuals.”

When I got home I had a message on my pay-as-you-go cell phone. It was Natasha. She was crying about how everyone had left her alone. “You cannot just leave your friend like this, Arthur.”

To make up for it we invited her over the next night for vegetarian dinner with Markus and his girlfriend and I. She seemed cheerful enough. We were wine laughing about sex and she admitted, “I have never done it.” I looked at her strangely and she started laughing. So you are a child. What was I thinking?
Chapter 10

The night that me and Natasha made love I was trying to tell someone my soul in O’Malley’s Irish Karaoke Pub downtown. I really think it was that same night.

There with Teresa and Eva, smoking around an ashtrayed Ottoman. A golden recliner panting fat on the floor. A man with a ponytail and earrings glowing in the green electric beersigns was trying to teach the old bardog a new trick. “Komm mal, Blondi, you can achieve it all.”

I asked the girls, “Why is it you European girls always roll your own cigarettes?”

Teresa said, “Because eet’s better. The companies put so many fucking chemicals to make you addicted, the same chemical is in your piss, you know this?”

I nodded. Eva said Frenchly, “Also, eet is nice to roll them. On your fingers, it just feels nice, I don’t know.”

I said, “Would you roll me one?”

She raised an eyebrow, “You would like one?”

“Sure.” I said, and to Teresa, “In America we like our food full of chemicals and our machine guns with no safeties on them.”

Eva haha-ed and blew shrugging smoke, “You know I think that America is the land of extremes. Everything must be at its maximum. Nothing is in the middle.”

“It’s freedom,” I said.

“Is it true, Arthur?” Teresa asked.

I shook my head, “It’s true for me, girls.”
Teresa smiles and leans over to snuff one in the ashtray near me, “Arthur, eess it true that American girls are bad at sex?”

“What?”

“I have heard this.”

“If you heard it, it must be true.”

“What?”

“I said if you heard it, it must be true.”

She smiled a little wicked, her eyes were green.

A man stood from his stool and started pointing at the bartender and laughing, like “do you get it”. Eva nudged me and handed me a cigarette, I told her, “Merci, Eva” and she nodded away. I asked for a lighter and Teresa gave it to me. Zebra striped thing, black and grey in the smoky room. I lit and pulled. I thought the words, “everything that comes together falls apart” and then I smiled into the cloud of my own smoke.

There was a doorswing commotion and a group of graduate wander-students were backwards laughing into the low hanging lamplight. The girls called greetings, stood and kiss-kissed a few people. I smiled off in between them, glanced in the other direction, an Arab clacked a poolball and missed the mark.

The big group joined us. I noticed Julie and she sat down next to me. She was speaking French with some dark stubbled boy. She started to smoke. I leaned back and took a deep pull, took in smoke and hurried talk and the grey gestures of naked hands.

Julie from behind my right ear said, “You smoke, Arthur?” And her voice was smooth and close and clear.

I said, “I heard all the cool kids were doing it.”
A cigarette was hanging from her mouth, she smiled and said, “No, who told you we were the cool kids? The kids who are reckless or suicidal, maybe.”

“I’m reckless, then.”

She said, “I smoke because I’m French, not because I’m cool.”

“Well, I smoke because I’m cool.” I shrugged.

She laughed and shrugged her cigarette. “It’s not good to do things to impress other people. You’re very vain, you know.”

“Well, maybe a little,” I said.

She faced forward, and her eyes were squinting at me sideways and she smiled. Eva got her attention in French across the table, asked her something I didn’t understand, she leaned over herself and answered.

A while later I said, “Julie, what would you do if there were no such thing as money?”

“You’ve asked me that already.”

“Really?”

“Do you always ask people existential questions when you’re drunk?”

“I guess I do.” My head was buzzing.

She laughed and said, “I’ve never heard your answer.”

I looked her in the eye and said, “I want to save the world.”

“Wow,” She said, “That’s quite an answer.”

“It’s true.”

“I mean, I’d love to save the world too, but I don’t think I’d ever just say it like that.”
I laughed at myself. “I speak boldly.” I said.

“Most people if they were honest, they would just say they want to have sex with as many people as possible.”

“That was the next part, you didn’t let me finish.”

A while later they were all getting ready to go somewhere. Julie asked if I was coming with them. I answered no and I didn't know why. She asked me if I was tired and I said, "Yeah, yeah."

She said, "I am too, secretly, but I have to stay informed on the latest morsels of gossip."

I walked home alone. It was August and the wind was cool up the back of my buttoned shirt. I heard my footsteps in the alley. A shadow across the street slumped over a garbage basket. Just you let the river carry you, little Arthur, and everything will be alright.

Got out on the long stretch of Olshausenstrasse, saw it stretch away past twin lines of rattling hedgerows. Passed under the dark bellies of the scribbled bridges. Heard a lonely convoy of cars rattle knock-knock over a trap door on the overpass. The air was fresh. I felt tall and my limbs were light. I scanned the dark corners of the bus stop across the street for hiding robbers. I imagined someone stepping out and shooting me cold and dead for no reason. I wondered if there was a parallel universe where it had happened already, and if there was one where I didn’t ever come to Germany. Then there was a gust of wind in my face and I stopped thinking. Cold in my nose and then a rumor
of fresh flowers from the breeze. I thought it was strange that I was here in this moment right now but soon I wouldn’t be.

Came back to the empty kitchen. The peppered smell of some traditional Chinese medicine stewing in the kitchen from the Sichuan neighbor. Markus was off in Paris with his petite chérie. A knock behind me. Natasha stood on her tip toes to the high window. Her cheeks looked fatter. I opened the door.

“Would you like to have tea? I have something to do tomorrow, but I cannot do it, and I cannot sleep.”

“Sure.”

The handle to her door shocked my hand. Inside we started talking about being children.

She said, “Have you ever tried to communicate something with your past self?”

I scrunched my brow and glanced up and said, “Actually, yes. I know what you’re talking about.”

She said, “There were times when I was a child, and I was so scared. I thought I would be murdered or that something else terrible would happen. And so I would close my eyes and try to tell myself in the past that everything would be alright—at least until the present moment.”

I just looked at her and didn’t say anything, and she said, “Am I crazy?”

I said, “No, I understand.”

She stared off like she was thinking. “I have never told anybody this. Except for my mother.”

“That’s alright.” I said.
“Now you have to tell me something from your childhood, let’s make it even.”

“Let’s make it even? Alright…” I stroked my chin, her eyes were listening. “I wanted to save the world. When I was a kid I had this feeling that I would be important, that I would be the greatest something that ever lived, or the president of America. I don’t know why. I guess it was how I was raised. But I don’t think it really matters so much now.”

“It does matter.”

“Am I crazy?”

“Yes, but I also want to change the world. And the only way you can accomplish this is if you believe it.”

I felt good, my head stopped buzzing so much. I didn’t want her anymore, but I didn’t mind the talk. The river was carrying me.

Hours drifted. I listened to her talk and half-listened to it. Soon it was early morning and out the cracked-open window you could hear birds singing for the early worms.

We started to talk about sex. I wanted to know how she’d never done it.

I said, “You’re a beautiful girl, and friends with everyone. Are you waiting for marriage or something?”

“No.”

“Are you afraid of it?”

“I don’t have a problem with it.”

“I mean…Do you masturbate and all that?”

“Yes.”
“But no boys? What is it then?”

“No mutual love.”

I looked at her kind of funny and nodded. What does it matter. I asked her, “Have you ever been in love?”

“Yes, of course. Twice.”

“Tell me about one.”

She was in love with some Turkish disc jockey who was ten years older than she was—met him in Istanbul on vacation. Her first kiss but she was fifteen and her mother caught her and pulled her out of it. She thought he probably didn’t care about her at all.

She said, “When I returned, I cried for a week. It was the worst pain imaginable. That’s how I knew it was love.”

“Doesn’t sound like love to me,” I said.

“It was.” She nodded emphatically.

“What was the other time?”

“It was a woman. My teacher. I thought about her all the time, and I tried to stay after class and ask questions. In class I would just watch her, and I could not pay attention to anything she was saying.”

“Interesting.” I said.

“And it also hurt. Because I realized it was hopeless. I think she started to know how I felt about her.”

“So did you want to fuck your teacher? Or it was just a platonic sort of love.”

“It was not platonic. I dreamt that she would tie me to a chair and kiss me, and that she would pull on my hair while she did it, and not let me move.” She swallowed.
“Shit, girl.” I said.

“It was a very powerful dream,” she said.

“Do you dream a lot about sex like that?” I asked. I heard my tone changing a little.

“It’s quite interesting.” She laughed. “I shouldn’t tell you.”

“Go ahead, what does it matter.”

“Okay. The first time I had these kind of feelings, I was very young. I saw some cartoon images of animals fighting.”

“So you’re into violence?”

“Yes, maybe a little. I have watched pornography with women who are tied up.”

“Is that so?”

“Have you seen this type of movie?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I was just curious, I wanted to know why it is that they do this. Why would you accept to be in this sort of film?”

“What do you think?”

“They all have this strange sort of look in their eyes. I cannot describe it.”

“Jesus.” I said.

There was a pause. She shook her head and stood up and started washing a plate in the sink.

“It’s late,” she said.

“I don’t understand how you’re still a virgin.”

“I told you already. There was no mutual love.”
“You saw I liked you, right?”

She turned over her shoulder. “Yes. You told me.”

I paused. “I don’t know why, though.”

“It’s okay,” she said.

I sighed. “So if you understood, why didn’t you say anything when I told you? It kind of pissed me off, if I’m honest.”

“You were angry? And that’s why you didn’t talk to me, that morning when we went to Copenhagen.”

I said, “Yes I was angry.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So what was it, Natasha.” I swallowed and stroked my chin.

“I don’t know. I have never been in such a situation before. I didn’t know how to act.”

“Is that it.” I said. There was warmth in my voice and I smiled. “You were afraid, huh.”

“Yes I was afraid.” She said it like she’d been holding in her breath for too long.

I swallowed. “It’s okay, Natasha.”

She turned and started polishing a dish absent-mindedly. I felt my blood rising up. I said, “Natasha.”

She turned and said, “What time is it?”

I asked, “You want me to go?”

She said tired, “It’s late already.”
I said, “Alright, that’s alright” and I sighed out. I went to stand and I stubbed my toe on the table leg. “Gah, Jesus.” I said, and then something struck me and I started laughing.

She smiled at me nervous, raising an eyebrow--”What is it?”

“Did that turn you on a little?” I said. I was in stitches.

She laughed her head down and covered her eyes with a hand. “Stop it, come on, don’t make fun of me.”

I couldn’t stop laughing. She walked over and hit me with the dish towel.

I said, “I’m sorry. I’ll go.” And I stood and went to embrace her.

I held her for a second and my blood rose and I moved to kiss her.

“Stop it,” She said, and she pushed me off gently off her.

I pulled back, breathing. “Stop what?”

She was somewhere strange between anger and laughter. “Why do this? I will only torture you.”

“Come on now. No you won’t.”

‘I should kick you out.” Her eyes contemplated.

“You want to kick me out?” I said.

She hesitated a second and then nodded to herself, marched past me and opened the door. “Out.” She said. She pointed out to 3AM oblivion.

“You’re gonna kick me out in the cold?” I said. I didn’t move.

She was breathing heavy. “Yes. You have to get out.” She didn’t sound sure.

“What is it you’re afraid of?” I asked.

“Sex. I won’t have sex with you.” She was flustered.
“I won’t do anything you don’t want.”

“But you can make me want!” A loud whisper. She looked out the door and back at me.

“Come here.” I said.
She closed the door and walked over to me and we kissed.

Her lips were soft. She was quiet. In between kisses I sighed. I kissed her neck and held her body tight. I was desperate to feel her breathe.

Her kisses were wrong and I kissed her the right way and whispered, “Like this.” After a while I stopped kissing her and we stood nose to nose in the kitchen. Her eyes were closed. I said, “I feel so good.”

She said softly, “I am glad you feel good.”

We got hot again, I set her on the wooden table and unbuttoned her blouse. I asked if it was okay and she nodded. She unhooked her bra and I kissed her breasts.

“Let’s go upstairs,” I said, “What if the neighbor comes out.”

“Fuck the neighbor,” She said. I sat in the chair and pulled her onto my lap. She took off my shirt and my skin was against hers and we kissed.

I pushed her back and said, “Let’s go, come on. Can you trust me?”

She paused considering and I stood her up and led her by the hand up the stairs. When we got to the top she said, “Wait a second,” and went to the bathroom. I sat on her bed. When she came back in I stood and closed the door behind her. She said, “Turn off the lights.”

I said, “Okay.” and I did.

We sat and kissed in the dark.
“Lie down.” I said.

She didn’t.

I said, “It’s alright, Tasha.”

We lay down together and I held her to me. My hand under her blouse felt the small of her back.

I said, “You wanna sleep or fool around?”

She said, “Let’s fool around.”

I got on top of her and started kissing her neck.

She said, “But don’t, ah.”

“It’s alright, I won’t. I don’t even have a condom.”

Her eyes were closed. I felt her with my hand. She was wet. I said, “It’s alright, babe.”

“Why do you keep saying ‘it’s alright?’ It is so strange.”

I blew air through my nostrils and shook my head and kissed her. I almost said it again.

In a while she said, “I’m not going to come. I’m too tired.”

I said, “It’s alright. You wanna sleep?”

“Yes,” She said.

I let go of hers and she let go of mine. I scooted a little on to my side and closed my eyes. She stood and walked out of the room and I heard her put the shower on. I drifted. She came back in and lay down and her hair was wet and she was in a soft t-shirt.
We lay there in the dark and my eyes watched her straggled hair and her body and I wondered how such a good thing was possible.

I couldn’t sleep. We were sharing a twin bed and I was propped on one shoulder with my back against the cold wall. I made her stand so I could get out and piss and she grumbled about it, “Arthur, I really have to sleep.”

I got a case of farts in the bathroom and tried to be quiet. It was cold and the sun was rising out the window. I felt a little pathetic. I went back and the door was locked. I was standing in the hall in my boxers and my clothes were in there with her. I knocked a few times and she finally came and answered.

“Arthur, really.” She complained. “I need to sleep.”

I tried to sleep and I couldn’t. She slept an hour and I watched her and my shoulder ached. The sun rose. I suffered for love.

After a while I stood in place and stepped over her. Started pulling on my pants in the morning dim. I felt out of place. She stirred and asked, “Are you leaving?” I said, “Yes.” And she shifted and sleep-clucked and it seemed alright with her.

I got out of there. I slept an hour or so in my own bed. Then the sun was too bright through the drapes and so I got up and started playing guitar in my boxers. I felt content.

She came and knocked on the door. I went out to meet her and she had my wallet that I’d forgotten. She said she had to go to Schleswig and she’d be back in a few days. I told her “good luck” and she turned and left.
Chapter 11

The next day I went with some of the Poles to Flensburg. We were cramped in a little Volkswagen. Wiktor and Antoni those two big saints in the back with me, Aleksander in the front squinting out Euroskeptically at the road ahead. A bearded Azerbaijani named Ruslan was driving, he spoke seven languages and he told us hello and goodbye in each.

We toured the brewery in Flensburg. It was right on the border and the street signs were in German and Danish, and I wasn’t sure what country I was in. In a museum full of dead bears posed growling and wax birds stuck in flight, I knew that I really loved her and I wondered if she felt the same.

On the way back we grilled sausages and cheap pork on the beach of Eckernfoerde. We were close to Natasha, I wondered where she was. Sat in the sand I shared a cigar with Ruslan, his spit was on it but the smoke was good. We all popped the Flensburgers we bought. I stared off into the ocean and it was infinite and it melted into the sky. I held a red-pink pebble between my fingers, I set it on the horizon like a burnt-out sun that was setting. In front of the waving water I dreamt a life with Natasha in my mind’s eye. I saw her putting on her earrings in the bathroom mirror somewhere, the two of us in a hotel in Moscow. Speaking Russian to each other. I remembered the pale firm flash of her breasts and I smiled and then I felt the pain of longing.

Driving back I wanted to speed, I would have risked breaking my neck to get back to her sooner. I needed to be with her. I wondered how it would work. I’d come back to Europe or I’d get my parents’ money to fly her to America.
When I got back I skyped pops and told him about her. He said if I really loved her then I could make it work. Mom was still gone. He told me they were getting divorced.

“What’ll you do now, then?” I asked.

He said maybe he’d go down to Mexico, lay this burden down in a hammock on the peasant shore. Fish away a few decades.

I told him I understood.

There was a party. Mostly everyone was there. Natasha texted me that she was back in town and I told her where to come. Before she got there I shared a joint with Teresa on the couch. Eva didn’t partake. There was some Russian guy in an argument with Aleksander over the invasion of Crimea.

Ezana called me over and I went to talk with him. Natasha showed up. She leaned against a kitchen counter and I went and leaned next to her and didn’t say anything. I smiled at her and she smiled back sheepish. Ezana was excited and he looked like he was interested in Natasha. I didn’t mind, I smiled because none of our friends knew that we’d slept together.

I walked out to use the bathroom. Some big towering German showed up, he said he played noseguard for the Kiel Baltic Hurricanes--an American football team. He picked somebody off the ground as a demonstration.

He told everyone, “American football is ze best sport art in ze world.”

Aleksander said, “I don’t agree, but if a guy is two meters tall, I will not argue.”
Went back in the main room. Ezana smiled at me, said, “You are back my friend. I told Natasha, I like it that her voice is back. We should sing ‘In the Jungle.’” We started singing. The Baltic Hurricane came over and started directing us with his hands. We stopped singing and laughed.

“Vy are you not sinking?” He said.

We started singing again and he joined in, loud and off-key. After a stanza he held up a finger for us to be quiet and went over to grab more chorus members. Natasha started giggling. He got Fritzi and a couple Estonian girls. Fritzi was laughing. We sang and he pointed at me to sing the high part. I tried and my voice broke and I laughed. He poked me in the chest. “Do it again.” He said.

I shrugged, “I’m all sung out.”

“Dance, zen.” He said.

I said, “I’m not a dancer.”

In German he said, “Art thou shy? Come on, do it. I will show thee how to do it.” He started thrusting his hips in my direction.

I was a little paranoid from the weed and I felt like he was picking a fight. I ran my fingers through my hair and said in German, “I just don’t have the urge anymore, alright?”

He put his hand on his hair, mocking me and started to flex the elbow. “I know this dance not.” He said. I pretended that someone was calling me, I said, “Excuse me,” and I walked over to the sofa to talk to Teresa. Her eyes were glazed and she was leaning back.
“Make yourself at home Arthur,” She said. “Anything you want, I will give it to you.” Her shirt was hanging low and her left breast had a freckle on it three-quarters down.

I swallowed. “Thank you, I’m alright. Do you know all these people?”

All of the sudden Hurricane’s face was upside down over me. He just stared and breathed through his mouth. I asked, “Was ist?”

He said, “Is everything in order?”

I said, “Sure, my friend. I’m a bit tired, so I wanted to sit me down.”

He guffawed and walked away.

I decided I wanted to go. I hugged Teresa and said happy birthday. As I stood Eva said, “Hey, me too wants a hug.” And I gave her one quickly.

I grabbed Natasha by the hand and said, “Hey listen, I’m gonna go, you want me to walk home with you?” She frowned at Ezana and then at me and then she agreed.

We walked home in quiet. I was still on edge. I told Natasha, “That guy fucking pissed me off, I was ready to fight him.”

She frowned and said, “Why? What did he do?”

“You saw what he was doing, goddamnit.” I said.

She started chattering about what she did in Shleswig and I didn’t listen. We got to her door. “I want to talk to you about something,” I said.

“Can it wait?” She asked.

I stopped for a second. “Can it wait? Why, you don’t have three fucking seconds?”
She started to talk on and on like a hypnotist. “I’m tired, Arthur. I’m so tired. It’s three in the morning. This is not the time to tell me anything. It will be the wrong thing. It’s three in the fuckingk morning. Two days ago it was three in the morning, too. We cannot think at this hour.”

“Natasha.” I said.

She opened her door and said, “Goodnight, Arthur.”

It closed. I was drunk and it was numb and easy to slide down to the floor. I sat against her door for a while and my ass got cold. Then I stood and went next door to bed.

I woke up with an ache in my heart. My forehead was hot and I thought I might have a fever. I wet a towel in the sink and put it on my forehead. My heart was racing. I had to love Natasha. I had to go and spill myself in front of her, had to go and vomit on her doorstep, trembling or not trembling.

I went and knocked and rang the doorbell and there was no answer. I called and got a recording in German. She wasn’t home, then. I took my chair and sat by the open door with the wet towel and my shirt unbuttoned. I was sick deep inside me. I sat there for hours and watched the sunlight change on my tennis shoes.

I got a hunch that she was home. I went over and peeked through her high kitchen window. I saw a shadow moving and I knocked loudly with the side of my fist.

“Natasha, I know you’re in there girl, open up.”

She did. Her face was bleary like she’d been crying and dried the tears. She had no expression.

“Natasha, what’s going on?”
“I’m sorry I didn’t answer.”

“So you got my calls?”

“Yes. I wasn’t ready to talk to you. I felt very sick. I ate some chocolate and now I feel better. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Natasha. I’ve been sick ever since. I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“I cannot stop thinking either,” she said, “It was my fault. I’m sorry.”

I paused. My voice sounded strange to me as it came out, like someone else was saying it. “It’s not something you have to be sorry about. I’ve been worried sick because I don’t know what to do. I love you, Natasha.”

“I know.” She said.

I said, “I’m afraid of losing you.”

She didn’t say anything. She looked away and said, “I’m sorry.”

“What are you feeling?” I asked.

“I’m just feeling stressed. I hate this situation. And it’s my fault.”

“What are you feeling about me?”

“I do not love you. I do not feel anything. I am just stressed. Can’t you see that? I’m sorry.”

I stopped for a second and looked at my outstretched hand on the table.

A clock ticked quiet seconds. Natasha sniffled. She had no expression.

“Bullshit,” I said.

“What?”

I raised my voice, “It’s bullshit. You’re sitting there with no expression, you’re telling me that you don’t care at all about me? You’re saying I don’t matter to you?”
She started to tremble. “You matter to me as a friend, nothing more. I love your mind, your ideas, but I do not love you physically.”

“That’s not important.”

“It’s very impõhrtnt.”

I held my head in my hands. I said, “I can’t fucking believe you, Tasha.” It seemed like the Earth was turning around me and I was standing still.

She was quiet and I was quiet. Then she said softly, “Why do you think I had you sit across the table. I mean, wasn’t it obviouς?”

“It wasn’t so obvious the other night, Natasha.”

“It was a mistake. I have never been free and on my own before. I think I just wanted to break the rules, and see what it was like. I was just curious. I used you for curiosity, nothing more.”

“Aehh.” I breathed out the last of my air and nodded.

“It’s your fault, also.” She said, “You tricked me. You talked about sex and made me want it. It was your plan.”

“Maybe it was.” I said. I didn’t know. Then I felt angry and I said, “Why didn’t you tell me? Why did you let me wonder all this time?”

“What was I supposed to say? I didn’t want to hurt you. I told you nothing and you seemed to be okay with it.”

“You can’t fucking do that Natasha. You can’t play with people like that.”

“I told you it would be torture.” She said. She seemed a little amused.

“My god, you’re a fucking sociopath.” I said like I’d just realized it. “You’re a child and you only care about yourself. I should have seen it all along.”
“Wow, I guess I am not such a good person as I thought.” She looked like she believed me.

I shrugged, “No, you’re not. But I guess you can’t change who you are, Natasha. And I guess I can’t change who I am or any fucking thing at all.”

“I have never seen you angry.”

“Yeah well, I am angry.” I said. She was quiet and still. I noticed her blank expression again and blew nose-air. “But I suppose it’s my fault,” I said.

“What do you mean?” She swallowed.

“Maybe I only loved you for those things. Maybe I only loved you because some part of me knows that you only love yourself.”

“Maybe it’s true.” She nodded and almost smiled. I almost laughed. She said, “There are other boys, they love me, and I do not love them, but I let them love me. But they do not get angry.”

“They would, they’re just fucking pussies and I’m not.” She watched me quietly. I sighed. “Well, Natasha,” I stood up. “You’ll never see my face again.”

She said, “What?” For the first time she seemed hurt.

“Do you really not know how this works?”

“But that’s not true; I will see you at the party on Friday.” The people who went to Copenhagen were supposed to get together.

“I’m not going,” I said. “Goodbye, Natasha.”

“Arthur?” She stood up and worried her hands. They looked red-speckled like she was allergic to something. She looked like she might hug me. She touched my hand instead, “Goodbye, Arthur.”
“Bye.” I said. I walked out and slammed the door.
Chapter 12

That day I took a train to East Frisia to see Jonas Klamp. I had to see someone’s face who I loved. I sat still in my chair out the windows the green earth was whirring, and all the highways and boulevards spinning by in their own fixed directions. I wished the whole thing would slow down.

The train went under a tunnel. It was dark and then it was too light. The wheels turned. The sun was high and then it was low. I was here and I was gone.

Stayed for a week in East Frisia. Last day there I helped Jonas blacksmith a sword on the back porch and the neighbors peaked over the hedgerow at the racket. Then Otto and Jonas got in a shouting match over something with the stepmom. Everyone got quiet afterwards and I figured it was time for me to go.

I took a nap in a room full of clocks. There was a picture of Jonas’s mom on the wall, she had passed away a long time ago. The clocks all struck thirteen at the same time and woke me up, cuckoos and bells and bits of Handel’s Hallelujah, all blended into a great furious roar of sound.

I checked the laptop and there was a letter from Natasha. It said, “Arthur, I ask you to forgive me and I can’t live on knowing that we’re enemies. Forgive me, please, it wasn’t on purpose and I’ve learnt the lesson. And thank you, thank you for being my best friend in Kiel. You’re one of the smartest people I know. I’m sure you’ll be happy and successful. It hurts not to see you anymore but I won’t show up in your life, be sure. Just tell me you forgive me, please. I wish you all the best, Natasha.”
I didn’t like it, I set down the laptop and rubbed my temples. I didn’t want to forgive her. I wasn’t angry, really. Just a sort of emptiness. No forgiveness yet. I didn’t want to lie.

She saw that I’d seen it and she started to bombard me with pictures of puppies and crying cherubs and hallmark cards that said, “Please forgive me.” I stood up and pace and now I felt real anger.

"The fucking nerve," I said out loud. She must think she's the center of the world.

Then I saw she changed her portrait from her singing in a jazz club to a bunch of fallen autumn leaves that said "I'm sry". I started to laugh.

I wrote her, "Alright, I forgive you Natasha, I couldn't stay mad at you anyway."

Jonas came in and asked me when I was leaving, I told him I'd get the next train.

He stroked his chin and said, "And then--one more week, again to America?"

"Again to America."

"What will you do, buddy?"

"I don't know. I think I'll go to Peking and teach Chinese kids to cuss in English."

"Peking is far away, buddy."

"Yes it is."

He went and fetched us some beers and we drank on the sofa in the room of clocks.

After some time had drifted and the talk had ceased for a moment between us, he stretched his back and said, "Do you remember Herr Linden? My old neighbor who sailed around the wuld? He died yesterday, he was a friend of my grandmother."

"That's too bad."
"I can't bulieve it, Arthur. That guy ran a fucking marathon two years since."

I drank and shook my head sadly.

Jonas said, "What happens when you die, Arthur?"

I said it was a good question and then I stroked my chin. The clocks ticked. I told him, "I used to think when you die, that's fucking it. Now I think we're just part of everything else. I don't think we ever get out of right here." I knocked the wood of the end table.

"It's unpossible to know, buddy."

I paused and saw the gold curtains wave a little. I felt a little sadness behind my eyes. "Yeah, sure. I wish I knew the answer, brother."

The clocks struck 14, all at once with great tremendous noise.

He plugged his ears. "I fucking hate them, buddy!"

Jonas said I should go and say goodbye to Oma. She was in her little house watching a crimi on an oldmoded TV.

“Goest thou?” She said.

“I go, Oma.”

“When comest thou back?” She faced the TV, she spoke loud so she could hear herself.

“I know not, hopefully someday.”

“Ah,” she said. “Goest thou for America?” She picked something from her chin.

“Ja, Oma. Thanks for your guest-friendliness.”

“Ah, nothing. We see each other probably never again.”
“Maybe not,” I said, and I nodded at the floor.

She turned her head back and looked at me. She coaxed a smile. “Thou art a good boy, Arthur. Be careful.”

I said goodbye to Otto in the courtyard. He told me to beware of evil people. He said, “But there are evil people also in America, of course.” Katje was there too and she kissed my cheek, said, “Don’t get lost there in America, neh?” A parrot in the barn squawked “Hello again.”

I did see Natasha again. She and I and a Greek economist went out and drank on the pier to celebrate the end of a season. She was quiet, mostly, and Apollo smoked conspiracy theories through his pipe, said Merkel and the Germans were coming for all the beachfront properties from Salamanca to Santorini, that every crisis was staged for somebody’s benefit.

I walked her home, mostly quiet. Her cheeks were glowing a little blue in the moonlight and I wondered if I’d ever see her again. The wind came cold and we both braced ourselves separately against it.

At her door she said she was sorry about the way she acted. She said she was scared. She said, “I came to your door after and I knocked. Your neighbor Wilko was there, he said you had left to the train station. I thought I would never see you again. It was the worst feeling in the world.”

I laughed a little. I said, “Well, here I am,” and I touched her shoulder. She said, “Promise me you will write to me. At least at first. Just so that I can get used to it. Please.”
“Sure, I’ll write to you.”

She looked over my shoulder and then reached her arms around me. I hugged her tight and rocked her a little. My shortsighted eyes looked off into the yellow glow of the kitchen behind her. Time felt slow.

“We had better not hug for too long,” she said, “Or who knows what could happen again.” We parted a little and she laughed. I thought it was bizarre and I smiled curious at her. I grabbed her ass.

“Better not do this, either, I suppose.”

She pushed me away and laughed. “Goodbye Arthur! Good luck in everything!”

“Fare well, Tasha.”

Inside the room was all packed up, the posters off the wall. I went on the balcony to look off the edge. The distance looked incredible. I shuddered to think. I looked off in the dark distance. Past the swaying trees there was a flag fluttering and I couldn’t make out what it stood for. I breathed in deep and thought of mama. Some memory from back when playing against the show curtains behind my eyes, the smell of soft soap for infants. Then it was gone.

I started singing. “Fare thee well my own true love, and when I return…” And then I stopped. Below me there were voices talking in German. One said, “Didst thou hear it? Who said it?” The other said, “Ah, it makes no difference, friend.”

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