

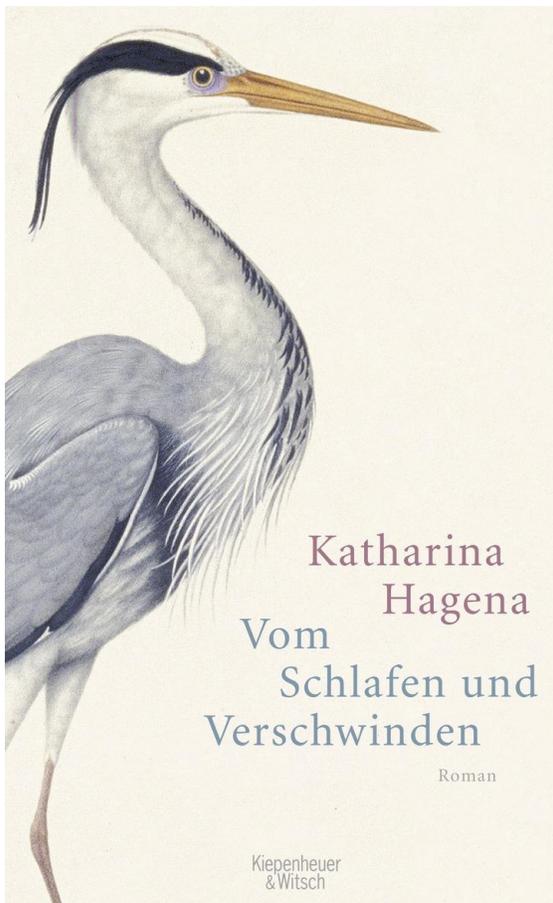
Sample translation

Katharina Hagen: Vom Schlafen und Verschwinden

("On Sleep and Disappearance")

Novel

Translated by Anthea Bell



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[Opening chapters of *Vom Schlafen und Verschwinden* [On Sleep and Disappearance], by Katharina Hagen]

1

Everything is full of signs.

Take an envelope, for instance: it bears a postage stamp, postmark and barcode, the name and address of the sender – printed out or handwritten, using a laser printer, ink, ballpoint or felt pen.

He sees typewritten characters less frequently these days, addresses behind crackling windows of transparent film more often. If he holds a letter between thumb and forefinger, he knows at once by the feel of it whether it weighs more or less than twenty grams. If it is only one gram overweight, he takes another good look at the envelope. The decision is his.

There are black-rimmed white envelopes for death announcements; grey envelopes made of recycled paper; soft, hand-made paper envelopes the colour of sand and feathers. Envelopes may be stained, creased, they may bear blurred addresses and insufficient postage. A special feature is the watermark; its outline appears, like a hidden truth, as soon as light falls on the paper.

He is the postman; that is his job. He delivers letters to the people of Grund. He knows Grund. Every letterbox, every street, every name, every house, every man and every woman. He knows which child belongs with which dog, which father belongs with which child, and which doesn't. He knows every street light, every set of traffic lights, the location of every bottle-bank covered with sparkling dust from broken glass.

Every bicycle rack by every pavement, every building site, every child's glove stuck on the paling of a fence, every paling in a fence, every set of steps, blind alley, entrance, every path and every track.

He has assimilated the entire street map of Grund, and when he is on his rounds he sees the irregular course of his progress as clearly before him as if he were drawing it on a map with his feet.

He knows the village and the new housing estate as well as the low-lying water-meadows beside the Rhine, the council-owned cherry-trees, the sewage works, the

recycling site and the old rubbish dump, which is now woodland, although the rubbish is still there. He knows the lake on a site excavated by a digger, the gravel-works where no one is allowed to go, but he knows it all the same. He knows the heaps of sand, due to be taken away in the near future, in the grounds of the gravel-works. He knows the arm of the old course of the Rhine and the banks of the river, he knows where there are fish, where grey herons nest, where stag-beetles fight. He knows that bullfrogs come up from the lake, more and more of them every year. He knows every rusty old object that someone has fly-tipped in the woodland, and he knows who it belongs to.

He is the postman, he delivers letters with their secrets. He passes on messages, postcards in cipher, sealed envelopes. He brings news of life and death, bills and financial statements, vows of love, confessions of guilt, news of legacies, lottery wins, legal proceedings, the results of medical tests, fines for motoring offences, times of arrival. Messages are not confined to letters. They are all over the place. In the V-shape of geese in flight, in the long, ribbed formation of certain clouds, in the forks of leafless trees and the markings on their bark, in the winking lights of the red and white mast for taking meteorological readings, in the rippled sand of the lake, in the cracks in the asphalt, the writing left by lichen on the stones of embankments, and the white, needle-thin hieroglyphics on iced-up windscreens.

He bends to pick up every piece of paper.

He picks up all the lost signs: information that has slipped out of trouser pockets, notes that have fallen out of school textbooks, lists left in shopping trolleys, phone numbers scribbled on beer mats, a notice asking visitors please not to ring the bell because the baby is asleep, then torn off a door by the wind or one of those visitors, and again and again letters that can't be delivered – letters with illegible addresses and no sender's address, insufficiently franked, acceptance declined by recipient, recipient no longer at this address.

He has found Marthe's book lying among the reeds, the choir journal that she kept in a green notebook. The pages are damp. They stick together, soft and heavy, the spine of the book is broken. He knows the notebook; Marthe always carried it with her. He has seen her writing in it, head bent over the pages, shoulder blades straight, arms close to her body. She wrote in it after singing in the rehearsal room, on the stairs, leaning against a tree in the wood, down here by the lake.

One page is lying loose in the sand. He picks it up and puts it in the front of the book. It is true that he does not talk now. But he is fluent in the language of watermarks, you learn it in his job.

2

Soon the grey bird will come flying over the wood, over the lake, and take me away with it. I am looking out for that shallow Z-shape in the sky. My neck has grown thin and longer than ever. Feathers are growing over the sinews and veins. I feel them coming through my skin. It's an itching, tingling sensation, like a foot that has gone to sleep. While I sit waiting, my toes spread further and further apart. It hurts, so I take my shoes off, stand up and walk a little way into the water. My legs, already long and bony, are very thin now. As I walk they bend back behind me. Crick, crack. My knees are like the nodes of thin stems of grass, delicate predetermined breaking points. I can easily bend my head back, the sky is not black, there are no stars in it, and the moon is not shining. Come along, grey bird, I'm tired of waiting, and my heart is already beating along with the wings that are ready for flight. Come now, or never come again.

Only when I have been lying awake for some time do I realize that I am not asleep any more.

A bird. Somewhere very close. A blackbird. And then another, further away. That's all. No cars, so it is still early. More like night.

An underground train sets up a tremor in the ground deep below me, perceptible only as a vague, uneasy sensation in my stomach. Like stones shifting inside a mountain.

Do blackbirds sing out of pleasure or in despair?

I thought I saw Andreas today. He was at the wheel of a taxi. *Taxi-Hamburg*, said the lettering on the driver's door. As he drove past me, I raised my hand and opened my mouth. The sun was reflected on the car roof, and I briefly closed my eyes.

But I don't really believe it was Andreas.

If you can think "I", then you're not asleep any more.

I look at the alarm clock: ten to four. As usual. I pull out the drawer of my bedside table, sweep the alarm clock into it with the back of my hand, and close it. The clock's ticking is deafening at this early hour, and its hands race on. I turn over on my back and feel my brain allowing the cortisol in me to work freely. I imagine an ochre sluice-gate of brain matter opening and the black gall shooting out, to distribute itself through my blood stream. Soon I shall be not only wide awake, but also melancholy.

The glow of street lights and lamps comes in through the cracks in the metal Venetian blinds. It flows through the holes at the edges of the slats, light gets in everywhere, boring into my eyelids, destroying the purple I see with closed eyes, irritating the retina.

It is bright at night in this city, bright. My eyelids are burning. Night here is brighter than many overcast afternoons. The melancholy man, claims Aristotle, does not need as much sleep as the sanguine man. But possibly the only reason why people are so melancholy is that they don't sleep for long enough.

The cortisol is making its cold way through my blood vessels.

People with easily visible veins apparently don't need so much sleep either. The veins in the backs of Heidrun's hands seemed to lie on top of them. When she grew thin, you could have separated her veins from her hands just by pinching the skin.

She's asleep, Joachim told everyone who asked after her, she's still asleep.

At first I meant to begin my cultural history of sleep, which I have almost finished now, with Aristotle, with his question of whether sleeping and waking are functions of the mind or the body. In his opinion sleep is above all the absence of wakefulness, something like being temporarily blind or deaf. But really I am more inclined to believe Heraclitus, who says that sleeping people are actively participating in what goes on in the world. When I talked to Joachim about it, he pointed out that “to sleep” is also a strongly active term, whereas “to be blind and deaf” are only silly epithets with a little verbal reinforcement.

When I had gathered all my strength, and placed my hand on my cold mother’s forehead in the room where she lay at the crematorium, I felt dizzy. Her forehead was firm and soft, not dry. Had they rubbed skin cream in? Or was it a kind of tallow? Tallow is a strange word; it makes me think of sliding and slime. Where did the huge frogs in the excavated lake come from? Frogs breathe through their skin. Heidrun’s skin was a sombre white. I couldn’t stop running my eyes over her face. Every time I put my hand on her cold forehead, the same dizziness came over me. Deep grooves ran from her pointed nose to the corners of her mouth. In the weeks before her death, her skin had been the liveliest thing in Heidrun’s face. It pulsed and contorted at every sound or smell, at every touch. Something was always twitching, shifting, working.

After she had spent ten weeks in a comatose condition I knew that Death, as it presented itself to me in that room at the crematorium, was not in the least like the twin brother of Sleep. Sleep, like Death, was a son of Night, but Night had at least two dozen children, each gloomier than the last, so whose brother wasn’t he? Furthermore, Aristotle didn’t think much of the twin brother story. As he saw it, sleep had something to do with metabolism, and thus with life.

I get up to go to the lavatory, but I don’t switch a light on. The light illuminating the way to the house next door dazzles me. Car headlights, malfunctioning street lamps, movement detector lights on the buildings that switch themselves on if a cat runs past or a marten goes under a car. I really must get proper roller shutters; the white slats become a source of light in themselves at night.

I hear the muted echo of my feet walking over the wooden floorboards of the corridor. The last of my warm drowsiness gives way to the cold plastic of the lavatory

bowl against my thighs and the smooth tiles under my bare feet. Being awake means being sober. In between, however, I still feel the lucidity of exhaustion, that shadow world inhabited by the sleepless, the over-wakeful and the undead with their heavy red eyelids and grey faces, always on their way to the world of sleep but never getting there. Always in the transit area. Maybe they'll make it on the next night flight.

This city is one great waiting-room. It might have been made for insomniacs; there are people waiting everywhere, at the railway stations, outside the Elbe Tunnel, at public ladies' toilets, bus-stops, airports. We are killing time and wading knee-deep in it here.

Heidrun's eyes sank slowly into their sockets.

Sleep inhabits a dark cave in the underworld. Up above, the wakeful have the world they all share, and only in sleep does each turn to his own world. But I know where the in-between world of the sleepless is to be found: in the waiting-room, in my waiting-room.

In the morning I must get up at seven in order to be at work at eight, so I must try to go straight back to sleep; I'm sure it will work tonight. I close the lavatory lid; everything open is a source of uneasiness, including toilets with the lid left up. An air bubble in the outlet pipe could burst, a sewer rat could come up from the bowl. What lives underground can swim to the surface, open lavatory lids, open doors, open questions, mustn't think too much about that, must act as if I were still asleep. Only now do I see Orla's grey woollen scarf hanging over the towel-rail beside the wash-basin. I hold it to my face and breathe in deeply. That will help me get to sleep. I quietly close the door and go back to the bedroom on tiptoe. My footsteps are light, which is not a good sign. I'm far too wide awake, I'm almost hopping, bad, bad. I try to make myself heavy, to reinforce my physical resistance to the inexorable wakefulness in my head. Those worn out for lack of sleep are always available and ready for anything, never resisting. Maybe I ought to put that angry remark into the introduction to my book, the introduction that I can't write, not least because of my chronic exhaustion, my daytime drowsiness, narcolepsy is the technical term for it. When I arrive at the hospital in the morning and go into my consulting-room in the sleep laboratory, alert and semi-conscious at the same time, I feel more drunk than at four in the small hours on my way back to bed.

I turn the quilt over so as to have the cool side against my skin. I don't like getting into beds that are already warm. I left my lover in Grund, but we never once slept in the same bed. I have no more business in Grund, nothing to take me there.

But I have Orla. She is asleep.

My daughter came home at midnight, and I forced myself not to go straight to her, talk to her and secretly find out whether she smelt of smoke, alcohol, marijuana or sex. Whether her pupils were enlarged or narrowed, whether her clothes were hastily buttoned up the wrong way, whether her speech was slurred and all the other things a mother would like to know. However, going to the lavatory just now I sniffed her grey scarf. She always leaves something in the corridor and the bathroom when she comes home late, an item of clothing as a sign to tell me that she's back safe and sound. I do the same for her. Joachim gave her the scarf, but I chose it. It is a large knitted triangle of fine grey wool with a lacy pattern. I can smell my daughter in it through the other smells of perfume, smoke, the red-light district and the underground train.

Three years ago I took my daughter, then aged fourteen, away from the German School in Dublin and went back to Grund. I hadn't planned to go back to where I came from, but I had been wanting to leave Dublin for some time. Declan was a good man, but all was not well between us any longer. He smoked too much grass, he drank too much, he was away too much, he had too many love affairs. I was getting more and more cynical and prudish myself, and if I happened to come upon my face by chance in a dark window, a mirror in a toilet, a changing cubicle, and saw my compressed lips, then – as time went on – the two horizontal lines on my forehead, it alarmed me. I was too old now for a musician whose long brown hair was getting ever longer and ever thinner, who liked sleeping with several other people in buses when on tour, and who still thought unreliability was a necessary quality in an artist's personality, even maybe the only one an artist needed. But now I am doing him an injustice. He's an excellent musician, he plays the Irish bodhrán and percussion and the cajon, and I loved his restless hands. He drummed all day on everything within reach that had a surface: tables, chair frames, walls, his thighs. It wasn't out of nervousness. Nothing seemed to him to have any form or consistency until he had drummed on it. Even if he put a slice of bread on a plate his hands would come together two or three times above it before he picked up his knife. I once asked him if that

was his way of finding out whether he wanted cheese or jam. He just looked at me blankly.

Declan was a loving father, erratic but enthusiastic. However, I felt too young to be feeling so old all the time. I had met him when I was pregnant. He was accompanying one of his younger brothers to the hospital where I trained. The brother suffered from insomnia, but his main trouble was addiction to sleeping tablets. I tried to talk to him on his own, but he insisted on having Declan there. Declan lost his temper when I said that the sleeping tablets caused his brother's insomnia. He drummed his fingers on my desk and made cutting remarks, in a low voice, about the incompetence of doctors who were far too young for the job and tried to blame the patients themselves for their ailments. He was tight-lipped as he left the consulting-room and closed the door behind the two of them, and then I heard him shouting at his brother out in the corridor. Next day he brought me two concert tickets for that evening. I took a woman colleague with me. When he saw us in the audience, he bowed to us from the stage.

Declan didn't treat me like a pregnant woman, although there was no overlooking my belly in the seventh month, he just treated me like a woman. Well, like a woman who was pregnant, but not with awe or contempt or as an impersonal container for a foetus. At the sight of a pregnant woman, so many people feel they have a right to finger her bump, put personal questions about her weight, or ask if she has to belch, can she shit in the usual way? Declan only asked if I'd like a drink, and later if I would dance with him.

I fell in love with him very slowly. His Irish music moved me, and I admired the dedication with which he performed. After a few weeks we were sleeping together. He wanted it much sooner, but I was ashamed of my big belly. After a while I told myself that my desire for him would grow just like my belly, perhaps even faster, and then it would be much more difficult. However, it wasn't difficult at all, but exciting and easy. He thought my breasts, which were getting heavier, were beautiful, and embraced my thighs with such heartfelt pleasure that after a few weeks I wondered whether he would still desire me when my figure wasn't quite so voluptuous.

He was almost present at Orla's birth, but there were complications, the baby's head was awkwardly placed and obstructive, something that hasn't changed much even seventeen years later. I had a general anaesthetic and a Caesarean. Declan was the only father Orla

ever knew. We had a good time together. He was away from home for many weeks of the year. I knew by that time that he slept with other women when he was touring. He thought it was all part of a musician's life. He took care not to humiliate me, he was discreet, but in the course of time I came to know the little signs. The mobile phone for "business calls only" that no one must touch. The smile at the corners of his mouth when he was sending a text message in the middle of the night. It was a triumphant smile that curved the corners of his mouth down and raised his eyebrows up. I knew it very well. When he was undoing my dress, and touched my breasts as if by chance, kissed my neck in a certain way, at the same time breathing in and feeling me suddenly catch my own breath, he smiled the same smile. It was still sometimes a smile for me, but he also smiled at his mobile like that. And I minded.

Orla would grow up some day, Declan wouldn't. But that thought no longer moved me, it made me feel tired at best and afraid at worst.

When I took Orla away from school so close to the end-of-year exams, he didn't protest. He asked whether we would be back. Not whether we would be back soon, just whether. I looked at him.

- I don't know. What do you mean?
- I don't know.
- He looked away. I nodded.

The outlines of the blinds and cords trace a shadowy spider's web on the wall, and I remember what I read in the evening paper about spiders. It said there was an invasion of bridge spiders here in Hamburg. Thousands of these spiders live on buildings beside flowing water, and at night they crawl around on the facades and the piles of bridges, eating, mating, increasing and multiplying and spinning cobwebs everywhere. Their webs even hang on windows, with remains of dried flies, scraps of old cocoons and half-eaten members of their own species caught in them.

And yet spiders can't cross glass.

Once we used to invert a glass over house spiders, carefully slide a piece of paper under the spider, turn the glass and the paper over, and the spider was at the bottom of the glass. Now you could take the paper away, because the spider couldn't climb up the sides of the glass. We caught only the big ones from the cellar, simply leaving the little ones

where they were, and there were always spiders somewhere. Heidrun sometimes swept the cobwebs away with a curious longish spider-brush, but only when the webs were empty and dusty. On no account were we to kill the spiders, although there were a great many of them in Grund. The Rhine was there with its water meadows, the Hardtwald forest, the low-lying river banks, the lake and the fields, and as a result there were also mosquitoes, crane-flies, house-flies, cowflies, hoverflies, horseflies, ladybirds, thunderflies, fruitflies, maybugs, summer chafers, rape-beetles, Colorado beetles, bees and wasps, including the species that hang their legs down in flight, bumble bees and hornets, daddy-long-legs, dragonflies, geometer moths and other moths in all sizes and patterns, humming-bird hawkmoths pretending to be real humming-birds, small clothes-moths, bugs, bright green and almost transparent flies, very delicate, crickets, aphids, flying ants and antlions, green caterpillars that came abseiling down from the trees in their thousands in early summer, and millions of other little creatures moving through the air. And the spiders caught them all, except for particularly strong insects, in their webs. Then we caught the spiders. We opened a window and tipped the spiders out of the glasses. If they were fat, we could hear it when they hit the ground.

When I left Dublin and went back to Grund for a couple of years, close to the river, there were yet more spiders than in my parents' house when I was a child. Although I didn't even have a cellar. For Orla, the move meant a great change: saying goodbye to her school friends, no one speaking English, driving on the right of the road. But she knew Grund, because we had spent almost every summer there, and often Christmas as well.

The house we had rented was just outside the village in the low-lying river bank area, right by the water between the Rhine and the dyke. It stood on raised foundations, and a long flight of steps led from the road up to the door of the house. When the water was high, the steps ended in the middle of the river, and then it looked like an open-air swimming pool outside our front door. Once the Rhine rose so fast overnight that in the morning we had to climb into the volunteer fire-fighters' inflatable dinghy from the fourth step down. But when high water was expected we usually moved really high up in the village in good time, to my parents' house.

Joachim didn't understand why we did not move in with him. He could understand it even less now that Heidrun was in a care home and the house was almost empty.

However, I couldn't live with Joachim, never had been able to. Only when I left home did I realize that the annoyance I felt first thing in the morning all that time was not one of my inborn character defects, but arose from my inability to feel comfortable breakfasting with a noisy, singing, quarrelsome and cheerful man who lectured me, taking sides.

As for Joachim himself, he could hardly bear it if you did things in his house in any way but his own. After all, he had thought about these things, he had tried out various ways of doing them, rejected those ways and tried others until he found the only right way, the best way to do everything. Other people's suggestions were objectively tested and sometimes accepted, but if they were found wanting he would not rest until he had replaced them by a better way. That applied to everything, from the right way to take off a sweater – so that it did not turn inside out – to questions of nuclear energy and the political programmes of the Opposition parties, and all the way to loading your fork with as many peas as possible with the aid of mashed potato, which acted as mortar.

When I was still asleep at the weekend as a child, and he was already awake, he used to sing at the top of his voice, but stopped as soon as he saw that I had woken up. If Heidrun had a circumspet word with him about it, he told her that he hoped people could still sing in his house.

Settle down where you can sing, he chanted in a kind of rhythmical speech-song.

– Those who don't mean well –

– and here he cast her a meaningful glance,

–those who don't mean well sing no songs. So there.

– By “so there” I suppose you mean “and now shut up”, said Heidrun coolly, going into the kitchen.

Anyway, Orla and I did not move in with him. And I did what I always used to do when I didn't want to do something, but did not like to admit it. I made the well-being of my child my reason.

– Orla is going through a difficult phase, she has to get used to living here all over again, and without Declan, so it's better if I'm the only person she's fighting with.

The house by the river into which Orla and I moved was not pretty. It looked as if an unimaginative child had painted it. A rectangular box with a pitched roof, damp, old and dark. The dyke came up to the back of the house, and beyond the dyke began the Rhine woodland, a jungle, a dark grey-green tangle of poplars and willows, usually with black

pools of water standing between them in various places. Sometimes the water disappeared.

I put the tip of my tongue against the fine ridge between my two upper incisors. Lightly, exerting no pressure. If I concentrate on the sensation in my tongue as it feels the smooth, slippery alveolar ridge, I stop thinking about anything else, anything that prevents me from falling asleep. The exercise is simple enough not to excite me, and demanding enough to call for all my attention. Think of something else, something else, Andreas.

It's a mystery why those bridge spiders in a harbour city like Hamburg don't fight each other, but apparently enough midges for all of them rise from the water. So at night they get together, build nests, form groups and colonies, and spin web after web. Webs in several layers, beside each other, one after another, in stages. The chemical composition of spider silk can hold its own against stone, and if you made a shirt of it it would weigh almost nothing, yet be five times stronger than steel. I would like to have a shirt like that, especially at night. Joachim used to tell Heidrun and me that the word *shirt* is originally Scandinavian. He liked to tell us about points of linguistic interest at mealtimes, and often favoured us with sayings and verses from German and English literature, making it clear that he was quoting by means of raising his eyebrows and rolling his "r"s. I preferred his lectures to being asked a question and having my answer interrupted, because he thought it was going on too long. Time for talking was something that, like everything else in his house, had to be fairly shared out, and too much was too much. All the same, I did not study languages like Joachim, although they charmed and bewitched me, but medicine, which interested me but did not inspire me with passion.

Perhaps I did that as a protest, perhaps out of cowardice. Joachim, however, did not read any deliberate demarcation into my decision. He welcomed the idea of my studying medicine, a field which had "done credit to Goethe's Wilhelm Meister." I am a somnologist; sleep is my profession. I treat people who can't sleep or fall asleep at the wrong times, sleepwalkers, snorers, narcoleptics.

But I have returned to writing narrative after all: a cultural history of sleep – sometimes I think that with my medical study of sleep I have not departed at all from the matters that occupy Joachim's mind. Sleep, after all, has always been the subject of art, indeed sleep in itself is an art. Those of us who do research into sleep are the custodians

of a resource that is progressively running out, and there are many of us: internists and pneumologists, paediatricians, psychologists, neurologists, chronobiologists, pharmacists, physicists, sociologists and anthropologists.

So I asked Joachim if he could help me with the chapter on music and literature in the English Renaissance for my history of sleep. And I had come back to Grund.

I wonder if I think I am seeing people because they are dead? Such things do happen. Naturally I don't believe them from the academic medical point of view, but that doesn't mean they don't exist. Is Andreas dead? Or maybe I only think of him because I read that report about the spiders. And spiders remind me of the frogs in Grund. It can't have been him driving that taxi, I don't get enough sleep, so I dream in daytime. Last week I even thought I saw Marthe standing at Hamburg Central Station. The angle of a long neck bent over a handbag. When she straightened up, it was a stranger.

What has happened to Marthe?

Flown away. Or drowned.

Only birds can do any damage to spiders, but there are no birds in a seaport city. This part of Hamburg is too new, almost a building site. There are no trees yet, so no birds live here either, and the spiders have it all their own way. Their young keep emerging from cocoons non-stop, fat old spiders run soundlessly over protein fibres that bend under them but never tear. They touch solely the spoke-shaped threads as they move; they themselves would stick to the spiral threads. The outlines of the piles of bridges will soon be blurred by grey cobwebs; all the right angles will acquire soft curves. And when the wind blows over the river, the bridges will swirl and the walls of the houses shake.

Grund is near Karlsruhe. Margrave Karl used to sit in his castle at Karlsruhe like a spider, surveying his road network. The story goes that he was out hunting in the Hardtwald and a large stag got away, upsetting him and spoiling his day's hunt. Although it was still early in the morning, heat hung heavily among the tall trees. Wearily, he beckoned his squire over to help him off his horse. The ground felt springy under the muffled tread of his tall riding boots. The margrave looked thoughtfully at the forest floor, which was covered with pine needles. When the leaves of the beech trees moved, dappled sunlight fell on his hands and his breeches. The margrave closed his eyes for a moment. He told

the squire to spread a rug on the ground, and sat down on it. He was a little stiff from riding so long, and from his dashing but therefore rather tight-fitting uniform. He took off his jacket, bundled it under the nape of his neck, lay back and looked up at the crowns of the trees. Here and there milky rays of sun penetrated the foliage, and everything that flew through those rays – motes of dust, flies, seeds parachuting down – was turned to gold. And no sooner had the margrave fallen asleep that he dreamed of a city like the sun itself, hot and golden with streets radiating out like sunbeams. He dreamed himself into the middle of this shining universe, he dreamed himself into a castle of light, a sun king from Baden in a golden realm where milk and honey seemed to flow in long streams from the sky itself. When he woke up he felt entirely rejuvenated, called for a goblet of Riesling, and rode home without his jacket, although it was cooler now.

A month after that day the margrave went into the forest again to chase the stag and lay it low, but the animal had disappeared and never came back. The margrave took this as a sign that the stag had been sent only to show him the place where he would be at peace, *Ruhe*, as the place name Karlsruhe now suggests, and his dream had been a prophecy. The squire said nothing in reply to that, but only struck his new stag's-leather boots a few times with his riding crop.

The cunning trick designed to send me to sleep with stories didn't work either, for the cunning are always wakeful too. It is possible that I am outwitting myself by avoiding sleep. Does my insomnia, perhaps, protect me from the coming moment of waking?

The cunning snake, a colleague from Botswana told me yesterday, lost its feet because it slept too much. And then he cast a long look at my shapeless hospital clogs and laughed. I like him, we enjoy winding each other up, but he is a somnologist, and like the others he can see what's the matter with me. I still haven't made any major mistakes in my work, it's just that I'm much slower now and so I have to work longer hours, and then I get home late, and Orla is waiting, and I don't want to think about a story to make me sleep, I have to leave early next day.

How much longer can I keep going like this?

Most patients keep going for a long time, a very long time. Whether that's good or bad I can't say. But a long time, anyway.

Snakes, spiders, bullfrogs, I'd be grateful even for a nightmare. My tongue slid away from my incisors some time ago. I put it back where it was. I will sleep again. Everyone goes to sleep some time.

Heidrun didn't wake up again. She slept and slept, only she couldn't pass away. In the end she starved to death. By then it was winter.

3

*Come, heavy sleep, the image of true death;
 And close up these my weary weeping eyes,
 Whose spring of tears doth stop my vital breath,
 And tears my heart with sorrow's sigh-swoll'n cries:
 Come and possess my tired, thought-worn soul,
 That living dies, till thou on me be stole.*

*Come shadow of my end, and shape of rest,
 Allied to death, child to his black-fac'd night;
 Come thou and charm these rebels in my breast,
 Whose waking fancies do my mind affright.
 O come, sweet sleep, come or I die for ever,
 Come ere my last sleep comes, or come thou never.*

I keep the choir's journal.

I must pull myself together, the opposite of falling to pieces. Come, heavy sleep. I will pull myself together by writing this. To write, meaning originally to carve on wood or stone, so then what I write here would be set in stone.

The book is a dark green notebook, and I am supposed to use it for a record of who was there at choir practice, what we rehearsed, and what we have to work on now. When Joachim Feld asked me to keep a journal of what our chamber choir did, I said yes. It was only to be expected that he would choose me: the inconspicuous grey lady of uncertain age, but certainly on the far side of good and bad. His daughter Ellen has enough on her hands, his granddaughter Orla isn't well-organized enough, and he wouldn't have ventured to ask either of the two men.

I think I am the right person for the job. And of course I am to write down everything about the choir that occurs to me. What does occur to me? There are six of us. Six of one and half a dozen of the other.

There's not much to say about the choir. We are obviously singing only this one song.

Weariness hides a longing to sleep, and drowsiness a wish for sleep to go away.

Are these feelings, desires or physical conditions? Are they situated in the same part of the brain? And which is worse?

Weariness and drowsiness are the two outer edges of the threshold in the house of Night. That iron threshold where Night and her daughter Day meet. One of them enters the house just as the other is leaving it. Neither of the two has ever spent more time with the other than is occupied by that greeting twice in twenty-four hours, but they still live together.

I wonder whether an iron threshold looks something like the rusty steel sleepers of the old railway line behind my parents' house?

I think of getting up to look in on Orla and see if she is asleep. My daughter's sleep is perfection. She lies on her back with her head turned slightly sideways. Her eyes are closed, and the lashes lie softly on her broad cheekbones. She breathes slowly and deeply through her nose and in her stomach. I can distinguish between her REM and deep sleep phases by the twitching of her eyelids; she has enough of both. Her mouth is closed, but her jawbones are at rest, so she does not grind or chatter or clench her teeth. She seldom wakes up. She doesn't walk, talk or scream in her sleep. She doesn't sweat or toss and turn in bed. She is calm but not catatonic, and when she opens her brown-to-turquoise eyes in the morning she is awake and fresh. I love to watch her sleeping, her beauty breaks my heart. I used to take her into my bed with me when I couldn't sleep. Now she is seventeen, and I'm glad when she is there at all.

But then I don't get up after all, partly because my body feels so heavy that I hope to find my way straight back to sleep, partly because looking in on Orla, smelling her hair and her skin, come only later in my ritual sequence of ways to get back to sleep. It is one of the last desperate attempts. And I haven't reached that stage yet. Not by a long way.

The hero in one of Jean Paul's books enumerates fourteen ways of boring an insomniac so much that he will go straight back to sleep. He admits that none of them will work, but I have copied them out all the same, and put the list beside my bed. I pick up the piece of paper, I don't even have to switch the light on, I know the points almost by heart, although not in my sleep.

Counting, of course, is his first method. Imagining musical notes, sad songs. Third, running through syllables in your mind, not making up poetry but reciting poems. Go on dreaming your dreams; fifth, keep your night eye fixed on a morning meadow. I wish I knew how that one works; it sounds as if it could help me. Look at the colours that form in the chaos you see behind closed lids. Seventh, do not think of tomorrow's work. That is certainly helpful, but he might as well have written, "seventh, try to sleep." Eighth, let your body twitch, which doesn't work for me either; I usually twitch myself awake. Think of nouns and line them up side by side; listen to the rushing of your own pulse like a fountain and your own veins like cascades; tell yourself a story of some kind. Spell very long words; my favourite is bending your five fingers up and down, one by one, on top of or under the covers; and fourteenth, bore yourself in some pleasant way.

Those are good methods: not particularly exciting, and yet the brain can gnaw away at them like a dog gnawing an old bone. I run my tongue along the alveolar ridge behind my incisors. There is no space between the incisors themselves. Andreas had a small space. The tip of Benno's tongue could get right through the space between his. It's six months since I saw the tip of his tongue or felt it, in my mouth, on my throat, on the inside of my thighs and going deep in between them.

And I have forgotten about Lutz's incisors and his tongue alike.

Tuesday 3 September

Present:

Joachim Feld, Ellen Feld, Orla Feld, Benno Hoffmann, Andreas Ritter, and myself, I am Marthe Griess.

The advertisement in the gazette:

“Choirmaster seeks experienced singers, men and women, for songs by John Dowland. All voices welcome, a knowledge of music required First meeting at 7 p.m. on 3 September in the Village Hall, Grund, small hall, door on the right and down the stairs. Joachim Feld”

I see what I notice and then write what occurs to me down in the book later. I admit I like doing it. Joachim Feld is right, I am the person for the job.

Joachim: “Maybe some more will come along.”

He rubbed his mouth and chin with his hand. His daughter looked at him doubtfully:

“Your ad was terrifying, Papa. I’m here only because you offered me the lullaby as bait. Orla is here because she wants to do us a favour. Andreas is here because he thinks he owes you a favour. Only Benno Hoffmann and Marthe Griess – ”

And she turned to me with an apologetic smile.

“ – have not let your arrogant wording deter them.”

I asked Ellen: “What lullaby did he use as bait for you?”

“My dear Marthe Griess,” cried Joachim, “you will like the song, I’m sure you came because of Dowland. And you, Herr Hoffmann, have sung in a choir?”

Herr Hoffmann jumped.

He is still young, at most in his early thirties. I think he is the only one whom no one here knows.

They all looked at him.

Benno Hoffmann: “Yes. That’s right.”

He cleared his throat. “Well, at least a bit.”

Ellen Feld looked at him and smiled – less with her mouth than with the skin round her eyes. He cleared his throat again.

Ellen’s laughter lines became a little deeper.

Joachim handed each of us a sheet of paper.

“‘Come, Heavy Sleep’, by John Dowland, 1563–1626.”

There was still a tall stack of paper on the black piano. He put it back in his briefcase.

Obviously he had expected half the village.

“We ought all to be on first-name terms,” said Joachim, “that’s what people do in groups like ours.”

“Are we going to sing it all in English?” asked Orla Feld. She sounded pleased. Andreas was frowning and studying the music.

Joachim translated the text – he is a professor of English literature, after all, retired a few years ago. He was well prepared. He took a tuning fork out of his jacket pocket and laid it on the piano standing against the wall.

The rehearsal room smells stuffy and sour, of sweaty shirts and bad breath. The smell clings to the rough-textured wallpaper, the beige curtains, and seeps out of all the cracks and joints of the floorboards. On Mondays the church choir rehearses in here.

Joachim Feld nodded to Orla. “Do you like it?”

Orla Feld said something in English. I know English, but I didn’t understand it, perhaps because of her Irish accent, because Ellen Feld lived in Ireland with her before they both came back to Grund in the spring.

I look at Orla.

She is striking.

I am not short myself, even my husband wasn’t much taller than me, but compared to Orla I feel delicate. She is not fat, but curvaceous and baroque. There is nothing doughy or spongy about her, she is rather statuesque. Stately is the word for her.

The rehearsal room has a row of windows with a view down to the low-lying riverbank.

When Ellen tried to open the windows, Orla stood in front of her mother and cried, “Tilt them all open! It stinks of a male voice choir in here.”

Ellen: “You can’t get rid of that by airing the room.”

With Benno's help, Joachim pushed the old grand piano out of the corner and into the middle of the room.

Joachim: "I think we'll try all the voices singing doh. Everyone can try every voice so that you don't all have to sing solo. I'll lead the singing and you join in as best you can. Maybe some of you can sight-read."

We all looked at our parts and kept quiet.

Joachim: "Let's start with the melody. Soprano, B."

Joachim struck a chord in G major. We all sang all four parts through once. Then Joachim asked which voices we felt most comfortable with. I really feel happiest with tenor, but I said alto. Ellen has a clear if untrained soprano. It sounds compact, has brilliance to it but not wide-ranging brilliance, not like the sun, more like a single concentrated ray of light. Joachim's tenor voice is still good, lyrical, flexible, perhaps a little inclined to break up in the higher register. Andreas has a deep bass. His voice has warmth, but he sings with great restraint. Benno is probably the best singer among us, another tenor, a slender but flexible and assured voice.

Orla is the surprise; she has a low alto voice. Unexpectedly full and feminine for a girl of seventeen, rich in overtones and with a vibrato that she uses entirely unconsciously.

Joachim Felt got her to sing to us and seemed first surprised, then moved:

"But all the Felds have high voices!"

Orla: "Looks like I don't. Can we go on now, Grandpa?"

Now I could hear the same timbre in her speaking voice.

Ellen frowned, bent over her handbag and acted as if she were looking for something in it. From her carefully stooped shoulders and the sharp angles of her elbows, I could tell how proud she was of Orla, and how hard she was trying not to show it. I turned my glance away, and saw something else: both men, Andreas and Benno, were looking at Ellen. Well, well.

But after all, I'm not here because of John Dowland either. I'm here because of Ellen Feld.

Benno was my patient for a little while. I was running a course on sleep in Grund and spent a couple of days a week at the sleep laboratory in the City Hospital. I like the idea of a course on sleep; it suggests that with a little hard work and stamina anyone can learn how to sleep. And sure enough, most people attending my course notice that when they put their sleep records down in writing, they sleep much better than they thought or felt they did. That discovery usually relaxes them so much that many of their sleep problems are resolved even before I can get round to dealing with them methodically. Of course I show them what autogenic training is and how to achieve progressive muscular relaxation, but it is often enough to explain that it is perfectly normal to wake up several times in the night. Many people's sleep hygiene is terrible: a long nap after eating or perhaps on coming home from work, then coffee, overheated bedrooms, TV in front of the bed – many of them have squandered a quarter of their sleep requirements even before they switch off the light. Completing the course has the same effect on up to 70 per cent of my patients as taking a low or medium dose of a sedative. And apart from the fee for the course it has no undesirable side effects. Then I have to look at the remaining 30 per cent of patients individually later.

Benno was a sleepwalker. He slept wonderfully well, but not always in his bed. Sleepwalking is a mild disturbance, a parasomnia of deep sleep in which the motor centres of the brain are insufficiently deactivated. But sleepwalking usually passes off of its own accord, and the only dangerous aspect is the risk of injury. Benno was ashamed of his sleepwalking. It was obvious that he wasn't telling me everything he did at night. He only asked whether sleepwalking could also entail talking in your sleep "or something similar." I told him that the two are different sleep disturbances, but that they can occur together. He nodded; my answer did not seem to reassure him. I asked him whether he lived a healthy life and was easily able to switch off and relax, and then he laughed out loud, and said he was a hard-working historian whose lungs had long ago become accustomed to breathing in dust, on account of the air in the archives where he spent his time, he had a stipend while he studied for a doctorate and was therefore under pressure to achieve, he could also mention a half-dead father who had been a doctor, he had money problems and clearly felt the deadline for handing in his work coming closer, but of course, just switch off and relax, he ought to have thought of that before!

I thought he was a little too sharp-tongued for his age, which I had seen in the files, just thirty-one, and told him as condescendingly as possible that all the same, he should try going in for some kind of sport or finding a hobby. I secretly congratulated myself on coming up with the word “hobby”. It took effect at once. He nodded briefly, stood up and left, accompanied by my advice to leave lights on everywhere at home so that he didn’t injure himself.

And then I met him again in Joachim’s choir.

It startled him to see me. I could tell from his face that he was wondering whether to leave again at once. Just before the rehearsal began, he pulled himself together and came over to me. He said he was here because he had been advised to take up a hobby. As he said that he smiled, partly in self-mockery and in part reproachfully, but in a certain way also enthusiastic. I couldn’t help laughing. Not again, I thought, not a baby like this again.

Only much later did he admit that his attention had been drawn to the ad because my surname was on it. He had been curious, he said. When he saw that I was there too, and that the choirmaster was not my husband, he had felt caught in the act and spurred on at the same time. It had been, he said, like a dream that he hadn’t even known he nurtured coming true. And after a pause he added that I needn’t roll my eyes like that, so that you saw only the whites of them, an ordinary squint would be quite adequate.

I told him he ought to be less forthcoming to a somnologist with stories about his dreams. He shrugged his shoulders:

– I suppose you think you’re immune to that sort of thing? Dreams, sleepwalking, unconsciousness in general, those are for weaklings, right? Do you sleep well yourself, by the way? No, you get people to sleep.

I smiled cheerfully and nodded. At that time I was still sleeping.

Margrave Karl of Baden made his own dream come true. He built his sun city. And if the streets were more fan-shaped than like spokes, and the castle wasn’t golden but only painted yellow, he still called the city Karlsruhe, because he had dreamed of it after hunting in the forest.

Grund is north of Karlsruhe, so to speak at the end of the cord from which the fan hangs. You go down a long, perfectly straight road through the forest if you want to cycle

to the city. The lowland plain of the upper Rhine is flat, flatter than Hamburg with the slopes of the river Elbe and its river valleys, its flights of steps and hills.

We have been living in Hamburg for five months now. It's not so bad. The city is large and crowded. It's cramped here, but at the same time there's so much space. When we moved here in January the river Alster was frozen. Suddenly there was a great grey wilderness of ice in the middle of the city, flecked with white snowdrifts. Even the sky seems larger than in Grund, with plenty of space reaching mainly upward. It reminds me of Dublin. The clouds drive across the sky on three and sometimes four levels, above and below each other, all coming together and towering up in all directions. Yet it seems as if cold, interstellar air were falling on the city straight out of space. This is May, and it is still wintry outside.

To the south in Grund, the sky is usually a uniform expanse. Either blue or grey or white, with cloud-cover or a pall of haze. The stars there seem less like heavenly bodies and more like simply light, starlight falling from above as if through narrow openings, as if we were sitting like ladybirds in a shoebox after someone has pierced holes in it with a knitting needle. Once Andreas picked up a dead stag-beetle; it was shiny brown like the wood of the old desk that stood in the living-room. I looked at the antlers with their spines. The stag beetle reminded me more of a trap for woodland creatures than a woodland creature itself, a gleaming steel trap with legs. Its black eyes were popping out of its head to left and right. All the same, we made holes of its box. You never know if something is just playing dead.

Orla and I still stare at the people opposite us in the U-Bahn trains, a sure sign that we are from the country. Last week, when there were actually two hot days, the young woman opposite me spread her knees wide apart all of a sudden, her short skirt slipped up her thighs, and I could see the little triangle of her flimsy panties and her shaved mount of Venus under them. When I gave a start and glanced up, I was looking straight into her face. She was staring at me. Her eyes were dulled and her lower lip slack. It took me some time to realize that she was imitating the expression on my own face, in a distorted version, maybe, but it reflected mine. I felt deeply ashamed and kept my head bowed until we reached the next station. I got out there and waited ten minutes for the next train.

Really I don't notice when I'm staring. Do I think myself invisible now that we're living in the city? I try to read in the U-Bahn, but I have to force myself not to look up at every station. Who am I expecting to see? There's no one here with whom I ought to pass the time of day.

I thought once before, two weeks ago, that I'd seen Andreas while I was shopping. I was standing in line at the cash desk, and was almost sure it was him as he paid and left the store with a plastic bag. My body seemed aware of him even before my brain, because at first I didn't understand why my heart was beating so fast. But I don't know whether it was really him.

I wonder if Benno has found what he was looking for now? He hasn't disappeared, but he's gone underground all the same. That seemed to happen quite often in Grund; young men appeared and were suddenly gone again, as if the earth had opened and swallowed them up. Benno was busy searching the earth when I last saw him. He had lost weight, his hair was greasy and matted at the same time, and the skin on his red, swollen hands was peeling like the bark of a birch tree.

It is good to be here in the north. Hamburg is large enough for anyone to play dead there for a while. Such people are known as sleepers. I try a snort of amusement, but the darkness of my bedroom, the pillows and quilt absorb the sound so that it comes out as helpless.

By night the faces seen on the U-Bahn wander through the dark shafts of my brain, staring back. Orla does better, she puts headphones on and looks out of the window. Her reflection looks back in the dark tunnels. But then we find ourselves staring again.

We're just not used to it any more; after all, Dublin is a big city too. However, by comparison with Hamburg it seems rural.

I'm tired. Night has plucked away the covering of my nerve tracts as if with a wire stripper, leaving them vulnerable and exposed in my body, and I feel an electric shock at every touch. Oh to have nerves like spider's webs. Or to sleep. That's all. And to know that sleep will end heartache and those thousand natural shocks. Perchance to dream. Here my train of thought is diverted. Does Andreas even have a driving licence? I really knew him only on the yellow post office bike.

The tip of my tongue has slipped away from the little ridge behind my incisor teeth again. I need time to get used to everything, my new job, my colleagues at the hospital, Orla's school, the faces on the train, the strange sounds, the unfamiliar dialect. Our new apartment on the second floor of this old building under which, far away, the U-Bahn seethes. In Ovid, sleep lives under a mountain. And it's true, sleep has a third dimension, even somnologists speak of deep sleep. Sleep is a place into which you climb down, a Utopia of depth. Singing may be one too, only much brighter. And a choir? Well, that's no Utopia, at most maybe a brave shot at realizing a Utopia, at least for a short time. The chorus, says Joachim, was once an essential component of a tragedy. The chorus gave warnings and expressed sympathy, soothed and observed the other actors. Such were the functions of the chorus.

Joachim's choir fulfilled none of those functions. It did feel as if it were part of a tragedy, but for that it would have needed further to fall. If something fell around there, then it fell flat, seeped away or silted up.

- **End of Sample** -