

**Volkshochschule Frankfurt Literary Magazine**  
**Issue 7, December 2013**

**Volkshochschule Frankfurt Literary Magazine**  
**Issue 7, December 2013**

Julia Shirtliff

# Foreword

Welcome to the seventh issue of Pandora, with more contributions than ever before! We're excited to have you discover the wide range of creative voices in the VHS Frankfurt community.

You may notice that this issue looks different and has been longer in the making than previous issues. Patricia Bartholomew, our devoted creative writing tutor – and Pandora's founding editor – left Frankfurt in Summer 2012 to take on new professional opportunities in her native US. We were at first concerned that Pandora might not survive, but Patricia's guidance has allowed several people to jump in and continue our commitment to presenting our writers (native and non-native speakers of English alike), whose dedication and skill is an endless source of inspiration for us all.

Thanks go to our creative writing tutors, Maren Michel and Barbara Thimm, for their ongoing support and guidance in their students' writing process, and for their editorial work in this issue. Thanks also go to Katharina Hepp, a creative writing student at the VHS, whose expertise in layout and design has allowed us to now present the finished pieces.

We hope that you will be inspired and entertained by what you read in these pages. And should you wish to join our writing community, take a look at our creative writing courses at [www.vhs.frankfurt.de](http://www.vhs.frankfurt.de)

Editors: Maren Michel & Barbara Thimm  
Founding Editor: Patricia Bartholomew  
Design & Illustration: Katharina Hepp



Pandora Issue 7

# Table of Contents

|    |                                   |                   |
|----|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| 4  | <b>The Lone Wolf</b>              | MP Olinger        |
| 6  | <b>Field Trip</b>                 | Jürgen Kruse      |
| 10 | <b>Writer's Block</b>             | Ewa Bechtold      |
| 12 | <b>Who My Neighbors Are</b>       | Dorothee Hoffmann |
| 14 | <b>Repetitions (Here Before)</b>  | Kolmi Sand        |
| 19 | <b>Afflatus</b>                   | Katharina Hepp    |
| 20 | <b>The Face of Another</b>        | Helen Weetman     |
| 24 | <b>Shift</b>                      | Jürgen Kruse      |
| 26 | <b>November Blues</b>             | Helene Lebold     |
| 30 | <b>Wardrobe</b>                   | Justine Otte      |
| 32 | <b>Street Style</b>               | Katharina Hepp    |
| 34 | <b>Rumors</b>                     | Polina Shestak    |
| 38 | <b>The Bull's Dream</b>           | MP Olinger        |
| 40 | <b>Johnny's Got a Job to Do</b>   | Ellen Hoover      |
| 44 | <b>Rain in the City of Rain</b>   | Jürgen Kruse      |
| 47 | <b>To My Flat, With Apologies</b> | Katharina Hepp    |
| 48 | <b>The Pillow Cover</b>           | Eva Poggio        |
| 51 | <b>The Cat Sat on the Mat</b>     | BrF               |
| 52 | <b>Just Weaned</b>                | Nuria Planas      |
| 58 | <b>Newspapers</b>                 | Ewa Bechtold      |
| 60 | <b>On Bridges</b>                 | Katharina Hepp    |
| 62 | <b>With One Wheel Gone Wrong</b>  | Julia Appel       |
| 66 | <b>The Old Buffalo</b>            | MP Olinger        |
| 69 | <b>The Geographer</b>             | Jürgen Kruse      |





MP Olinger

## The Lone Wolf

The forest had disappeared behind sheets of snow and ice, the skies over Montana heaving. From inside the cabin, Mike could feel the blizzard drumming, almost swallowing the howl of the wolf. Long after dusk had settled, Mike heard the wolf continue to howl against the storm. Grabbing his Winchester, he finally ventured out. Blinded by stinging ice crystals, he fought his way to the stables. As he approached, the door banged with the storm. Reaching inside, Mike switched on the light.

The hens were perched high, safely on their racks. His pitifully braying sheep huddled in the far corner while the scent of death kept tiptoeing around one of their young. The little one fought bravely for its life as a line of blood left its mauled body. Mike lifted the dying animal into his

arms while realising that another one was missing. He knew that the wolf would be coming back. With a heavy heart, Mike stepped into the yard. He lowered the young sheep into the soft snow. The sound of his rifle reverberated as he released the lamb from its agony. Gently closing the creature's eyes, he scanned the surroundings. With clenched fists, his shoulders hunched deep into the warmth of his coat, Mike stared into the night.

The blizzard kept tearing at him as he followed the wolf's tracks, leading him deep into the forest.

As the storm spent the last of its fury, stillness took over, and Mike became acutely aware of every hush under the pine trees. Like a whisper in the dark, snow danced from branches, casting silent shadows through the forest.

It was like being inside a cathedral, with the pale light of dawn filtering through snowed-under trees, when Mike finally saw the big grey. Turning its head in defiance, the wolf stood over its meal, its slanted amber eyes locking with Mike's. Light hushed around man and beast. The forest held its breath. A raven's wings, suddenly brushing through frosted airwaves, broke the spell. The wolf bristled. Mike, tasting victory, lifted his rifle. Time seemed to expand as he kept his index finger on the trigger. With the crack of thunder, one by one, the bullets tore through the wolf. Mike felt a rush of joy. With his head held high, he carefully approached his fallen prey. Yet, as he drew nearer, his pride turned stale. The she-wolf had died doing what she-wolves do, fending for her cubs.



Jürgen Kruse

## Field Trip

When I moved to Frankfurt after my retirement some years ago, I joined a creative writing course offered by the Volkshochschule, the centre for continuing education. The idea was to take up an activity that was really new to me, that posed a “new challenge”, to use a platitude – old habits die hard – of my past trade.

I only had a vague idea of creative writing. So far I had produced facts and figures, graphs and statistics all of which I interpreted in a lingo of stock phrases for fear of not appearing objective and dispassionate. Originality of style and eloquence were not part of the job profile, and my factual texts seemed to be as far from fictional writing as sober reality from spurious imagination. However, I was determined to welcome the new and overcome any old *déformations professionnelles*.

It did not take much time to realize that it wasn't as easy as that. But not to worry, I will not go into the essential elements of writing craft such as plot, theme, character and setting, or dwell on the various techniques of creative thinking like mind-mapping and storyboarding. Instead,

I would like you to join me on a field trip we undertook in one of our creative writing classes. The purpose of our excursion was to observe and to describe a location in order to get an idea of how to construct a literary setting, i.e. a place, time, and context for a story.

The Volkshochschule resides in the Educational Centre Ostend, a spread-out edifice of obvious functionality. We left this nondescript office block to walk the short distance down to the river Main. I knew that the purpose of this building complex was not primarily to offer Frankfurt citizens better learning opportunities but to push the redevelopment of this run-down neighbourhood. The Ostend, once a densely populated working class district, had begun to suffer from dilapidation when the East Harbour became obsolete as a terminal for bulk goods, and thousands of workers lost their job some decades ago. Frankfurt's advantage of being situated on the river Main, which is part of the trans-European waterway from the North Sea to the Black Sea, was no longer of use in an economy rapidly changing from manufacturing to services.

Thus, Frankfurt's city council decided to

convert the Ostend and its former industrial heart, the East Harbour, into a model neighbourhood for the new Frankfurt. Office buildings, the impressive ECB tower as their flagship, and apartment blocks for the well-to-do middle class have been replacing the numerous dock cranes and freight warehouses, and all that remains of the busy harbour railway is a brewery train offering short pleasure rides along the embankment.

Our goal was a part of the East Harbour that has been turned into a recreation site dominated by a harbour restaurant built on the platform of a defunct dock crane. This juxtaposition makes the crane look like an oversized inn sign ridiculously incongruous with the clear, regular lines of the glass, concrete and wood of the restaurant cube. Past and present do not always go well together.

All this was going through my mind on our short walk from the Volkshochschule down to the strip of newly landscaped harbour park that still bears the original names of Weseler Werft and Ruhrorter Werft. In German the word *Werft* has a double mea-

ning: It can mean both shipyard and wharf. Ships have never been built in Frankfurt. The harbour park was the pier where the barges coming in from the Ruhr district's inland harbours Wesel and Ruhrort unloaded their cargo of coal and steel until the demand went down in the 1960s.

Having reached the harbour park, we gathered around our tutor. “I'd like you to observe the location and take notes of what you see; close your eyes and direct your attention on what you hear and smell. Put your impressions down as precisely and objectively as you can. Avoid any subjective remark,” she explained the assignment. “Then narrow your vision by looking through a rectangular frame formed with your hands and, finally, imagine how the site would look if one of its essential details wasn't there.”

Reading my notes later at home, I became aware of how little I had kept my thoughts on the task. Already during the short walk down to the harbour park, my mind had strayed into this neighbourhood that is striving so hard to erase its past. Of course, I know that sticking to the point

has a lot to it. If you want others to see a location with your eyes, you need to concentrate your description on the relevant details and depict its features as precisely and objectively as possible. However, I think even the most accomplished realistic description can improve by setting it in its spatial and historical context.

These thoughts accompanied me while I was peering through my handmade frame to block out the spatial context of the harbour park. The result was stunning. Suddenly the location was no longer a reference, it could be situated everywhere and was drifting aimlessly around like a floating island. And when I looked at the harbour park restaurant imagining how the place would look if the restaurant weren't there, I thought of the famous photo of Joseph Stalin with

(and without) the "Vanishing Commissar". After the leader of the Soviet secret service was executed in 1940, his image was removed from an official press picture that showed him with Stalin. The people knew Stalin's photo was a fake because they knew its historical context.

Yet, I don't want to part from you with this bleak reminiscence. Here's an uplifting example. Right opposite of the East Harbour, on the other side of the river Main, you find the Städel, Frankfurt's renowned art museum. It owns an impressive collection of famous paintings from seven centuries, among them a fine collection of Dutch Realists. I love these 17th century paintings. Though they are precise and objective landscape representations picturing the rural life as it was, to today's observer, they appear as a peaceful and tranquil idyll.



Ewa Bechtold

## Writer's Block

It is a joy to cry. How ridiculous to think that one could only enjoy laughing or drinking or watching comedies! She cannot stop her tears, wondering whether it is possible to shed all of the body's water, so that, eventually, she will end up like one of the dried plums she likes to eat for breakfast. The floor is covered with white Kleenex: white water lilies full in their blossom, floating on the surface of the blue carpet. The whole living room resembles a still life painted by a modern artist: her clothes carelessly thrown over the chairs, piles of books on the sofa, a glass filled with red, an expensive Merlot, only yesterday. When the message arrived at the office a few hours ago, she did not shed a single tear. She only covered her face with her hands while everybody else was crying. But now tears are flowing down her cheeks and she is

enjoying them, just as she is enjoying the chaos in her flat, the chaos in her life and the fact that he is dead.

She had killed him every morning. Mostly before she got up, with her eyes closed, so she could see everything. She had shot him. She had stabbed him with a letter opener. She had tampered with the brakes of his Mercedes. Sometimes she had hired a killer. A Russian; she insisted upon it. She had heard that they were good at killing. Sometimes her colleagues had done it. All of them had a motive: the associates, the partners, his secretary. His wife had done it more often. She had every reason and every opportunity to do it. To sauté some mushrooms. To smother him with a pillow while he was sleeping. To add some poisonous substance to his wine. Perhaps to just throw a heavy coffee mug at his head.

She would get away with manslaughter. Now and then a lover had killed him. He must have had a lover, and she could bet that it was a very jealous one.

And now he was dead, and nobody but he was responsible for it. He had done it in his very own way: he always wanted to come first, whether on the airplane (he had to sit in the first row on the aisle seat!), or in the line for the buffet at a reception, or for the counter at the airport. This time it was a country road. He had tried to overtake a car, and it was too late when he saw a lorry coming towards his convertible.

She stops crying. There is no joy anymore. There is no justice: no murder, no scandal, no mafia. No Greek tragedy, just death, mundane death. And tomorrow she will not be able to write a crime story in her head.



Dorothee Hoffmann

## Who My Neighbors Are

I rarely meet them. To tell you the exact number of neighbors I have, I'd have to try and count the apartments in the house: there are 10 apartments – so I've got at least 9 neighbors, but there must be more, because I know that there are two or more people living in some of the apartments.

Let me start on the ground floor. Actually, I'd prefer to omit it, because I feel so ashamed for the two "ladies" in the flat on the left. When my mother or my friends visit me, I always send prayers into the universe that these creatures keep their door shut while we are in the corridor, even before the day when a fulminating burp sounded through the walls.

They are the female version of "Dick und Doof". Both between 50 and 60, one of them fat, the other one skinny, both with oily spaghetti on their heads instead of hair (in one case an artificial yellow, in the other case in the color of suburban asphalt). There is a sticker on their door: a little black guitar with the inscription "Rock Star". Every time I pass this door, I imagine these two figures riding a Harley or jumping on a stage, overwhelming Bruce Springsteen with kisses.

When their door is open, their apartment smell invades the whole building like invisible fog, settling for hours. I can't imagine what a human being has to do to create such an olfactory event. The memento of hundreds and thousands of cabbage soups, cigarettes, clogged toilets, humans' and dogs' farts and armpits must have been smoldering in this flat. The third inhabitant of this cavern is a huge Berner Sennenhund, nearly as fat as his mistress. I feel really sorry for him because his name is Schnuffel. What must it be like to be a Berner Sennenhund and to walk around as "Schnuffel"?

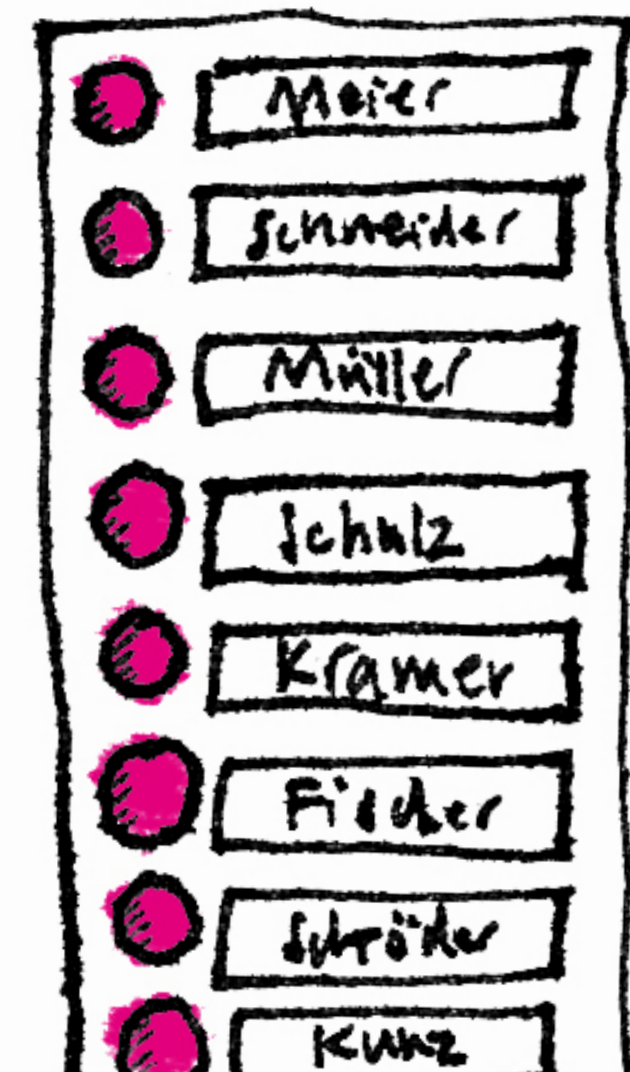
It would be unfair to conceal that all three of them are lovely. When there are no witnesses, I almost enjoy talking to them because they are unique, exotic and good-natured. I don't know their name or their profession and I prefer not to know – so I can always say with quiet conscience that I do not know these cohabitants which might give a strange impression of the house I live in.

As far as I know, the ground-floor ladies are the only ones of this kind and quality. The others must be like me: invisible, inaudible, unsmellable.

*Postscript:*

*One of the ladies (the skinny yellow one) died in an apartment fire in February 2011.*

*The flat was renovated and sold, and I miss the little black "Rock Star" guitar on the door every time I come to Frankfurt for the weekend.*



Kolmi Sand

## Repetitions (Here Before)

*once I had a child  
he was wilder than moonlight  
he could do it all  
like he'd been here before*

One two three, I count as the keys unlock the door, before it opens slowly, squeaking tiredly. I don't have to be here in persona to predict what is coming now. It is all set, it all follows the script that was written before I was born, and we hold on to it, as if it wasn't 17 years since I left home, as if I haven't become a woman of 34 years now. Holding on to the script, we manipulate time, have the power to stop it from passing. We keep running in circles. Time warps. I can't find the exit. Crossing the Jordan river once a week.

Now my mother steps out of the dark, out of her foyer with its last-four-decades smell that takes my breath and brains away every time I get here. Then she grasps my arm, violently, tears me in. She turns around, a deft spider, the keys jingling in her arachnoid hands, and: one two three, we're locked in again. Like the witch in Hänsel and Gretel, she is fat-checking me, she pinches

my arm to feel if it is thick enough now, to see if I'm finally ripe to be cooked. That, at least, is my interpretation of what she does. Maybe it's just her way of showing affection.

People keep wondering whether I was suffering from a terminal illness or from anorexia nervosa only. I am skinny. I don't want my mother to keep me hostage in her house for more than one afternoon a week, so I don't beef up, I don't put on weight, not even as much as a grain of dust. I never did. I was never wilder than moonlight, either.

My hands get clammy, my stomach cramps when I enter the house. I have been here before. Since I left my mother's house for good, I keep praying to never go back again. Since I left my mother's house for good, I keep coming back every Saturday afternoon for my eternal Saturday-pancake diet. Since I left my mother's house, my daughter spends her Saturday afternoons without me, and she is more than happy about it. (At least I managed to get pregnant the first and only time I had sex directly after leaving my mother's house!)

Once I sit down in the kitchen – a dim room

void of daylight, totally seventies, orange kitchen unit, olive Formica surfaces, time worn wallpapers in psychedelic patterns, all covered with a greasy film of time and resignation and the fug of standstill – it is just a matter of seconds and I'm fully back. 17 years undone, a dream, a big mistake. Here I am, the little girl, the daughter, in the role of my life.

There is a yellowed photograph on the cupboard, showing me and my Mum at the seaside, laughing. I look away and concentrate on the smell of melted butter I know by heart, the sound of the crackling eggshell, one, two, three in a quick sequence, bear in mind the fizzling noises as my Mum pours the dough into the hot black, rarely cleaned iron pan. I hate pancakes. I try to withstand the impulse of taking the nail-scissors out of my clutch and cut my hair. The skin on my knuckles is about to rip, but I resist.

"How was school today?" my Mum asks. I hate going there. Slender and hollow with bloodshot eyes as I spend my nights reading books, I'm not very popular in Martha Mount School. "It was ok," I say without looking at her, my head bent down

on the table. I know they keep teasing me because of her, because they think she is weird. I think so too. But instead of helping me out of the cobweb my mother nets me in, and of which I fervently want to escape from, they banter me back into her insect arms. She never wants me to leave the house. I'm never allowed to see friends, so, as a result, I don't have any. There is so much insanity out there, she used to say, until I stopped asking for permission.

Instead I found a place in here, an inner world to dive into, where a wild sister of mine would be waiting for me. She'd show me funny things I could do to get away. She showed me how to cut my arm, so a beautiful pattern of small red stripes becomes visible. She showed me how to swallow pills my mother kept in her desk that made me all calm and dozy. She showed me how to use scissors.

"What the hell did you do with your hair?", my mother suddenly yells, sensing that something is wrong. My hair was the only striking trait in my appearance, thick and copper-red. As my skin is milk and moonlight, my classmates would nickname me



"matches", though not in a friendly way. Today I couldn't resist my sister's idea of doing something unsound, of inflicting damage on myself again.

"You want to look like Angelina Jolie?" she asks. "Then go for it". She hands me the nail-scissors and starts snipping my hair. Criss-cross, leaving a heap of rusty wool on the floor and a helmet of hair that looks like dried blood on my head. The bangs look particularly insane as they start right at the scalp. "Just like Angelina," my sister whispers. "Girl, Interrupted" was one of her first movies and she really looks like a lunatic. So do I. What I learned at school today? Spiders do have a heart but it lies in its back.

*once I had a child  
she was smiling like sunshine  
she could see it all  
like she'd been here before*

I don't remember how I got back home, but when I arrive, I only see my daughter's copper-haired head from behind as she rushes to the car. She is skinny, maybe anorectic, a 17-year old bookworm and

always eager to get out of my way. I don't get it. Her aloofness. We used to be so close together, when did she start to kick me out of her life?

We had spent summer after summer at the sea, only Jolene and me. It wasn't Myrtle Beach for sure, and it was off season, northern summer, yes, so what? She wouldn't have endured the heat, with her moon-skin. It still cost me a fortune, and if there was no sunshine she was smiling like sunshine – and now she is reluctant to even say hello? I had hoped to have her over for tea and pancakes. Every child loves pancakes, don't they?

I sit down at the kitchen table and stare at the picture we took with self-timer some years ago: Jolene and I laughing.

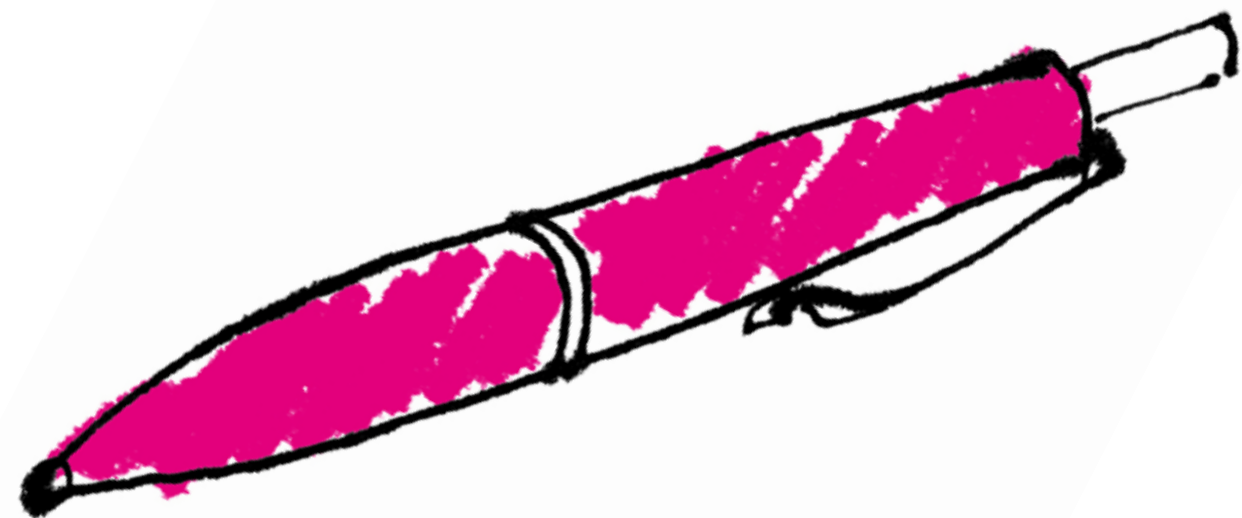
"How was school today?" I ask when she comes back for the car keys. She gapes at me without seeing me. Then she turns away and continues mumbling as if she were talking to somebody. There is no one. There is a knife, a pillow-box and nail-scissors on the counter.

Somehow she looks different today, but I can't tell why at first. She's got the same pale

complexion as I do, and just like mine, her hair is of that kind of red that, once touched by the sun, includes every existing color. She isn't beautiful but people can't take their eyes from her. Then I realize: today my daughter looks like Angelina Jolie, a lunatic in "Girl, Interrupted", with bangs the length of a fingertip, leaving the forehead all naked. I watch her drive away from the window. Then I take the keys out of my pocket, go to the door and turn them around in the lock. One two three.

*then I had a child  
took his while like northern summer  
and he knows it all  
like he's been here before  
(Vashti Bunyan)*





Katharina Hepp

## Afflatus

She had first noticed it a few weeks before. A fluttering, the faint echo of its movements, like a whisper she couldn't comprehend. It was unnerving, her thoughts were muddled and she seemed unable to concentrate. After a while it nestled into a corner. She was unaware that she was nurturing it, and day by day it grew, hidden between the folds.

Then the attacks started, sudden, blinding jolts leaving her mind reeling, her eyes blinking in surprise. She felt as if she'd had a glimpse of something from the corner of her eye, but it disappeared as soon as she tried to focus. It was both exciting and frustrating. The flashes became longer, more pronounced every time, only to disappear again for hours, days, weeks. The anticipation made her restless, the wait was agonizing. She never knew

when it would hit her. But by now she was prepared, she thought. As soon as it raised its head again she would pin it down, and that would be the end of it.

Yet nothing could have prepared her for what was to come, one early morning, between sleep and awake. First so subtle, she almost slipped back into a dream.

But the tugging she felt was familiar, and as her mind grew ever more alert she could do nothing but succumb to the now overwhelming sensation unfolding from the depths.

Afterwards she felt almost delirious. Elated and giddy, like a child knowing it is about to open the most wonderful present. When she was finally able to move again, she grabbed pen and paper from her nightstand and started to write. She couldn't stop. Everything was so clear now.



Helen Weetman

## The Face of Another

*In the first taxi he was alone tra-la,  
No extras on the clock.  
He tipped ninepence  
But the cabby, while he thanked him,  
looked askance  
As though to suggest someone had bummed  
a ride.  
(Louis MacNeice - "The Taxis")*

I've always liked that phrase, to 'look askance' at somebody. It's hard to define — in fact, when I try to do so, I find myself resorting to another phrase, similarly pleasing but similarly opaque: to give someone a 'sidelong glance'. Both phrases have a distinct sense that is difficult to capture in words — or perhaps I should say not sense but senses, given that they seem to involve both vision (seeing and being seen) and a visceral feeling of uncertainty and distrust. They describe quizzical looks in which the quizzing is often on two sides, on the side of the caster of the look, and on the side of an observer who catches it — whether that observer is the object of the glance or a third party. The observer notices the caster of the glance apparently trying to fathom

something about his object, sizing her up — and in turn attempts to fathom the meaning or message held in the glance. Picture them: the caster of the glance with slightly hooded eyes and an impassive, detached look, veiling his thoughts and intentions as he tries to penetrate those of his object, while at the same time, like MacNeice's cabbie, he seems to be trying to pass a message underhand (if only the intended recipient, or you the observer, were astute enough to grasp and decipher it). The object of the gaze, in contrast, is taken slightly off guard, eyes widening a little, inclined (but resisting the urge) to lean back slightly as if to try to field a ball that has been lobbed unexpectedly in her direction. The whole has the vertiginous sensation of a *mise en abyme*: 'I know that you know.' 'I know that you know that I know.' 'I know that you know that I know that you know.' Yet the core, the first 'I know', is left forever unspoken, uncertain and thus unfixed. Asked to describe my own face, I realize that I can only look at it askance. Over-familiarity is one of the problems here. Just as it's impossible to recapture the sound

of a language before you understood the words, the face you wear day in, day out becomes something you may look at but never quite see. The person wearing the face may thus be the person least qualified to describe it. Looking directly in the mirror my eyes slide from my features, and that I can describe them at all — longish chin, small mouth, upturned nose — is because I have already observed them at one remove in my brother and my cousins (and yet, mysteriously, not in my mother nor in photographs of my maternal grandparents, whose features must somehow have combined to create this common face of ours). I thus glance sidelong at myself in shop windows or in photographs, attempting to fathom the face that is presenting itself to the world when I'm not looking, but it's hard to catch that face un-awares. Or, perhaps I should say — when I try to look at my own face, I find it looking askance at me.

There is a repeated shock of finding that it does not look like me at all, or at least, like the person that I've projected onto it from the inside. At the same time, I have

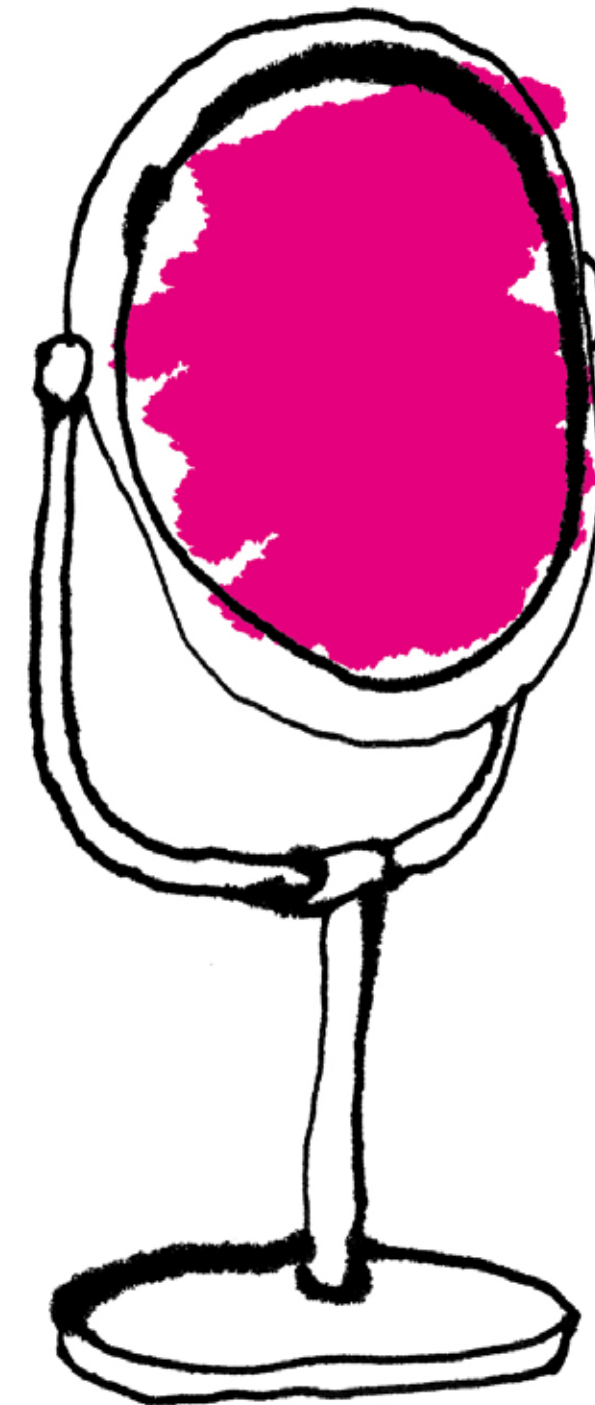
to accept that this is, to all intents and purposes, me, and that there 'I' am, looking back. You're not me! I'm not you! It doesn't help to realize that if it came to a suit in which we fought for the rights to this identity, the world at large would no doubt back the face (having known it for years) rather than me (who?).

Usually I find it better to avoid such confrontation. In a bar or restaurant with mirrored walls, I'll try and position myself directly in line with the person opposite, replacing my reflection with the back of their head and shoulders, hiding in front of them; and should my barrier suddenly shift sideways or go off to the bathroom, it's as if an acquaintance from years ago whom I shook off and have long been avoiding has popped up again and — worse — greets me as a long lost friend, clings to me for the rest of the evening, and upsets my sense of place in the company as I worry about what people will think of me for introducing such a character, for having such a friend. If the face could tell you her side of the story, of course, she'd say she was there from the start, and that it was me

who barged in.

To tell the truth, though, there is another side to the relationship, in places where we meet on equal ground. When we're at home we live in a comfortable symbiosis, neither of us inclined to upset the status quo. The face might not be all I'd like her to be, and she no doubt sees shortcomings in me as well; and yet when it's just the two of us, in private, it's clear that we do pretty well together. Or, when we go to the hairdresser, and we find ourselves in the position of perfect strangers. Then, like people sitting opposite one another in too close quarters

on a train in a long tunnel with nothing to look at outside the window, our eyes slide here and there to avoid at all costs catching each other's gaze. At some point the hairdresser wanders off, leaving us in the absurd position of half-shorn heads sticking out of dark canvas cones; and as when the train grinds to a halt for no reason, or an unusually strange announcement comes across the loudspeakers, then and only then do we let our eyes meet, and those eyes, crinkling slightly at the corners, communicate our mutual amusement at our shared plight.





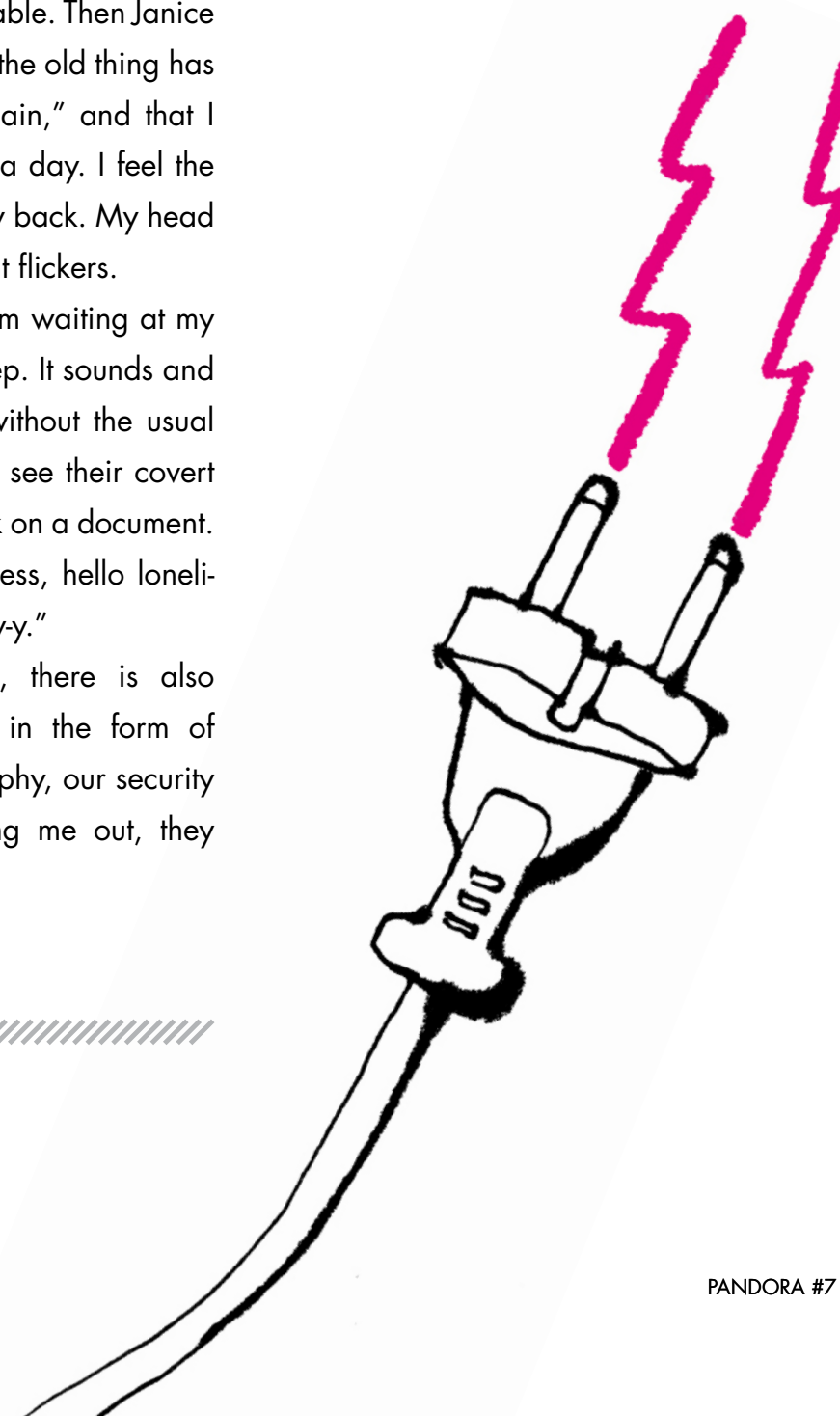
Jürgen Kruse

## Shift

"Don't worry, you'll get accustomed to it. There's no more noise in our new office environment than in your old cubicle. Anyway, John, the noise level is far below any possible health risk, and think of how often you complained about being cut off and forgotten and all that," our company doctor said when I saw him last week. At least Dr Brewster told the office manager to move my desk from the centre of our open-plan office to the Bermuda Triangle, that's the corner where some overstuffed filing cabinets wait for their disposal. But even here, far from the maddening crowd, I'm not safe. Yesterday, the new air condition hummed the whole afternoon without anybody paying heed to its enervating monotonous tone. Today, it's the copy machine on the other side where the loss adjusters sit. The monster is churning out copy after copy, announcing each one by a loud cli-

cking rap-tap and a bluish-green flash. I can't remember when it started. It must have been going on for some time now. As nobody seems to care, I walk over to silence the pestering devil. Some smile, others frown when I pass their desks. Someone shouts, "Keep the vow of silence, brothers and sisters, John the Trappist is on his beat again." Unperturbed, I nod into the subdued laughter and press the red button. Nothing happens. I pull the plug. No reaction. I walk back to my desk to call the office technician. He says he can't do anything about it; it's just the way these devices work. He gives me the number of the hotline. They put me through from one expert to the next. At first, I have to listen to someone pretending not to understand me, then to a soothing voice reminding me of my next therapy date, a third one tells me the real problem is that nobody cares anymore, and the

last one starts shouting before he hangs up. I walk again to the Xerox to ask the colleagues sitting next to it if they know how to stop it. They look uncomfortable. Then Janice says, "Why, let's be happy the old thing has finally decided to work again," and that I shouldn't worry and call it a day. I feel the eyes of my colleagues in my back. My head begins to throb; my eyesight flickers. The rest of the afternoon, I'm waiting at my desk for the five-o'clock beep. It sounds and my colleagues sneak out without the usual commotion. I don't want to see their covert glances so I pretend to work on a document. I type in, "Bye bye happiness, hello loneliness, I think I'm-a gonna cry-y." But where there is harm, there is also salvation. There it comes in the form of Dr Brewster with Barry Murphy, our security officer, at his side. Leading me out, they smile reassuringly.



Helene Lebold

## November Blues

"We'll definitely have to cut down on wood," I said to the Managing Director, Mr. Devil himself, you know, the one with the horse shoe on his left, well, hoof. "If we don't cut down on wood, Hell will be pretty cold in December, and as far as I understand, we want it very warm, even hot here, especially during the so called, well, holy days."

Mr. Devil raised his left eyebrow. "You've been doing very well so far, you learn quickly. We've made a good choice in accepting you as my assistant trainee. You've got a great career ahead of you." He paused, watching me intensely. "Please, be honest, is this idea of cutting down on wood based on a wish to give those poor souls suffering in the heat a chance to recover a bit from being roasted all the time? You should know by now, clever as you are, there's no place for pity in Hell, yes?"

I looked at my presentation charts. "Well," I said, "here are the monthly figures. Have a look yourself, Mr. Devil, and see how much wood has been used during the last three months. The average monthly figure is right here. And, please keep in mind we still have

two more months to go before a new supply of wood will be delivered."

"Ah, you're trying to cheat. You'll go straight back to Earth now and prove that your relevant professional qualities are developed to a degree that justifies our promoting your career here in Hell. Remember, concerning your future we've got interesting plans in mind."

While ushering me to the main portal of Hell, he continued to give me instructions to make me understand what he expected me to do. Seconds later I found myself in a classroom, where students were sitting a foreign language examination. I seated myself close to one student who seemed to be fairly intelligent. "You won't do well," I whispered into his left ear. The student stopped writing and looked at something invisible in front of him. "I should have prepared better," I heard him think. "Yes, you didn't do enough," I poured into his mind. He hadn't recommenced writing and kept thinking. "With foreign languages, it's too bad: one day you're relaxed and express yourself fairly well, and then, the next day, whatever you say or write is absolutely mediocre and one



mistake wants the company of another." Surely I had reached my objective: the student started thinking about basic grammatical structures and rewrote words that he had spelt correctly. It felt good having power and using it, though for a moment I became philosophical and wondered why I enjoyed doing such a weird thing. I had indulged in more challenging deceiving manoeuvres during my life on Earth. The student got up now, he obviously felt miserable. A collapsed small angel of self-confidence sat in his place. On his left

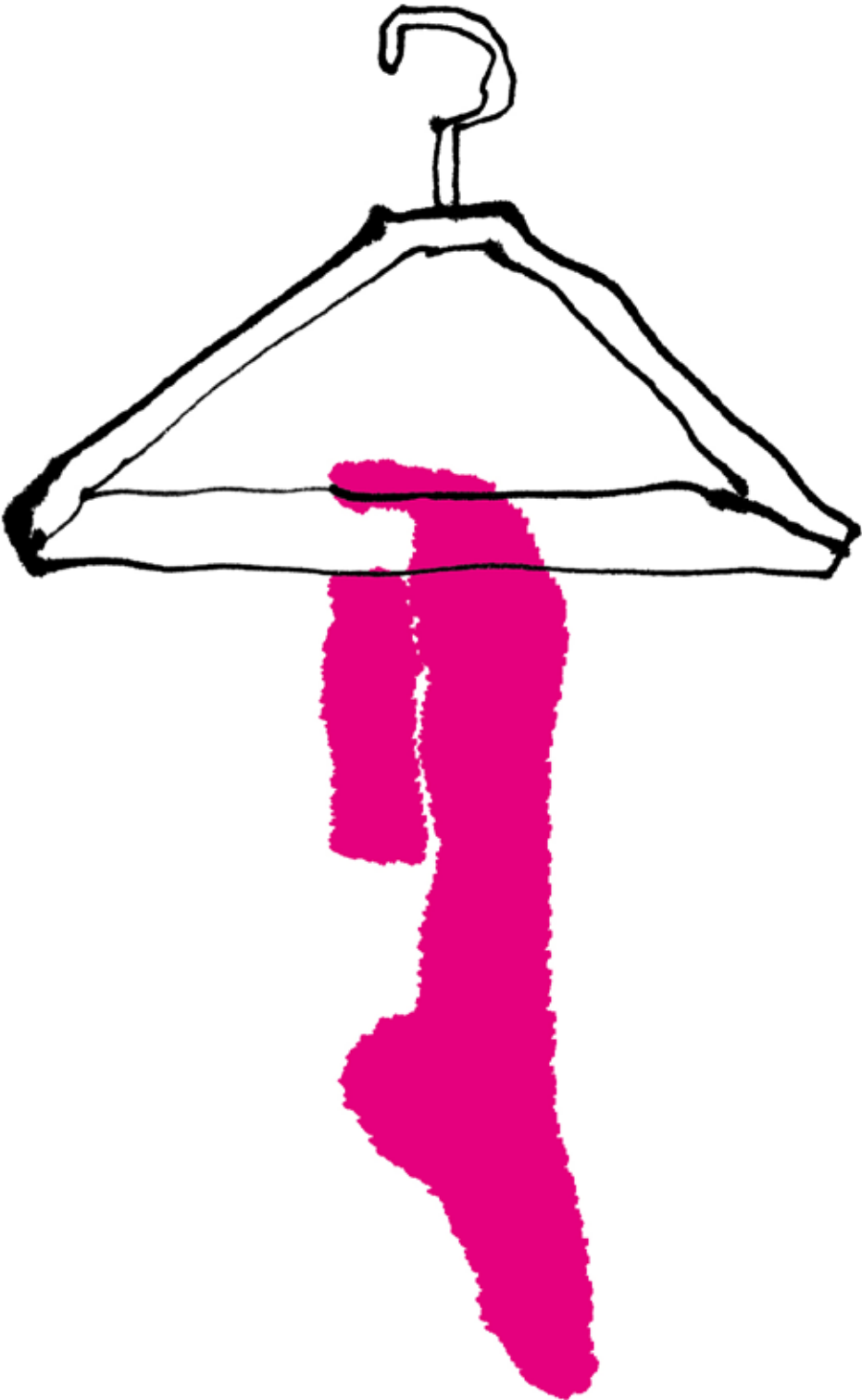
shoulder, the student carried a fat under-devil of self-doubt. Together they left the room.

Somehow I was fed up now. Was there any reason why I should stay on Earth any longer? Not long ago, when it had been time to die, I had opted for Hell. My rheumatism is to be claimed for this. The old joke that in Hell heating is never switched off was decisive for my choice, and then, could things in Hell not be discussed, as well? There it should also be only a question of being clever or not.

Now I wanted to go straight back to Hell. I knocked at the Portal three times, exactly as Mr. Devil had advised me to do. Nothing happened. Maybe I wasn't expected to return so soon and should try again later. It was freezing cold; I therefore walked a bit to and fro, every time a bit faster. After a while I heard jingle-bells coming closer and then recognized a sleigh, pulled by reindeers, with Santa Claus sitting on the coachman's seat. I raised my arm and lifted my thumb. Santa Claus would surely help a freezing hitchhiker, and so he did. "Jump on," a melodic voice said and his face

was exactly as friendly as on the numerous X-mas cards sent around every year. I wasn't even seated, when the sledge moved so rapidly that I fell. This didn't hurt, there were blankets and I felt free to wrap myself into these cozy textiles. There were no presents on the sleigh, which seemed to be natural: it was November and surely Santa Claus was on his way to fetch them. Maybe I could help him a bit and gain some points. I didn't really care, to be honest. I felt warm and safe on this ride and had forgotten about my rheumatism. The tender ringing of the jingle-bells made me feel sleepy and before dozing off I wondered if St. Peter would let me enter once we had arrived at Heaven's door, but why should he not? I dozed off and found myself in some paradise, not that bad, now that I'm thinking about it, lots of sun there, you know, gave me the

idea that sun-rays might cure rheumatism. Then my back started to ache again, and I tried to tuck the blankets closer, but there weren't any, and the smooth swishing of the sledge had turned into a rumple-pumple. I sat up abruptly and saw a landscape of stone, ice and snow around me. A well-known voice behind me chuckled: "Pretty cold, eh? Finished napping?" Before turning, I understood. With a mocking smile Mr. Devil said: "It was you, you yourself, who had opted for Hell, wasn't it? Of course, we haven't forgotten about you. And you were absolutely right, Hell nowadays isn't what you would expect it to be, and now you know for sure." The sleigh moved on, rheumatism and backache drove me near crazy, and the giggle of the jingle bells seemed like a low derisive echo from eternity.



Justine Otte

Wardrobe

Skinny Jeans

Everybody in Chicago seems to be wearing them. A simple chic look tucked into high leather boots. Trying on eight pairs from three different stores with zero coming close to clearing my hips is discouraging. My sister works at Bloomingdales. This was the final attempt. She peaked her head in the dressing room as the jeans wiggled their way up. "You don't look like you would need that big of a size, really."

Christmas Dress

Teachers are usually festive. They wear brooches and sweaters that come out once or twice a year for a holiday. Teachers wear them and blend in with the decorations on the wall in their classrooms. There is no holiday-based rotation in my wardrobe. Well, there wasn't. Now hanging proudly and boldly between the blacks, purples, and greys is a bright red dress that can only be appropriate in December. It is a bit

too short and a bit too tight, but it is the holidays! Surprised expressions seemed to fill the hall as my colleagues passed by me. Is it my festive attire... or is it too much leg?

Tailored Shirt

A package arrived from Poland about three weeks after our visit to Marek's new store. He practiced measuring on me. He promised me a blouse that did not pop open at the button over my chest or hang baggy visually expanding my waistline. He promised a blouse made for me. The package delivered these promises. The perfectly fitting shirt is complimented by shiny cufflinks that draw your eye to my initials embroidered on the left cuff. Never has a button down blouse brought me such confidence.

Black High Heels

Black high heels stand at attention waiting for their turn. The rich scent of leather blasts out

of the shoebox at the store. The heels plunge in a perfectly thin, feminine line from the heel to the floor. The toes are adorned with a bit of extra leather designed in a way that separates these shoes from the ones you see everyday. Reflecting in the knee-high mirror are some other woman's longer leaner legs. These elegant shoes must come home with me. There is one problem. The heels "clonk" instead of "click". How can anyone walk in these?

Undressing

All alone facing the dresser I remove the first layer of me. The necklace now hangs on the rack, earrings are in the tray, the gold ring rests in the cushioned blue box and my watch is tossed on its side. I pull my sweater over my head and shiver; the apartment is always too cold. The next layer comes off and then the next, piled on top of yesterday's clothes that I am just too tired to hang up. They all lie next to me on the empty side of the bed.



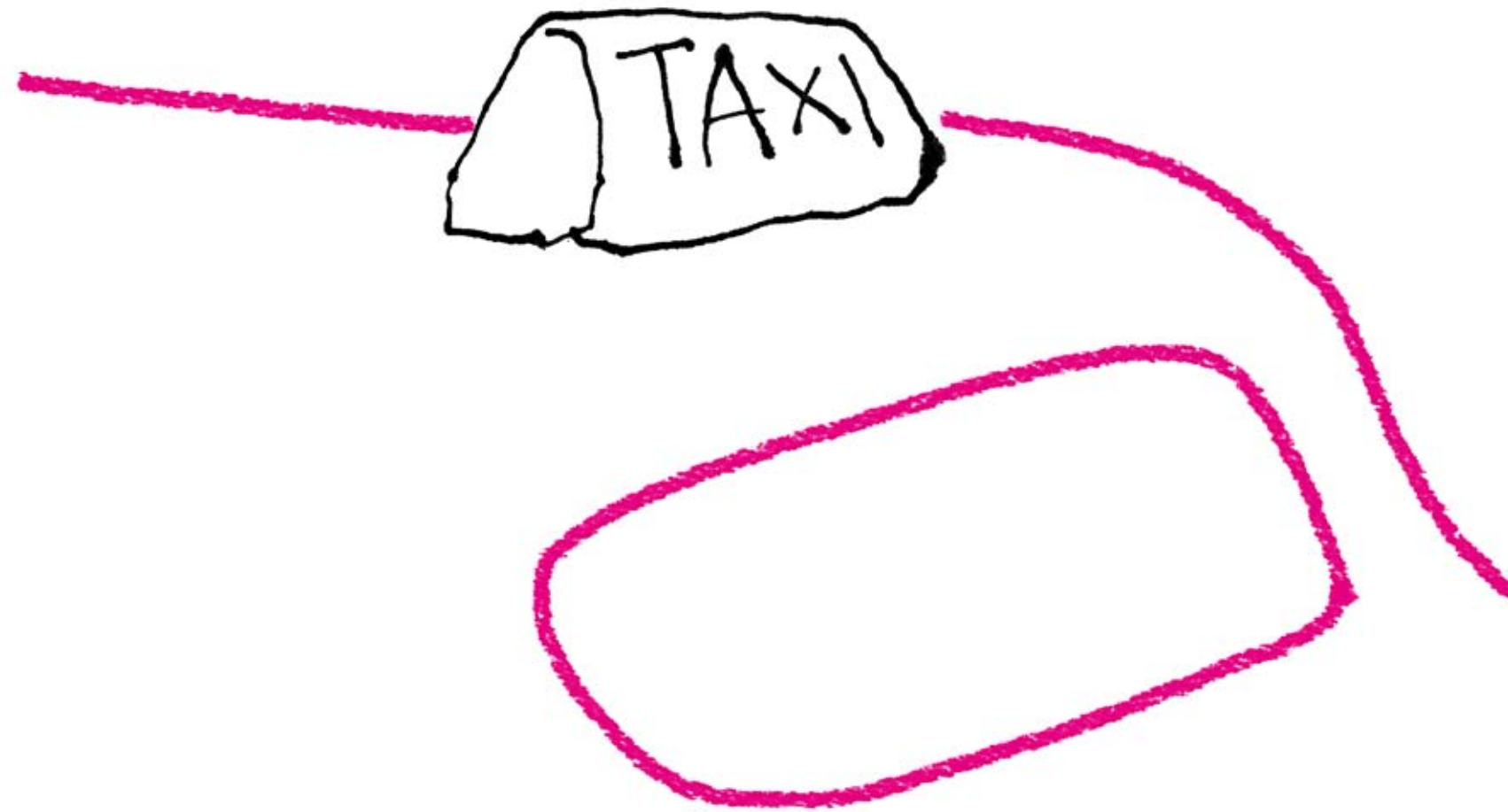


Katharina Hepp

## Street Style

I am walking down the high street, taking a shortcut to get to the office on time, when I see a man heading towards me. He is wearing a beany hat and has a shawl wrapped tightly around the lower half of his red face. His clothes are strewn with sewn-on patches, his pants sag in a rather unflattering way. He sways gently from side to side as he walks, in his hand the stub of a cigar and an immensely cheerful expression on his face. I can smell the stench of cheap wine, stale sweat and smoke just by looking at him. Immediately my avoid-the-crazy-homeless-guy sense kicks in, and I prepare to cross the street at the next possible opening in the traffic. I scan the oncoming cars for an opening and step into the street, when from the corner of my eye I see a flash going off behind me. What's happening?

This is my chance. I check if my camera's ready and slowly edge out of the doorway. I quickly glance up the road to see if I am right – yes, it's him. What took him so bloody long? I've been waiting for an hour, and I've lost count of the times I have casually walked up and down this block today, snapping a few Japanese tourists, they're always good. But these fresh-faced, rainbow-colored sprites have nothing on him. He's a classic. Creative director of the biggest fashion brand this nation has to offer, he just exudes style and personality, man. And that smile, jeez, he's a bit of a smug bastard, isn't he? But then, he has every right to be. Let's just hope I can catch it in high-res before he sees me.



Oh dear, here we go again. Another sneaky little photo-blog-shmuck, they really are everywhere today. Those other two in front of the deli this morning, hell, it's not even Fashion Week! At least they don't expect me to stop and pose for them, really, that'd be the day... These strangers, they usually don't come up to me. If they know the business, sure, they know me, but then they also know that I can be pretty rude if someone over-

steps the boundaries. And if they don't know the business, well... I suppose they fear I'm a homeless freak, that I will smell bad, swear or spit at them – well, they aren't wrong about the swearing part, that's for sure. Like this tight suit ahead who couldn't wait to cross the street so as not to pass me by, that really made me laugh. Although I had to stop that when he was almost run over by a taxi. Bet he could've sued that photographer.

Polina Shestak

## Rumors

The sun was shining the whole week, the snow natural and crisp was falling down every other day and the mountain's hills were sparkling white and smooth. Bright blue sky and gorgeous high pines formed a picturesque landscape. Ivana was briskly walking to the ski slope carrying only a light backpack, as she was going to rent skis and ski boots from the rental house near the lift. Tall and strong, he was easily catching up with her, although his own skis and ski boots added considerable weight to his backpack. It was already one week since she met him and Ivana vividly remembered how difficult it turned out fastening her rented ski boots and how helpful he was when she asked him for help; closing the old cable locked at the moving rear portion of the ski boots forward onto the front half required significant strength. After several futile attempts to fasten her ski boots, Ivana took a short break and looked around. As it was then the first day of her student vacation at the resort, she knew just a few people and nobody from them was around. Then she saw him for the first time, sitting at a nearby table, drinking coffee and speaking to

his friends. He agreed willingly to help Ivana with fastening her ski boots after she asked him, smiling. From this first encounter they happened to see each other and talk every day, either on their way to the slope or while waiting their turn at the lift. Their conversations became more and more personal each time they met. His mother was a professional hairdresser and that explained his very fashionable haircut. He lived in a town that was close to Ivana's. It was perfect skiing weather for a whole week and they were making the most of it. Nobody seemed to notice them as everybody had been busy skiing and having fun also. They were laughing, making small talk and sharing experiences which his friends paid no attention, as he was the type of open-minded guy who talked easily to many different people and this would not imply anything other than just good rapport. It was the biggest ski resort in the area and the road, ski lifts and the slopes were crowded with skiers, mostly students. The long queues at the ski lifts were very much appreciated by both of them, as this meant to them more time to get to know each other. Ivana felt joyous and strong because she was

rapidly falling in love and she was looking forward to the second week of her vacation in the mountains.

At 22:30, at the end of the first week of the students' ski vacation, the music in the students' hostel bar was turned up, as usual, in order to attract students to come to the regular dancing party. The dancing floor opened, like every other night, with the "Boney M. Megamix" single. This was a sure way to fill in the empty dance floor with students. Within seconds the place was filled with energized and happy young people that were keen on dancing even after skiing the whole day. In the middle of the "Boney M. Megamix" Ivana looked at him admiringly because he was really a good dancer. He knew popular dance moves and was confident enough to attract attention with his dancing. Ivana loved to dance, too. At twenty, Ivana looked fabulous in her white ruffled blouse she had bought especially for the occasion and black jeans, perfectly fitting her nice straight legs. At some point the place became very crowded, so he put his arms around her tiny waist and lifted her onto

his shoulders. She had the feeling he was saying to everybody around them, "that's my girl." It felt nice that he went on dancing with ease, as usual, with her sitting on his shoulders through the whole next song. In the early morning hours they left the students' bar, hugging each other tightly. He kissed her many times at the door of her room and left saying he was looking forward to seeing her at breakfast.

The same morning, just after Ivana got out of her bed, she heard his knock at the door. As soon as she opened the door, she knew something was very wrong. Still, she tried to smile, looking for his eyes. Strangely, he did not respond. He was awkwardly standing in the door with his luggage and ski equipment in his hands. No kiss, no hug, no eye contact. He said he was leaving in an hour. No explanation, just silence... The next moment he turned around, his head sank in his shoulders, and silently, unhappily he walked away.

Just a few hours ago both of them had been making plans for the following week. Suddenly he was leaving without explanation. Ivana felt deeply hurt. He left no

address of his nor his phone number and he did not ask for hers. It was still that time when ordinary people did not have mobile phones. The only telephone at the students' hostel was in the room of the hostel's manager. None of what was happening made any sense at all except that there was a pattern emerging. Ivana could not believe that this was happening to her again, just another time, another place, another man, but the same sudden and without a word disappearance from her life. There was a pattern of abrupt endings each time Ivana was about to start a relationship with a man who clearly liked her. It was always a sudden, silent and unexplained departure of her love interest, who always looked unhappy to leave, but obliged to.

At 22:30 the same day the volume of the music from the students' bar downstairs went up again, as usual, but the song "Vision of Love," by Mariah Carey, was playing,

a very unusual choice for an opening hit on the dance floor. Although Ivana had no intention to pretend that nothing had happened, she only had one week of vacation left, so she decided to join the others instead of staying alone in her large and empty room. Before going downstairs to the bar, Ivana opened the window and took in a few deep breaths of the already familiar smell of pine trees and crisp mountain air. Then she closed the window, put on her black jeans, nice blouse, lots of black mascara on her lashes, bright lipstick on her lips, and joined the other students.

Eighteen years later Ivana learned that somebody was continuously paying money and giving favors to a lot of people to spread false but influential rumors about her and her family. Then she started seeking an answer to the question, "What does a person need in order to trust his own judgment and feelings, and to ignore rumors?"



MP Olinger

## The Bull's Dream



The young bull tore through the springtime's high green grass with his gang; stopping for a moment, he heard the van rumbling. Dusty clouds rolled towards his valley. When the dust had settled the young bull, bred to fight, stood watchfully. Despite enjoying the salty air of the coast nearby, he smelled danger. He saw the humans stepping out of the van. Chasing the bulls, the herd stormed off in all directions. Finally, they caught the young bull. Hurling him into the van the bull, looking at the blue sky, sniffed the salty air.

After a few hours drive the young bull found his new home to be a ranch with other fighting bulls to keep him company. As the months passed he adjusted to his new situation. He didn't have his freedom, but he had made new friends. He was fed and looked after. Enjoying the company of others made the narrow stable walls bearable. Yet he continued to dream about high grass brushing against his flanks, smelling the salty air and tasting the bitter aroma of greens. He kept dreaming about home, his green valley.

One evening at the end of September, as the sun had left the land in a soft red glow, two

humans who had looked after him all of these months guided him out of his stable. The van was waiting. His heart leaped. Expectantly he entered the van. Home, he thought. But the men only drove a mile around the corner. As he stepped out of the van, he followed the men through a dark, narrow tunnel. He liked these men. They had looked after him. He trusted them as they now guided him through the Puerta Grande out into an arena. He stepped through the gate. The Fiesta National, bullfighting, was in full swing. The air shivered with excitement. The cheering crowd clapped as he entered the bullring.

Instantly picador lancers on horseback dodged around him. The young bull was confused. He couldn't understand why they inserted barbed darts into his back. His muscles quivered. He tried to shake the red and green darts off, but they only wedged deeper into his back. Then the whole of the quadrille danced around him. The crowd cheered as the picadors rammed the darts deeper into his tender flanks. Fear grabbed the insides of the young bull. The knots tightened. He couldn't breathe. With each breath the spears trembled painfully. With

each added banderilla, with each wound to his tender flanks, his fear grew. Longingly he looked at the blue sky. The wind caressed his battered flanks. Time passed. More spears. More darts. Under the biting sun, dust and pain blurring his vision, the young bull stumbled. Finally, the matador, dressed to kill, entered the arena. The crowd clapped and cheered the man on. The bull locked eyes with the flamboyant man dressed in red and gold, and a new dance began. The crowd kept cheering. Heat waves pounced on the bull's back and through the arena. Sound waves rolled against his eardrums. The bull ignored the cheering crowd. He felt alive with fear and anger, and fighting for his life, the young bull kept hoping. More darts. More pain. While his blood trickled hot, matting the sides of his neck and flanks, the bull charged once more, yet his curved horns only grazed the matador. With each new barbed dagger struck deep into his flanks, the bull fought for his dream. He fought to see his green valley again. He fought to sniff the salty air again. And while he shook blood and sand out of his burning eyes, the matador stood tall, his back straight, yet curved, and with a swift

single sword thrust, he stabbed the bull in one elegant movement through the middle of its beating heart. The dagger cut through memories of green pastures. While the bull's spirit left the arena, the matador cut off a piece of the bull's soft, still quivering, right ear. As the matador held this trophy high in the air, the jubilant crowd gave him thunderous ovations.

While the young bull's body lay bleeding, his dreams seeping deep into earth, the satisfied audience headed home. Round the corner, the central station opened its dark curved doors. Waiting for the happy-chattering crowd, the trains stood silent. The trains stood breathing. The doors opened. Like giant alligators, one by one, they swallowed the satisfied crowd.





Ellen Willson Hoover

## Johnny's Got a Job to Do

As the plane took off, I felt myself drifting into the atmosphere, and behind my closed eyes, I saw only black. The day had been long already and it was feckin' massive to think, see and do absolutely nothing.

Then I felt a tug on my left arm. I remained still but cracked an eyelid at the woman sitting next to me, then quickly shut it. Maybe if I ignore her she'll think I'm asleep. Tug, tug, came the reply. I opened both eyes this time and found a set of green eyes staring into mine.

"I know I'm supposed to keep this a secret," the woman said, "but I have to tell someone." I sat still and stared back at her. Seems she was expecting me to ask for further detail. I said nothing.

Thankfully, she leaned back into her seat and I exhaled. I had been holding my breath since the first tug on my arm. Jaysus, just my luck to be sitting next to a madwoman on this, of all days. As I steadied my breath, she ran her hand through her hair and I couldn't help glancing over. This madwoman was gorgeous.

"Are you traveling to Belfast on business?"

she asked. The idea of that made me snort. "Uh, no, Belfast doesn't have much business going on these days except for Orange bastards marching around."

"Yes, that's true," she nodded. "Are you visiting family then?"

Ah, damn, should've kept my eyes closed.

"Yes, I'm seeing family. My granny died and her funeral is tomorrow."

"What a shame. I'm sorry," she said and she looked at me like she actually meant it.

"Please get back to your nap... I'm sure you'll need a lot of rest to prepare for everything." She squeezed my shoulder and then opened the book that had been sitting on her lap. I closed my eyes again but instead of black, I was seeing flickers of red and gold and I started wondering what she was reading. Ever so carefully, I lifted my left lid to get a peek as she read "I'm OK, You're OK." Naturally, what a pointless piece of shite she's reading. I slammed my eyes shut and slept.

"Does your husband want chicken or pasta?" the stewardess bellowed across the aisle. I felt another tug on my arm. "Darling, do you want chicken or pasta?" my green-eyed

neighbor cooed. I looked over to the stewardess and back to the green-eyed monster next to me. "Sir! Do you want chicken or pasta?" the stewardess barked. "Chicken, please," was all I could manage.

All around me I heard the sound of passengers peeling back the foil on their meals while mine remained untouched, sitting on the pull-out tray. Avoiding any eye contact with my neighbour, I stared ahead while my peripheral vision noted she was buttering a roll and then taking dainty bites.

"Darling, aren't you going to eat?" the green eyes fluttered in my direction. "Are you ill?" and she put a palm on my forehead. "No, I'm fine," I remained frozen until she lifted her palm and her hand floated down to her side.

"The name of the game is to stay cool, Johnny," Eamonn's words echoed in my head. "Whatever you do, don't call attention to yourself. Have yourself a nice meal and a drink, then get yer sleep. You're going to be a busy lad tomorrow."

After the trays were cleared, I felt a hand on my knee, and it wasn't my hand either. I turned to my left and there she was beaming at me

like a Christmas tree. I reached for it and squeezed. Hard. In a low tone I growled: "Look, you're a lovely one, but please stop. I don't know you and you don't know me. Let's leave it at that." I imagine my look was something fierce. I released her hand just as tears started welling in her eyes. "Ah, sweet Jaysus," I muttered and pulled out my handkerchief and handed it over. She hesitated and then her shaking hand snatched it and she dabbed her eyes.

The feckin' stewardess was at it again with her cart, offering another round of drinks. Leaning over, she eyed the green-eyed one snuffling next to me. "Ma'am, are you all right?" she asked before glaring over at me. "Oh, I'll be just fine," she replied with an agonized smile. The stewardess poured her a glass of Chablis and slowly moved her cart away, eyeing me the whole time. I wasn't offered another drink. Guess I deserved that. The one next to me kept a full-on opera of sniffs, gulps and sobs. I had to do something to shut her up. "Look here, darling, I'm sorry," I offered. She glanced over and then tossed her head in the other direction. "I'm just upset

about my Granny dying and all but I shouldn't have taken it out on you." I sounded like a complete eejit. The sniffles slowed down but I needed another tack: I tried on a smile and decided to use it.

"So what's your name? Mine's Johnny... I know we got off to a bad start but maybe we can sit here and have a better conversation." I was grinning like a muppet at this point. The snuffling one looked up and regarded me like I was something she found on the bottom of her shoe. "I'm Madeleine," she said, sticking her chin up a bit.

"Well, hello, Madeleine. I'm glad we're properly introduced. Sorry for being such an arse."

"You're worse than an arse, but I'm fine now. Stop apologizing."

We sat in silence for a moment and I ransacked my brain for something to talk about.

"Hey, you were going to tell me something earlier on, remember? Something you said was a secret, right?"

Slowly a smile spread across her face. Bingo! I was back on safe ground. "Well, I can't tell you now," she said with a mock-haughty shrug of the shoulders. "You don't

deserve to know my secrets. At least not yet."

"Well then, tell me what's bringing you to Belfast. Business?" I smirked.

"As a matter of fact, yes, I am returning to business," she said as the haughtiness crept up a notch. "Well, well, well. So what do you do?"

"I'm attached to the U.S. Consulate, processing visas and such."

"Sounds a bit boring for a beauty like you."

"Not really, I quite like it actually."

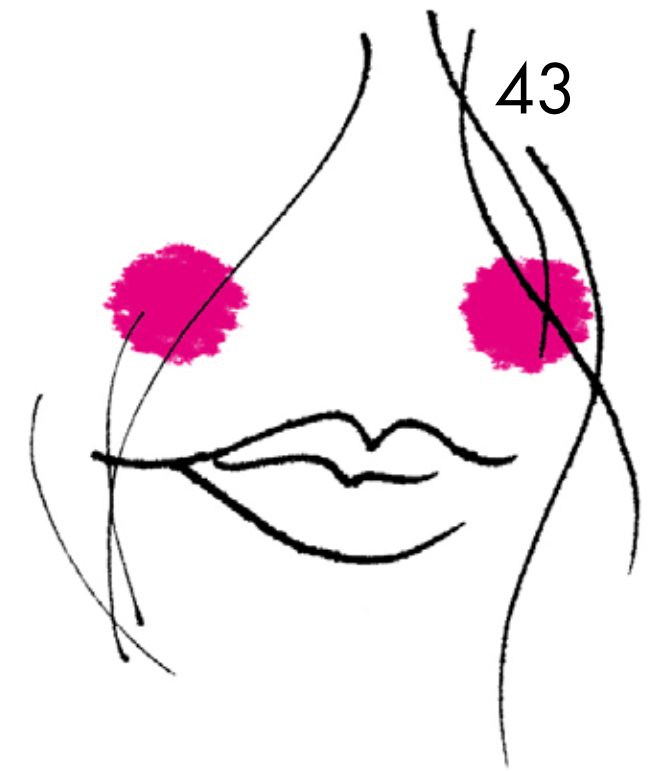
"Flight attendants, please prepare for landing," a voice intoned from the cockpit speaker.

"Maybe we could meet up for a drink?" I suddenly heard myself saying. Feckin' hell, I have no business setting up a shag when I've got cash to deliver... but she's a lovely one, isn't she?

"Maybe I can but, only if you promise to pull your claws back in."

"What do you mean? You seemed to like me quite a bit early on, with all the darlings and grabbing my knee and such..."

"Oh, I'm just an affectionate person. I'm sorry, it gets me into all kinds of situations,



but I just liked you and I could tell you had so many troubles on your mind."

By this time, the plane had landed and we were being herded off the plane. We walked toward passport control in tandem, but didn't speak. I knew my time with her was running out. "So how can I find you? I'd still like to meet up while I'm here."

Madeleine nodded her head slowly and then with more assurance. "Sure, I'd like that. I'll give you my number." She pulled some paper out of her bag and wrote on it with a flourish. "Here you go," she smiled and handed it over. We arrived at baggage claim and nearly all the bags were gone, but Madeleine spied hers and I helped her lift it off. "I have to move along now," she said as she hiked her carry-on back on her shoulder.

"Right. I'll call you, Darling," I said with a raise of my brow.

"I'll look forward to it, Darling," she answered, raising her own brow. With that, she was gone.

I spun back to look at the baggage turnstile, just as it stopped. Only a few lonely bags were waiting and mine was not one of them.

Jürgen Kruse

## Rain in the City of Rain

In the City of Rain, rainfall begins exactly at each full hour, and it lasts precisely the hour numbers of the 12-hour clock, beginning with a rain of 1 minute at 1am/pm and ending with 12 minutes rainfall at 12am/pm. Therefore, during every 12-hour period, it rains for 78 minutes. As the level of precipitation is always the same, the 1-minute rain comes down as a cloud-burst whereas the 12-minutes rain is a mere drizzle.

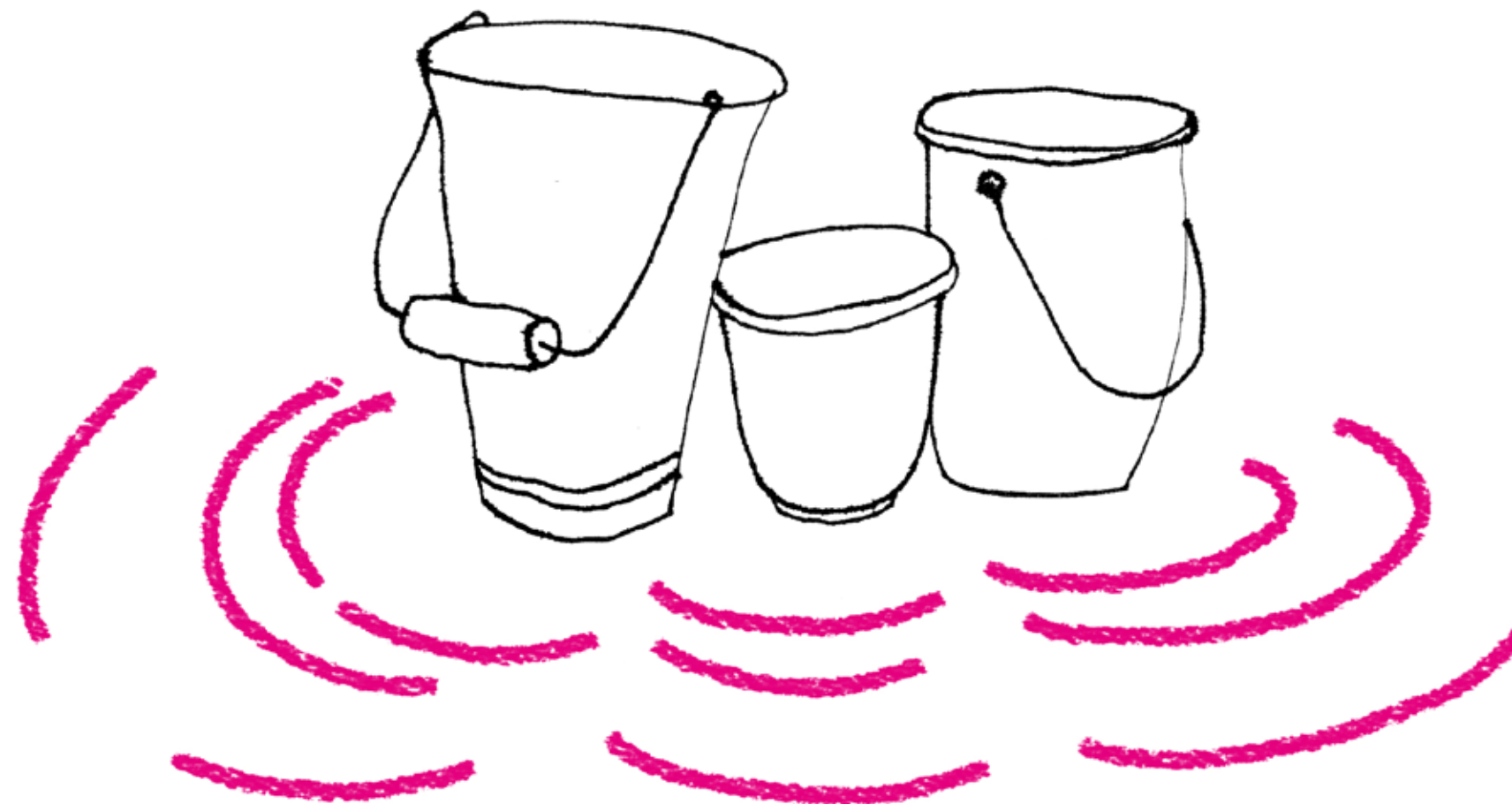
The City of Rain measures rainfall in millimetres. For this purpose, a self-emptying tipping bucket rain gauge, the Pluviometer, has been installed beneath the roof ridge of the town hall. The Hydrographer Extraordinaire, the only hereditary office in the City of Rain, registers the amount – invariably 2.5mm – of every rainfall and enters the figure into the Isohyet Ledger. For the sake of domestic peace and external security, diary and rain gauge are classified items and, thus, not open to the general public. All this has gone well for a long time but now strange things are going on in the City of Rain. Out of the blue, the media talks about transparency. In an unheard-of provocation,

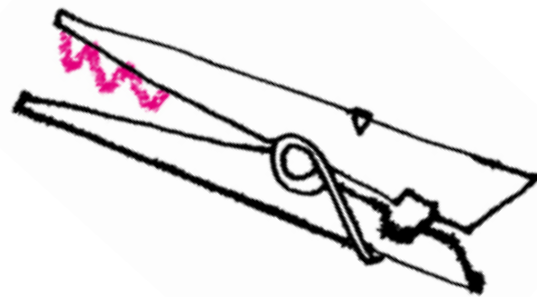
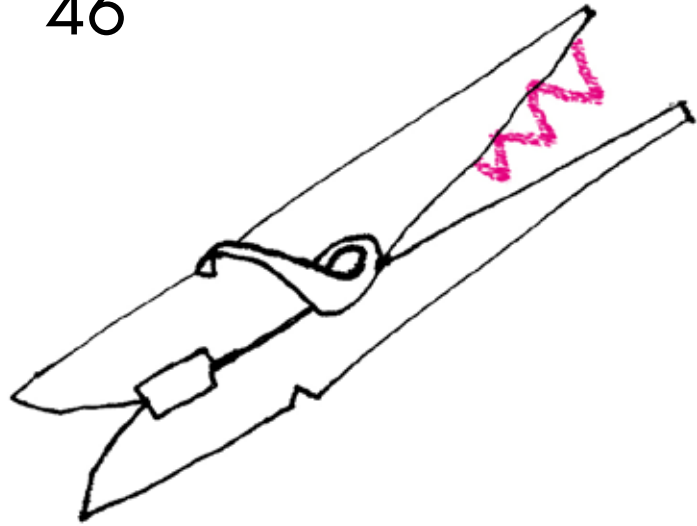
the local newspaper, The Weather Vane, indirectly proposes a public discussion (within reasonable limits, of course) of the rain gauge and Isohyet Ledger. A local historian found and restored an inn sign reading in Old English Come Rain or Shine and claimed that once there must have been a time when rain was accepted as an unpredictable natural phenomenon. Last but not least, a group of not yet identified anarchists, calling themselves The Weathermen, are trying to disrupt public order by showering leaflets and stickers on the people, inviting them to emancipate themselves from the rain-makers in the town hall. As expected, the Hydrographer Extraordinaire has reacted swiftly and with his usual caring understanding. A recent announcement reports that new forecasting methods will be developed, pending the results of a study entitled:

*Individual Misconception of Objective Data – A Legal and Moral Problem in a Healthy Society – Analysed on the Example of Rainfall by the Interdisciplinary Institute of Applied Research*

Willa Mazin, BA, MSSc, LLd

Hale Glaw, MRes, EngD.

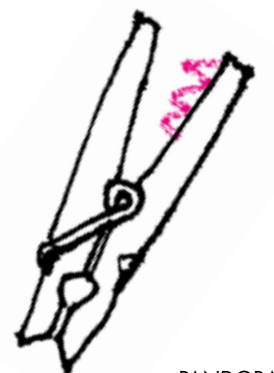




Katharina Hepp

## To My Flat, With Apologies

Stacks,  
 heaps,  
 piles,  
 clusters,  
 scatterings,  
 pairs,  
 handfuls  
 and mugs crying out to be washed  
 have assembled into a collage,  
 a crazy-patterned rug covering the floor.  
 The Obstacle Olympics start in the morning.  
 Barefoot bedroom-to-bathroom gymnastics include  
 tiptoeing,  
 ducking under,  
 edging around,  
 avoiding,  
 taking a big step over  
 and watching out for stray clothes-pegs.  
 Waiting in the kitchen labyrinth,  
 at the edge of the work desk clearing,  
 on top of Bed Mountain,  
 I am my own minotaur.  
 In a wrinkled t-shirt  
 and mismatched socks,  
 with an earring missing  
 and decidedly undecided hair.





Eva Poggio

## The Pillow Case

The blue and red pillow case holding tight my son's pillow is embroidered with a cow, a goat, a sheep, a cat and a boy with a farmer's hat. The knit is as perfect as the machine-made original my mother had copied the motif from, but the threads are thicker and the colors somehow real: the green as pale as the first spring grass, the cow as brown as mud, and the boy's face is not pink, but the color of skin. This boy with the farmer's hat holds out a carrot to the goat, and the goat's little mouth is slightly open.

My son was three the time we visited my mother on her farm; it was the summer before Marco disappeared with everything. I also have a daughter now, and sometimes, when she won't stop crying, her brother comes into my bedroom with his pillow and he snuggles up next to us, so that she can touch the knitted story sewed upon it. When she is calm again, I read to them from a fairy tale book; I let my son decide which story he wants, and my daughter usually falls asleep. How was it again always to be three in this bed, my husband, my son and I? Now we would be four. But tonight

my daughter's hand rests on the cow. "Do cows also eat carrots?" she asks halfway through the pirate story my son has chosen tonight. "Yes, they do," I reply and read on. "Has granny got cows on her farm?" she wants to know next.

She hasn't been there yet. When we had come back home three years ago, Marco was already gone. I didn't have time to say goodbye. None of his things were there. The house was raped. My son's toys were scattered all over the floor in his room and the few things that had been left we found in the garden, right under the bedroom window: the olive green baby carrier Marco and I bought on a weekend trip to Paris when our son was barely a month old, an old wooden candleholder I got from the flea market by the river when I was still in college, a few books (poetry collections in translation), the gold necklace with the bulky medallion, and my father's photo inside of it, lay shining in the sun. The toaster, a handful of books (also translations, but no poetry), and the small, old wooden crib that had been the bed for a doll, since my son had outgrown it, were all inside



where they belonged.

It had been such a beautiful summer. My son had played with the neighbors' children, and they had talked like children do, they speaking French or English, he Italian. Marco went home a week before us. He is a teacher and school was about to start again. I learned that my daughter would be coming only some weeks later, when we had just moved again back into our house after the police thought it was safe. I didn't have the time to tell him about her; it was the police who informed me about what had happened the week I was still riding my mother's horses, and my son was playing with newborn baby goats. They told me the neighbor had seen the men from a moving company emptying the house, and Marco sitting around all day in the garden, in the white plastic chair, sweaty. There had been a noise that night, like a real-life version of that red-lettered noise written inside comic books: BANG! That was the way the ten year-old son of our neighbors told the story to his friends. His mother scolded him when he told it to me too.

When we had just moved back again into our house, I said to my son that his daddy was gone, and that I didn't know where he was, if on earth, in heaven, or on the moon. I told my son that wherever his daddy is, he is building a farm just like granny's right now and one day we will all go and live with him and each of us can have a horse, a dog, a goat, a sheep and give them names, and once we are together again we will not come apart. To my daughter swimming inside me, I said not to worry, your mommy and your brother are strong and so are you. I begged her to stay with me, not to leave me. Ever.

"No, granny's just got horses and goats and cats and dogs and a lama," my son answers his sister. Her hand dangles in the air and then she reaches only for her pink pacifier, exchanging it with the one she has been sucking on. Pretty soon she is asleep. I finish the story to my son and when he, too, is asleep I get up and call my mother in Canada, somewhere my son and I have been once and my daughter hasn't been yet, where my mother must be washing the lunch dishes right now.



BrF

## The Cat Sat on the Mat

The house could be described as a small mansion of colonial style, built towards the end of the 19th century. Inside it had a large central lobby placed at the foot of a broad, sweeping staircase. Here, on the marble floor, lay a small, finely knotted red silk Persian carpet. As a result of careful architectural planning from this view-point in the house, one had a direct sight into three upstairs rooms: the study, the master bedroom, and the maid's room.

Through the study's open door, the elderly Dr. James Smith sat dressed in formal eveningwear at his writing desk. He did not appear to hear the hall clock chiming eight; he did not appear to see the gentle fall of snow through his study window. His only perceivable movement was his right hand lifting and laying down, lifting and laying down an old service revolver on the polished surface of the desk. His left hand was firmly closed round a single diamond earring.

In the adjacent master bedroom Elizabeth his silver-haired wife of many years, sat on the counterpane of the large double bed. She was only partly dressed; an evening dress lay on the bed next to where she sat.

She had her head buried in her hands and wept openly, unaware that she had not closed the bedroom door; she did not hear the clock chime or see the snow that had begun to drift down, outside.

Next to Elizabeth's room, light from the open door of the maid's room shone into the hallway. This was Sarah's habit when preparing for her night off in the town away from Smith family duties; she made herself up carefully in the mirror, studying herself under the light. She heard eight chimes on the hallway clock; she was aware of the snowfall outside her window. She knew that the Smiths would drop her off in the city as they headed for dinner to celebrate their wedding anniversary.

Downstairs, in the lobby, the family's large, over-fed tortoiseshell cat came through the flap in the main door and glided over the marble tiles towards the small red silk Persian carpet. It stretched very slowly. Looking directly up into each room, the cat sat on the mat. With its paw it began to flick a glass bauble it had found on the floor earlier.

It yawned.

Nuria Planas

## Just Weaned

"Father, I need you to give me the absolution right away!" a distressed woman said.

"It's all right, Patty," a middle-age priest said, walking the woman towards the confessional box.

"Father Mike, I sinned terribly!"

"I do not think that you committed such a terrible sin."

"Oh yeah! I committed a mortal sin, not one of these van... venial sins. I killed, Father. Can you envision that?" she asked, whispering.

"N... no, not really. Calm down, Patty. Whom did you kill? This is getting complicated," he slightly sighed.

"You are not going to tell anyone, right? Afterwards, all the neighbors would gossip about it."

"No Patty, I won't tell anyone. You know that, under the confessional sacrament, I cannot tell anyone. Tell me what happened."

"Well Father, I, myself, without the help of anyone, without any kind of suggestion of anybody, I, with all my imagination and perversion, killed an innocent..., can you imagine?" she started yelling, while she was

raising her hands towards the sky. "Father, one... one sweet, innocent... woman!!"

"Whi... which woman?"

"A woman, Father; a woman in the SUPER-MARKET!"

"Patty...?"

"Yes, Father...?"

"Are you sure about what you are saying?"

"Of course I am!"

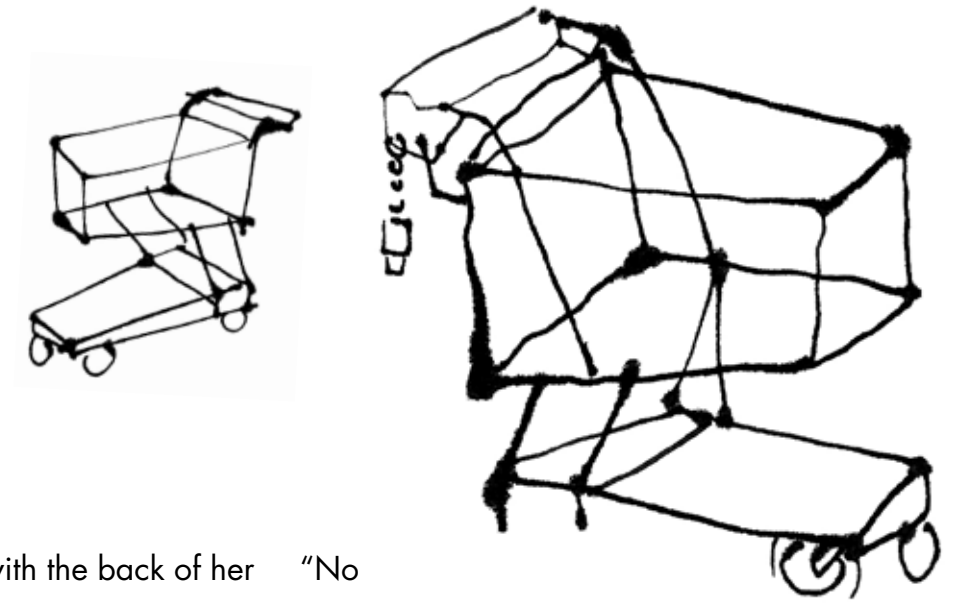
After one minute of comfortable silence where the compassionate and kind priest's look had engulfed Patty, she said:

"Well, I didn't kill her, technically. I killed her with my mind. The devil was inside me."

Suddenly, nearly bubbling and talking fast she said, "Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It has been since my last confession... actually Father, I don't remember when my last confession took place."

"All right, let's leave this for another occasion; calm down, Patty. Why don't you sit down, take a deep breath... – do you want a glass of water...? – and calmly, you tell me what all of this is about."

"Thanks Father. ... huff...! I think I was very thirsty."



After wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, shyly she smiled, looked at Father Callaghan and started explaining, while saying, in between her explanation, tsk, tsk.

That morning, Pat, the adventurous Patty Donovan engaged herself with high spirits to go grocery shopping with her three little, innocent... well, maybe not so innocent... angels: Jack, a five-and-a-half-year-old child in his reading-learning process, Jimmy, an already potty-trained, two-and-a-half-year-old boy, and Julia, her starting-talker-14-month-old daughter.

After "instructing" them to behave properly in the supermarket, Patty with her three children on board of the shopping cart started the grocery shopping. Here we go!

"Mommy, mommy, what's that?"

"That is..."

"And zhat, mommy?"

"Oh, mommy, can we buy this?"

"Pease, pease!"

"No."

"And... what about that? We can buy it, right?"

"Yez... mommy?"

"No

"Mom..., mom..., mom..."

"Sweetheart, why don't you read the label of the products? So you can show your brother and sister how good your reading is."

"...fan-ta-o-ran-ge, fan-ta-lii-mon..."

"Lemon, fanta lemon, sweetheart... Jimmy, stop bothering your little sister!"

"...fan-ta-le-mon, di-et-doc-tor-pe-pper, ca-ca-co-la...? Ca-ca? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Mommy, mommy, Jack is zhaying caca!"

"Jimmy, Jack didn't want to say that, he meant to say co-ca-co-la. He is learning how to read," Patty now excused herself to a woman who passed next to her giving her a dirty look. "They are so cute when they start reading... whatever!"

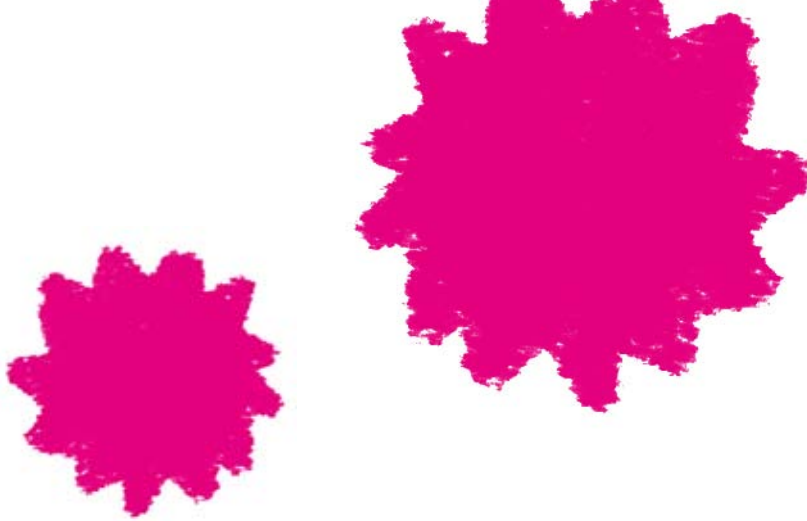
"Mommy, mommy, I want to get out of the cart!"

"Me too, me too!"

"...too, ...too!!"

"Sorry Julia, but you won't. You're way too... guys no running, NO RUNNING! ... small..."

"Mommy, mommy, Jimmy bumped into an old guy, and he..."



"No, I dit NOT. You DIT it."

"No, I didn't!"

"Yes, you dit!!"

"No, I did not!"

"Guys, guys!!"

"Ms, you could control your children better. This is a supermarket, rather than an amusement park!"

"Really? I hope you collapse in the next minute, lady! Oh, oh, where is the cart? Where is Julia...? Julia! Julia!!"

"Don't worry mommy, Jimmy took her for a ride. He is the greatest racecar driver ever. Brrmm, brrmm."

"Jimmy, JIMMY, come here right away!! Jack, you stay here and don't move, got it?"

"OK, but I'm bored. Can I keep reading?"

"Yes, that's... JIMMY... a great idea!"

"A grown up screaming and running like this in a supermarket! How are these kids going to turn out? Tsk, tsk!" that lady said.

"Mommy, I'll have to read louder so you can hear me."

"Jimmy! ... fantastic idea, Jack... Here you are, Jimmy, how many times I've..."

"...VI-TA-MINS-TO-BE-S-TRON-GER, PREY..."

PRE-NAN... too difficult..., DU-REX-CONDOMS-FOR-SA-FE-SEX... MOMMY...?"

"... told you not to run away... Jack, I'm coming..."

"... WHAT DOES IT MEAN CON-DOMS-FOR-SA-FE-SEX?"

"Jack, you don't need to talk so loud... and you, young man are going to be in trouble..."

"Tsk, tsk!!" The same lady.

"...toble, toble!"

"You, be quiet!"

"But, I don't know what CON..."

"Jimmy, don't talk to your little sister like this! ... Stop Jack, I'll tell you later. Let's go pay now..."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk!!!" She again.

"Promise, I will kill her! I like to have my children well informed about everything," Patty whispered to her.

"Cough, cough," the woman cleared her voice.

"Mommy, mommy..."

"Yes Jimmy...? ... Jack put that back on the shelf; we are not buying more cookies for today!!"

"Cukis, cukis!"

"...I've got peepee!"

"Oh no, can't you just wait a little? We are about to pay. Soon, we'll be at home."

"Bua, bua!!"

"No, not now Julia! Jack?? Did you just hit..."

"Mommy, I have a lot of peepee!"

"Good morning Ms? How're you doin' today?"

"Are you mocking me...? ... hit your little sister...? What do you want... peepee? ... Great, I'm doing great, and you Sir?"

"Bua, bua, bua!"

"Oh sweetheart, don't cry! Jack, make her stop crying. Give her something!"

Meanwhile, on the other register the tsk, tsk woman could not stop herself from looking towards Patty.

"Mommy, what can I give to Julia?"

"Whatever!"

"Tsk, tsk, tsk!"

"Mommy, mommy, peepee!"

"Oh no! Jack, don't tell me that you have to go to the toilet too?"

"No, just to inform you: Jimmy just went peepee... in his pants."

"Ma'am, will that be all?"

"No, Jim...! I mean yes, that will be all..."

"I... I'm so... sorry...mommy..."

"Ma'am, are you gonna pay for this?"

"For what? For this wetness on the floor?"

"No ma'am, for what your daughter is eating."

"Eating? What is she eating?"

"Chocolate!! I gave her chocolate and she stopped crying. Mommy, you told me I could..."

"Look at you, your face and hands are full of chocolate!! ... But Jack, you know better than that, that she cannot eat chocolate. Afterwards she..."

Jimmy, stop licking Julia's fingers!!

... gets diarrhea."

"Oops!"

"But... mommy... it's yummy!"

"Mode..., mode choco!"

"Are you paying with credit card?"

"TSK, TSK, TSK!!!"

"Yes Sir, with credit card and a knife!!"

"Mommy, mommy!"

"...TRI-DENT-LONG-LAS-TING-FLAVOR..."

"Choco, choco!"

Suddenly, Patty Donovan with an 8-inch doubled-sided butcher's knife in her right

hand, jumped over to the next cash register and started stabbing the woman.  
"Patty...? Patty!"  
"And I killed her again and again... and..."  
"PATTY!"  
"Oh sorry, Father Mike. I let myself get a little too carried away and..."  
"Patty, where did you get the knife from?"  
"Well Father, this is the point; I... I did not have any knife, and as a matter of fact, as I said before, I did not kill her... technically. But I thought about it and... and isn't there a commandment that says not having impure thoughts? Because... believe me, my thought, actually my thoughts, were highly impure. I killed her once and again, and over and over..."  
"Patty..."  
"... and then I took hold of her by her throat and made her say tsk, tsk, and every time she said it, rush, knife in the body and rip her up to down, right to left and... I peeled her and..."  
"Patty, Patty, that's enough! By the Power that He has vested in me, I absolve you from your sins and you get the complete

forgiveness from God and blah, blah, blah. And Patty, don't worry; I think you are terribly tired and sometimes it is normal to have these kind of fantasies."  
"Should I say three 'Hail Marys'?"  
"Patty, go and take a rest. You need it and deserve it, believe me."  
"But Father Mike, I'm not sorry for the sin I committed. I won't get His forgiveness..."  
"Patty, you will be fine and, if it will make you feel better, say one 'Hail Mary'. That will do it."  
"Are you sure...?"  
"I'm sure."  
"Positive?"  
"Positive."  
"But..., some moments I have the feeling that I wished I had done it... actually!"  
"Patty...?"  
"Yes, Father?"  
"Don't push it too much... Maybe... two... 'Hail Marys'?"  
"Yes, Father Mike."  
" And, now go home... and why don't you try to take some days off by yourself...?"  
Father Callaghan suggested as she was walking towards the exit, "... alone...

without your husband... without the children..."  
"Bu...t... Fa...ther...",Patty stammered as she turned back her head.  
"Don't worry. I think God agrees with me and He would want it."  
"Yes Father."  
  
\*\*\*\*\*  
  
"You look great!" Matt, Patty's husband, said as he arrived home.  
"Thanks!"  
"What are you doing with this suitcase?"  
"I'm going on vacation."  
"On vacation? Won't it be too much for you alone with the three kids?"

"No, definitely not. I'm going alone!"  
"Alone? You... you mean... without the children?"  
"Yes, that is what I meant!"  
"Is your mom coming here?"  
"I don't know. I haven't talked to her for a while."  
"And... what about the children?"  
"What about... what?"  
"Who are they going to be with?"  
"With you..., I guess."  
"And Julia?"  
"What about Julia?"  
"Aren't you still breastfeeding her at nights?"  
"Nope, not anymore. I just weaned her! God will forgive me."





Ewa Bechtold

# Newspapers

One day he was gone. On a Thursday, at midday, shortly after 12. Just gone, without a word, without saying good-bye to anybody, notwithstanding that every Thursday we used to meet in Friedo’s pub to discuss world affairs and football. He had always been afraid of flying, spiders and germs in tap water. But it was a chestnut tree. He was coming from the Underground when it broke like a match, fell and buried him and the newspapers he had bought at the Central Station in Frankfurt: the “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung” and “The Guardian”. Next day we could read the local news that he had been killed immediately and nothing could have been done about it. Mathematicians tried to calculate the probabilities whereas the City Council tried to find someone to blame for

the accident. But too late: he could not read the news anymore, just as he could not read the “Frankfurter Allgemeine” and “The Guardian” he had carried under his arm when the tree crashed upon him. He was gone, and he had not been flying or drinking water full of germs, and there was no spider to bite him. He had been on his way home, on foot, and then he wasn’t there anymore, and we didn’t meet at Friedo’s on that Thursday or any other Thursday afterwards. Ever since, we have been looking at the trees under which we are walking. But we know that the most sinister of all chaps is lurking everywhere. We can bump into him at midday or at midnight. And we’ll be gone for good then. And the newspapers will continue writing their news, no matter who will read them.



Katharina Hepp

## On Bridges

### Burning and Other Means of Destruction

'Burning bridges' means that you are severing contact with people, towns or even countries. Loves, friendships, jobs – whatever it is that you are letting go up in flames behind you, you cannot fathom you might ever want to go back. To do this, you have to hurt, steal, cheat, kill, break promises, lie, or finally tell the truth. Possibly all of the above.

*Note: The bridges you destroy and the ways to do it are as varied as the nature of the relationships that bind you.*

#### a) The makeshift bridge

A wooden plank laid over a stream, based on only a few inches of common ground. You tend to cross it shakily, always fearing to slip. It takes no more than a half-hearted kick to let it slide into the water and out of sight.

#### b) The bridge built from necessity

Spanning a stretch of jungle at a precarious height, it is held only by some strategically placed knots, the rope starting to fray at the points of pressure.

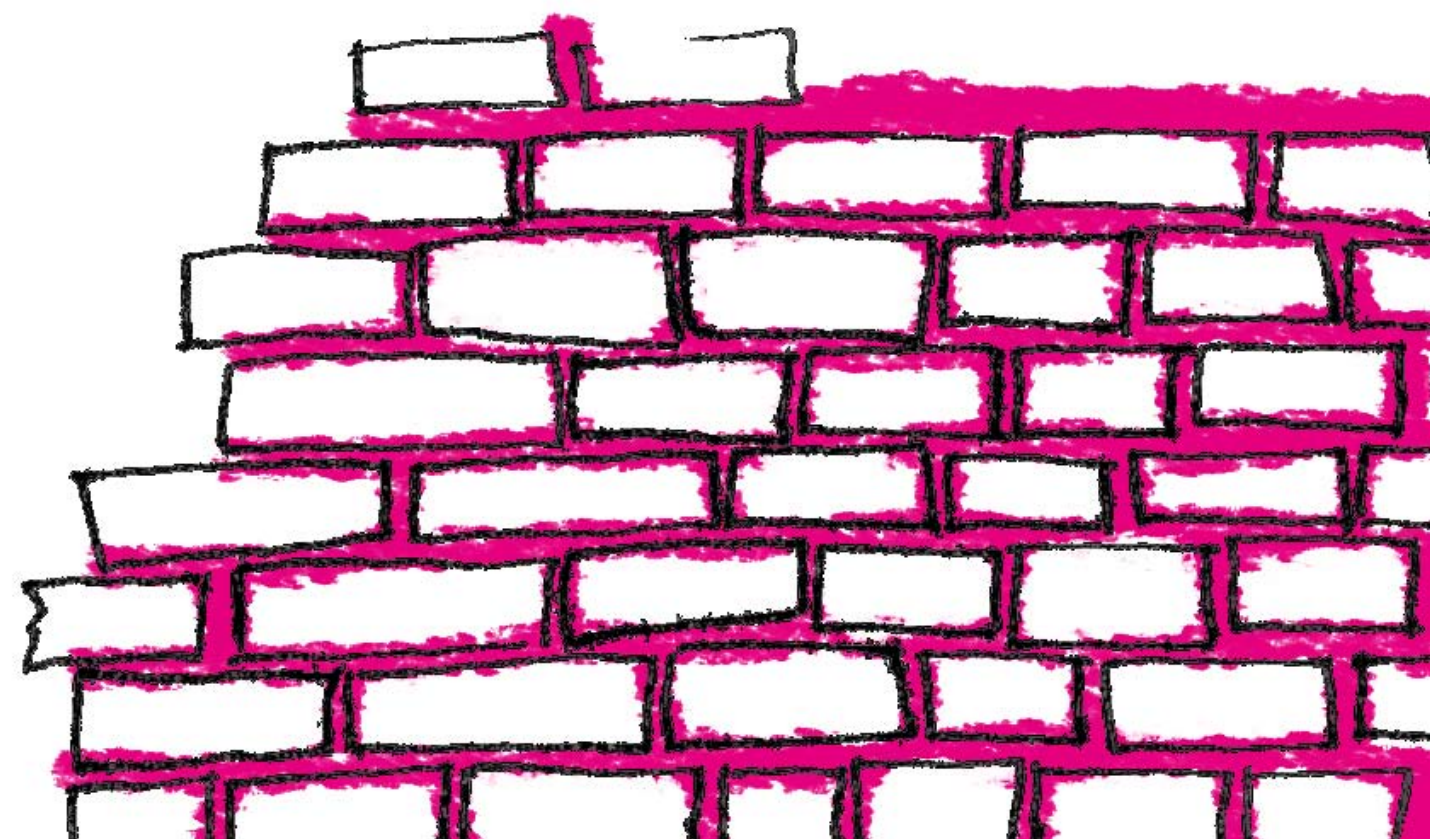
Use a good measure of force to hack through the trusty stems that attach it to the tree, and it will fall apart easily, disappearing into the green abyss.

A rusty machete will do the trick.

#### c) The durable bridge

It took a long time to build, brick by brick, thick mortar cementing the pieces together. It takes a devastating explosive to destroy this structure. Do not hesitate to use the most powerful available.

*Note: Be thorough. Take care to scatter the remains, as one might still be able to cross back and forth over the heaps of rubble after the smoke has cleared.*



Julia Appel

## With One Wheel Gone Wrong

*(inspired by the A. M. Homes' short story of the same name)*

What an ordinary day. He saw ordinary faces and ordinary people buying ordinary stuff in an ordinary supermarket. John was so over it. Nor could he stand the sight of shopping carts or the noise of the cash box when it opened any more. The routine was nearly killing him. In addition to that, saying phrases like "Good morning, Sir," "Good morning, Ma'am" or "Have a nice day" became simply unbearable to him. But the worst of all statements was asking a customer, "Paper or plastic?" This simple question gave the consumer the impression the earth's fate would be in his hands. As if such a decision would change anything about pollution or waste of resources on the planet since both materials – paper and plastic – had their own advantages and negative consequences for the earth. John had sometimes smirked internally at people who looked guilty when choosing the plastic bag, or the other way round at old ladies who considered taking a paper bag as their daily

good deed. However, today was not a day for smirking, mischievousness, any sort of irony, or even humor. The only thing John felt was frustration and disappointment. Here he was, at his best age – at least this was what people always said – and he had been packing items in supermarket bags for years now. This was not where he was supposed to be at 25, with his handsome face and his intelligence for mathematical problems and his astuteness. Once he had met a guy in the checkout line who turned out to be an old school friend. John had been able to read pity in the expression of his old friend's face. Working as part-time employee in a supermarket was a well-respected thing when it had the purpose to finance your academic studies, but none of John's old classmates would be able to understand how somebody could have this job in order to make a living. John felt stuck and for years he was hopelessly trying to find a way out. All these thoughts were running through his head while he scanned products, accepted and returned cash and credit cards, and, most importantly, pretended to smile while saying in a monotonous



voice, "Good morning, Sir... Have a nice day, Ma'am... Paper or plastic?"

John would never have recognized Sally under normal circumstances; on this day he was so sure that nothing could ever break the monotony, so that he found himself surprised when it happened just like that. Sally was not the kind of woman one would notice because she looked pretty, or odd, or different from anybody else. Sally had her brown hair at a simple shoulder length, wore glasses that made her appear older than she actually was, and did not attach much importance to her clothes or make-up. But on this ordinary Friday morning, when all the housewives were doing their usual weekend-shopping, Sally drew everybody's attention to her because she somehow managed to block the checkout-line, which was already long enough, even without her interference. At first John only noticed the other customers' angry voices: "What is it with you?", "Are you just standing here for fun," he heard another customer shout. John stood up over his cash register to get a better overview and then he saw Sally. She was totally engrossed in a magazine. She

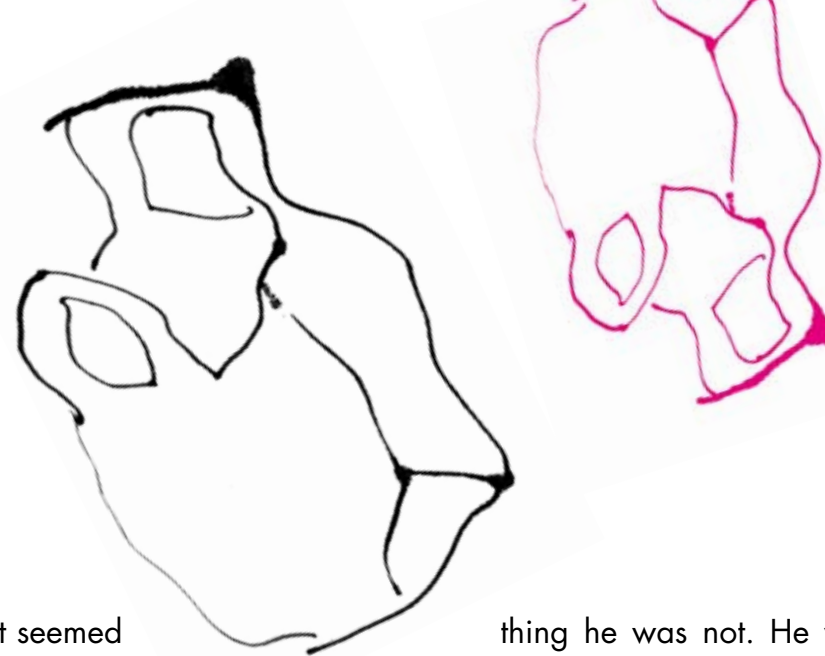
and her trolley were standing in the line, but she did not seem to recognize that the people in front of her had already moved forward, and there was now a long, empty space. The customers behind her could not walk past Sally, as there was not enough space for two shopping carts next to each other.

John responded instantly. "Are you taking that magazine," he asked so loudly that Sally could not ignore him. She looked up, took a very deep breath, and then grabbed all the magazines out of the rack with a quick movement of her hands. "I'll take all you've got," she finally said with determination in her voice.

What? This was John's first thought, but he had to appear professional. "Paper or plastic," he asked instead, with his indifferent voice, just as he had asked all the customers before her. Sally came closer, put the magazines and other items like catnip, kitty litter, *Pull-Ups* and pomegranates directly in front of him and responded with a clear voice: "I don't need any bag at all. I can carry everything just like this."

This simple sentence brought John somehow





back to life. "Tell me one thing," and his voice turned into a whisper, so that only Sally could hear him. "What's inside this magazine that made you stare at it like this and makes you want to buy every single copy of it we have?"

Initially she did not answer, but looked at him in a strange way. John noticed that her eyes were hazel. Then she handed him her credit card – like all the other customers before. John scolded himself for bothering to be curious, and let her sign the receipt. After signing she took one copy of the magazine and wrote something on it with the pen that she still held in her hand. For him, time came to a stop. "Goodbye John, have a nice day," she said, and handed the magazine over to him.

He felt dazzled. She had written something on the magazine for him; she had noticed his name tag at the same time. He was even more amazed that she obviously gave him one of the magazines as a gift. "Goodbye," he answered with a voice full of astonishment and lack of professionalism.

She put everything into her shopping cart, and he could not stop staring at her. He

realized that one wheel of her cart seemed to be broken. She had difficulties moving the trolley forward. John tried to guess her age although he knew he would fail terribly. Sally looked so much older than him and still, she appeared so young... John was lost and diverted and almost ignored the next customers.

Like a machine he worked on and on, scanned on and on like he had always done before. He did not dare to look at the magazine, nor at the words that she had written. Still, curiosity burned inside his lungs like he had rarely ever felt. Finally his shift was over. When counting the money in the cash box he counted wrong three times; finally everything was right in the end. Distractedly he put on his jacket and left the supermarket without even saying a word to the cashier who came after him. He held the magazine firmly in his hands like a precious treasure and rushed out.

Outside, the cold evening air embraced him. It was almost dark, but John loved darkness when he was not forced to see faces and supermarket items and when he was not under compulsion to pretend to be some-

thing he was not. He went directly to the next street lamp. The light shone on the magazine and he finally dared to cast a glance at it. Sally's handwriting was neat; the letters were all clear and burned themselves in his mind. She had written a lot, considering the small amount of time, and he could not stop himself from reading everything at once: *Sometimes it's just a simple image reminding you of things you could be, steps you might take and questions you should ask. The picture on page 44 made it clear to me: We need dreams, aims and illusions for the pursuit of happiness. Yours, Sally.* John immediately opened page 44. There was a photo on it, showing a beautiful house with every luxury people might dream of, yet seeming so unreal at the same time. The picture did not touch

anything within John, but he instantly knew how Sally might have felt. He understood the meaning of her written words, her longing. These were feelings he shared – only that he was dreaming of different things. He wanted to break out of the misery he felt. Sally did not know anything about his situation, how he came to end up in the supermarket, why he could hardly live like a normal man of his age. He did not know anything about Sally, her life, her problems, or her story either. But today she had shown him that he should not stop daydreaming. He should stop always caring about other people's opinions and judgments. John put his hands deep in the inside of his pockets and started moving. He still had a long way to go.



MP Olinger

## The Old Buffalo

Like a river of fear, the herd stampedes through the night. The ground shakes as the hooves of thousands thunder down the mountains. Trailing dusty layers of despair, the old buffalo follows the herd. His big heart pumping wildly in his chest, fear drives him on. Follow the herd, his instincts tell him. Just follow the herd. And so his tired muscles keep moving, and the herd of thousands keeps dragging him along. The formerly starlit sky coughs up flaming ash. While the river is on fire, the herd flees east.

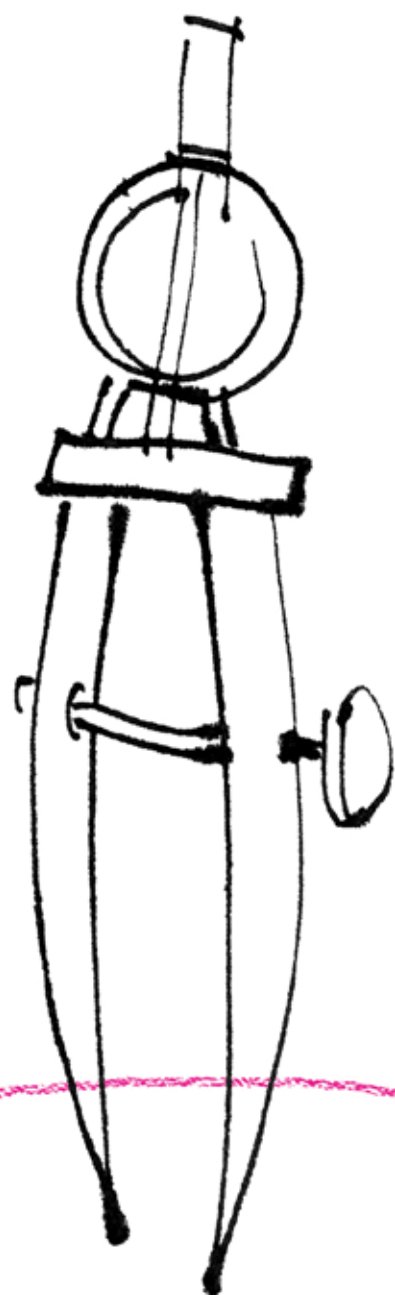
The air swells with the herd's grunting as exploding arrows of fire shoot from the heavens. While the old beast falls behind, the arrows of fire sizzle through its shaggy coat. The buffalo lets out a desperate grunt. He so longs to keep running. He longs to

keep on living. He so longs to see the sun rise once more, yet the herd overtakes him, and in the middle of pounding hooves and pounding hearts and blood, fear and scorched fur, the old buffalo stops in his tracks.

He hears the prairie wind whispering. While the rumbling thunder of the herd overtakes him, the ground shakes to the core. As he stands back, the echo of the lush prairie, now sweating with fear, breaks his heart. The hulking beast's majestic silhouette, still standing six feet tall, traces black against the bright burning sky, his brown shaggy coat in flames, his wide long horns bend towards heaven, his stance defiant, yet despair tears at his soul. The old buffalo turns his head in slow motion, and, greeting the crackling flames with resignation, the beast's spirit finally soars.







Jürgen Kruse

## The Geographer

The heavy rainclouds have gone and the sun, now shining again from the light-blue summer sky, is sending its rays through the stained glass window into the spacious study. The coloured glass filters the brilliant sunlight and mellows the contours of the interior.

For some hours now, the painter has been sitting in the background of the room, observing the man whose portrait he is going to paint. Seldom has he had a customer who seems to take so little notice of his painter. Though all his clients are prosperous, esteemed and influential burghers, usually not suffering from lack of self-confidence, most of them change their behaviour when sitting in front of him. Some are posing, others dissimulating, as if they didn't want their true self to be seen on the canvas. Not so this customer. He acts as if he were alone in the room, presenting the picture of a mild-mannered, friendly scholar deeply devoted to mapping out the features of the unknown world for the benefit of his country and its industrious citizens.

However, the painter has soon found out that his customer's calm and modest air is

merely the cloak for his soberly calculating mind. Instead of beginning the expected lengthy debate about style and content of the portrait, he gave the painter precise instructions about his assignment.

"The painting is meant as a gift for my future father-in-law. I'm about to marry his only daughter and heiress," his customer said at their first meeting some weeks ago and the painter, having already heard the gossip, knew who was meant. The portrait would hang in the house of one of Delft's leading families. In such families a suitor becomes son-in-law if he is judged to be a caring, faithful husband and, even more important, a valuable gain for the family business.

No doubt this man will fulfil his future father-in-law's expectations. The pater familias is a major stockholder of the Dutch East India Company. Everybody knows he has vested interests in its trade with China and Japan. The profit is high, and it could be higher if less ships got lost. A son-in-law who is a widely respected geographer will certainly help to solve this problem. Who else but he would be able to map out reliable sea

charts that lead the company's ships safely through the still uncharted oceans? His craft will bring him more wealth and honour than I will ever get by painting pictures to adorn the walls of townhouses whose stingy masters carp about the finished work to reduce the fee.

The painter smiles wanly and looks at his customer who is studying the proposed setting delineated in the sketchbook. The draft shows the geographer, clad in a Japanese robe of intense sea-blue, working at his desk in the midst of his charts and maps and some books. He peers musingly out of the window holding a pair of dividers, a tool of his trade, in his right hand.

The geographer nods and begins to scrutinise the sketches of his head. They show his face from different angles and in alternative interplays of light and shade. He wants to be seen as a creative mind, he comments, as a thinker who solves practical

problems and not as someone who takes too much interest in his outer appearance. "My eyes are crucial," the geographer goes on. "You let me look out of the window. I agree, but I'm not interested in what's going on down in the street. So let me look into the far distance."

"Perhaps seeing a ship following safely the route into the orient you have just now projected," the painter ventures, carefully avoiding any trace of irony in his voice.

The geographer doesn't take it up. Instead he says, "By the way, my future father-in-law is a staunch Calvinist. He believes in frugality. I share his view. So give my skin and hair a nondescript touch, skin tone lacklustre and the hair of an indifferent dark brown. But be careful, I don't want to look sickly."

"Everything will be carried out to your utmost satisfaction," the painter says in the obsequious manner of his profession, thinking that again he's going to betray his art by dressing up the truth.



## About Pandora

Pandora is a publication of the English Writing Department of the Volkshochschule of Frankfurt am Main. All material is copyrighted and all rights remains with the individual authors. Submissions are open to writing students of the VHS Frankfurt am Main, teachers and associates of the Writing Department. To contact the department please address correspondence to *Julia Shirtliff, English Department, Volkshochschule Frankfurt am Main, Sonnemannstraße 13, 60314 Frankfurt am Main*. E-Mail: [j.shirtliff.vhs@stadt-frankfurt.de](mailto:j.shirtliff.vhs@stadt-frankfurt.de)

## About the Design

This edition of Pandora was designed by Katharina Hepp, illustrator and graphic designer born and raised in Frankfurt am Main, educated in Hamburg and London and a participant of VHS courses in Creative Writing. <http://sketchyfabric.blogspot.com>

The typeface used is Futura. It was created by Paul Renner as a contribution to the New Frankfurt affordable public housing program in 1927. Paul Renner also taught advertising design and typography at the Frankfurt School of Art.



Issue 7, December 2013  
Volkshochschule Frankfurt Literary Magazine

Issue 7, December 2013  
Volkshochschule Frankfurt Literary Magazine