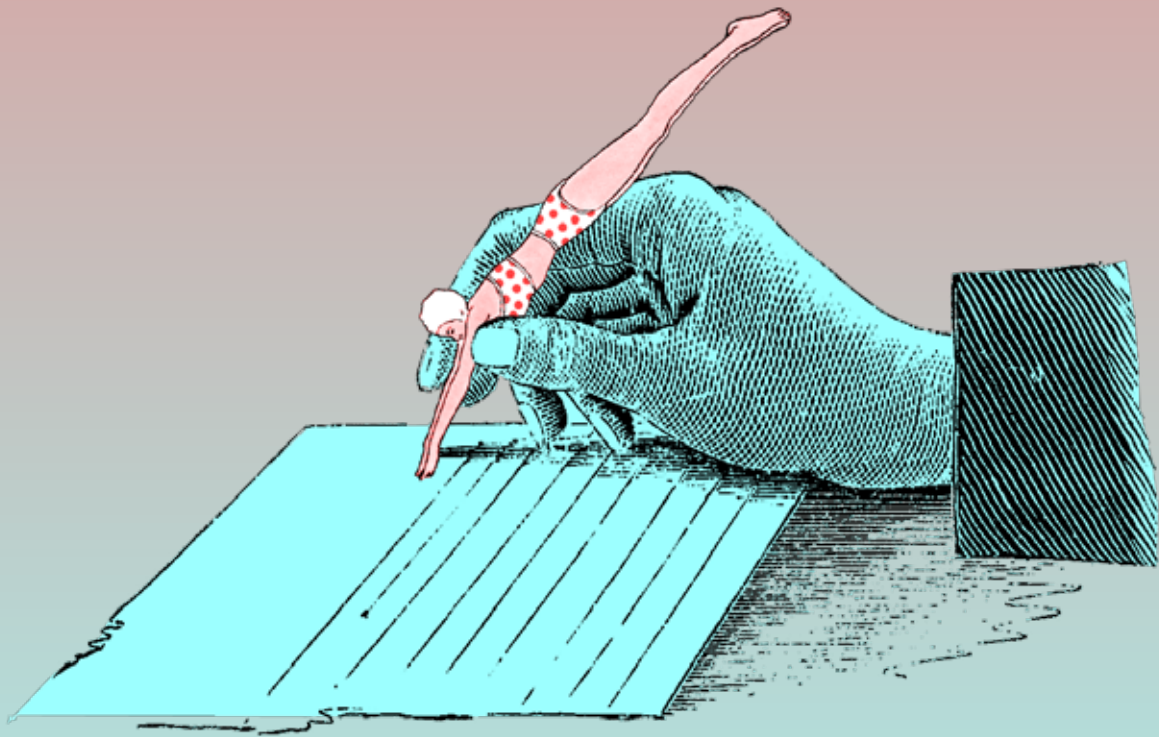


# PANDORA

Volkshochschule Frankfurt Literary Magazine  
Issue 8, February 2015



**„There are thousands of thoughts lying within a man  
that he does not know till he takes up the pen and writes.“**

***William Makepeace Thackeray***

International students of creative writing have been exploring their own thoughts, following their creative urges and honing their English writing skills in courses at the Volkshochschule Frankfurt am Main since 2006. In this, the eighth issue of our VHS literary magazine, Pandora, we are proud to present you some of their work from 2014.

Opening Pandora's box this time reveals an astonishing range of topics, emotions and writing styles. Each piece takes us briefly out of our daily routine and into another world created for us by the writer. We smart at the sharpness of a neighbour's cutting remark, we cringe at the terrible dawning reality of the morning after, we tremble at the tension in the 707 cockpit. Guilt, fear, revenge and metamorphosis are but some of the areas explored by our writers.

My thanks go to Maren Michel and Tonya Teichert, our creative writing teachers who support and nurture their students in the writing process, and to Katharina Hepp, herself a creative writing student and contributor to Pandora, for her artwork and layout expertise.

I hope you enjoy the pieces in this issue as much as I did and that you will be inspired – maybe with the help of a VHS creative writing course – to take up your pen and let your own thoughts run free.

Pandora / Issue 8 / February 2015

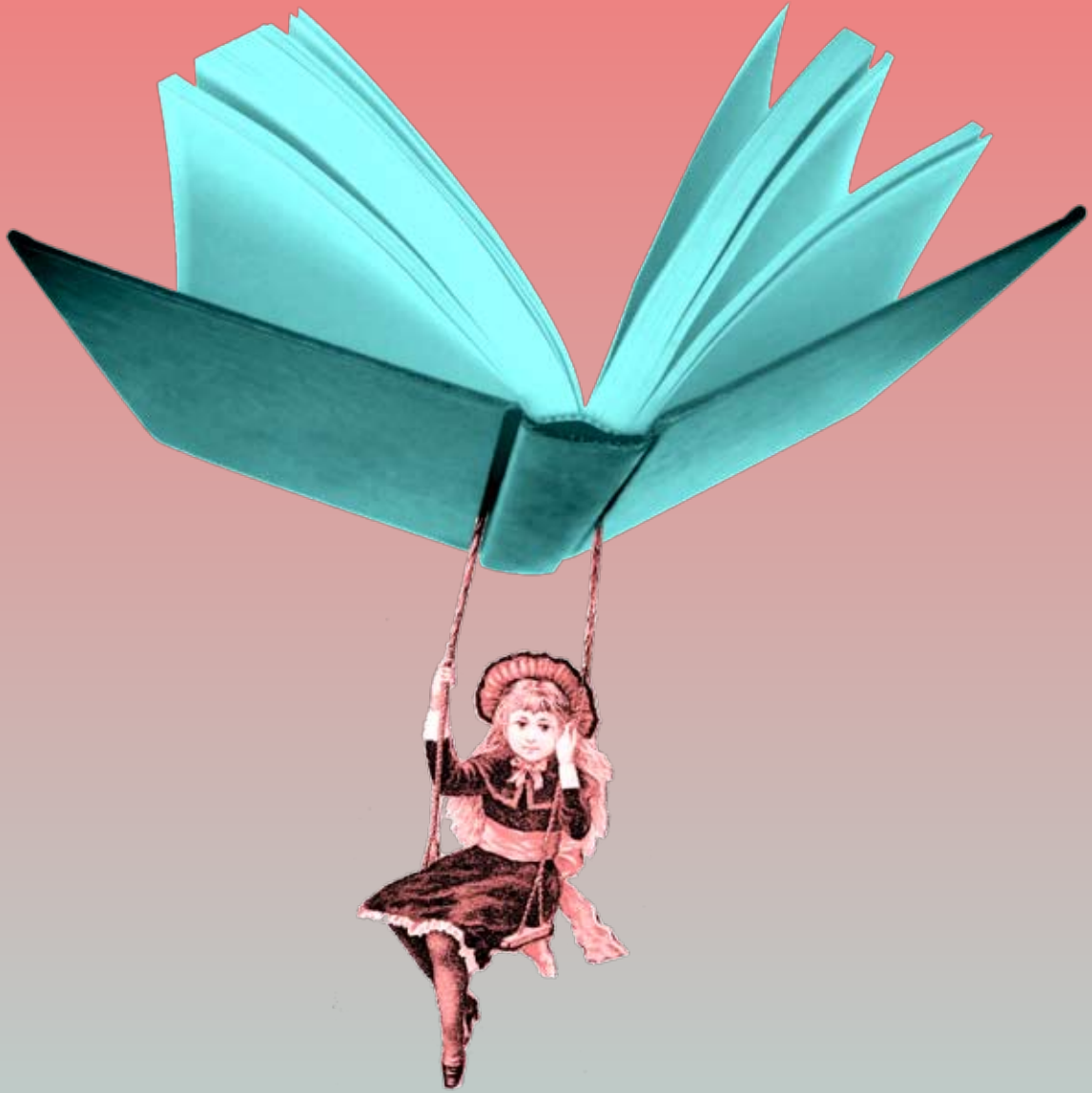
Editor: Maren Michel

Founding Editor: Patricia Bartholomew

Design & Illustrations © Katharina Hepp 2015

# Table of Contents

5	Young Eun Park	<b>Why I Started Writing</b>
7	S. A. Nieberding	<b>A Respectful Distance</b>
11	Katharina Hepp	<b>What to Do When You Have Some Time on Your Hands</b>
13	Nuria Obradors	<b>Stairs</b>
15	Susanne Kux-Ebert	<b>Modernization of Pedestrian Zones</b>
17	Martha Schmidt	<b>Living With a Balcony</b>
20	Nuria Obradors	<b>His Shadow</b>
21	Martha Schmidt	<b>Filling in the Blanks</b>
24	Katharina Hepp	<b>On Words</b>
25	Jürgen Kruse	<b>Queuing</b>
29	Kate Fistrich	<b>Cheap Date</b>
31	Martha Schmidt	<b>The Ear</b>
35	Jürgen Kruse	<b>Memories</b>
39	BR Fisher	<b>The Sting</b>
40	MP Olinger	<b>He Didn't See it Coming</b>
45	Helene Lebold	<b>Paradise Now</b>



Young Eun Park

## ***Why I Started Writing***

When I was a child, I had a bookshelf with a lot of children's books. I can't say that I understood them all, but I can say that I loved to look at books and the shapes of the letters and illustrations in books. My parents collected many kinds of children's books for me and my little brother in the hope of raising scholarly children, so it was very natural that I started to read.

My father ran a small rice shop and, at the same time, he worked as a shuttle bus driver in a town where we lived. My mother helped my father by looking after our small business and taking care of me and my brother. Until I was 13 years old, my family lived together in a tiny room behind the shop. The room was actually connected with the shop via a door, which had a small window in it, so we could look through a window, like a telescope, to see who was waiting in the shop while my mother cooked or embroidered on a textile, or did something else. My parents were away sometimes to deliver bags of rice to neighbors or to do their other business. In these moments, I looked after our small shop and home with my little brother. These were the most exciting moments because we could begin to invent our own journeys by reading books. We sometimes jumped into the jungle and talked with animal friends. Other times we imagined our room was swept away in a cyclone to the land of Oz.

Our favorite, but also saddest, journey was when we went to the Sahara desert to meet our buddy, the Little Prince, from the story by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. We loved to hear the story about the Little Prince's beloved rose. The rose he described was sometimes like me because I was also a fickle and complicated girl for my parents at that time. But I wished I could be the most unique girl in all of the world to my parents, like the only rose of the Little Prince.

Every story we read together was a dream for us because we could travel to places where we couldn't go in reality. And I believed I would never forget this fascinating feeling in my imagination.

Since I've grown up – to be accurate, since I've been busy, building my own life – this feeling has worn off. I still love visualizing and fantasizing between the realities

which I have to suffer, and sometimes these pictures come to my dreams. However, every morning when I wake up, these pictures disappear without words, quickly. I don't remember anymore the fine pictures I drew and the feelings that I had before, as if I had a black hole in my brain.

And then one day, just like any other day, I stumbled upon this quote from "The Little Prince" that touched my heart so much, so much that I could try to start writing stories: "All grown-ups were once children... but only few of them remember it."

S. A. Nieberding

## **A Respectful Distance**

"I'm tired," says Captain Kim as we mark the seventh hour since our departure from Seoul. I'm not surprised. It takes a strong man to fly a 707. The flight controls are connected by pull rods to the panels on the wings and rudders. His right hand controls the speed while his left hand flies the plane. It is exhausting. The pilot is essentially pushing the plane around the sky.

I've been looking forward to this flight since I received my schedule at the beginning of the month. It's not so much that I'm about to get a three-day break in Hawaii after five straight days in the air. It is that I will fly with Captain Kim Ji-hoon. What a great honor for me – only a 28-year-old – to share the flight deck with such a role model!

Eight hours into the flight, the engineer says, "Captain, the weather radar has helped us a lot."

"Yes," replies the captain, "it can be helpful."

Although it is the flight engineer's responsibility to track the weather, his comment strikes me as odd. But if Captain Kim is not bothered by it, then I too should not be.

"The company just works us, works us to the maximum, the sheer maximum," says Captain Kim, rubbing his eyes with one free hand.

I would like to offer to take the controls but rather than risk offending him, I feel compelled to remain silent, granting him the respect his position and station deserve.

Thirty minutes later, the engineer speaks up again unprompted. This is unusual.

"Captain, the weather at our destination could be better, sir."

"First Officer," said Captain Kim to me, "request initial clearance for landing."

I contact Honolulu Air Traffic Control, give our coordinates, and seek preliminary clearance. They tell me they are tracking a tropical storm and cannot clear us yet.

"Captain, I spoke with them, sir."

"Good," said the captain. "Entering HNL coordinates and initiating auto pilot."

Before I can tell the captain that we are not, in fact, cleared for landing, he erupts

into cursing. The auto pilot is apparently malfunctioning. He cannot use it. This will be a manual landing.

Behind me, the flight engineer shifts in his chair. He sounds uncomfortable. Finally, he clears his throat and says, "Captain, it is useful to have alternatives, sir."

Captain Kim says nothing.

"Alternatives?" I ask quietly.

"Such as diverting, sir," he replies.

I turn around and look him directly in the eyes.

After checking that the captain is not watching him, the engineer points to the fuel gauge and pulls his thumb across his throat.

Now I know what he's seeing: an overtired pilot about to attempt a manual landing in bad weather with no opportunity to divert to a different airport due to low fuel. There are not many runways in the middle of the Pacific long enough to land a 707.

"To where?" I whisper.

"Midway," he says loudly and clearly enough for the captain to also hear. That was brave of him. But he must be seeing a very serious weather system indeed to recommend turning the plane around. Surely he must know that diverting to a floating U.S. military base 1,300 miles east of Hawaii would not be a popular decision with the passengers or with the company.

"We're landing at our destination," interjects Captain Kim definitively. "It's bad enough that we're already so delayed. First Officer, tell ATC to bring us in now."

After confirming our current position, I ask Air Traffic Control if we may now proceed to Honolulu. No. They give me a new holding pattern at 10,000 feet and 40 miles west of the island. I repeat their instruction, confirm it, thank them, and add that we're running out of fuel.

No response from ATC. By definition, of course, all planes in flight are constantly running out of fuel. No one speaks.

After fourteen hours in the air, the plane is about to switch to the reserve tank. When it does, we will have about a half hour of flying time left, maybe less. Could it be possible that Captain Kim has not checked the fuel gauge recently?

"We've been in the air a long time, sir," I say.



"Yes," acknowledges Captain Kim.

"Sir, reserve systems are very useful," I suggest.

The captain nods in agreement, but does not look at the instrument panel.

Turbulence begins to shake the plane. We are flying into a tropical storm.

I lift my right hand. It is shaking. The plane hits another pocket of turbulence, setting my arm into motion. The flat open palm of my hand meets Captain Kim's cheek squarely with a loud smack. He immediately meets my eyes. In them, I see shock melt into something like respect. I look down, humbled.

A warning bell sounds in the cockpit.

The fuel gauge is one of eight gauges on the instrument panel, each the size of a teacup. Captain Kim leans over and looks at it hard, his eyes narrowing.

"First officer, tell ATC we're coming in now," says the captain. "Commencing descent."

"Honolulu, this is KAL97 requesting clearance for landing."

"Roger that, KAL97. I'm going to bring you about fifteen miles northeast and then turn you back onto the approach. Is that okay with you and your fuel?"

"Yes, I guess so. Thank you."

Twenty minutes later we are on the approach. We cannot see the island yet.

"Turning on wipers," I say.

The engines flame out with a stutter. Our fuel supply is spent. The plane is now gliding.

"Landing gear down," says the captain.

We are probably about five miles away from the airport, but it's useless. We can't see a thing. The rain that is pelting the windscreen begins spinning, slowly at first, then faster.



*Katharina Hepp*

## ***What to Do When You Have Some Time on Your Hands***

First of all, whatever you do, don't just go and wash it off.

Try not to waste it like that.

Spread it out on an even surface and marvel at the possibilities.

Then decide whether you want to spend it all at once or store some of it away for future use.

Carry a handful in your pocket for emergencies, it will make you feel safe.

Share it generously with friends to enjoy together.

If your workload is heavy, sprinkle a handful over your day for a few quiet moments.

It might surprise you how efficient just a small serving of spare time can be.

And even when you think you've spent it all, there will be crumbs of it hiding in the folds of your sofa, between the pages of a book, in the corner of the window sill.



*Nuria Obradors*

## **Stairs**

My first home was in a quiet pedestrian lane stuck in the middle of downtown Morón, one of the busiest cities of the great Buenos Aires. The entrance was a simple metal door on a beige wall, opening to the front patio. My grandma lived downstairs, and though I could not spend enough time with her, I don't remember much about her flat. Our own dwelling was accessed through an L-shaped staircase in the patio, starting to the right of the street door. The black iron railings, which repeated around the huge terrace outside my parents' bedroom, had a simple geometrical design that vaguely resembled flowers. On top of the stairs there was the entrance door, white wood with four or five fixed windows of colored glass. These were nice enough from the outside; from the inside, they were magic. The stair rests – one at the angle, one in the middle of the upper flight – doubled as a house when I played, and from them I had a panoramic view of the patio, with its grey terrazzo floor and a narrow flower bed on the side, green with grandmotherly plants: spider plant, snake plant, cacti, wax flowers, purple hearts, shrimp plant, and ferns. Although the house faced midday, sun would come in only at an angle to the patio, for there were higher buildings on the opposite side of the street.

To the right of our door there was a narrow veranda, whose only use was providing a byway to reach the flimsy metal stairs that led to the tiny shed on the roof. They were in ruins; I can't remember any balusters coming from the handrail, and one of the wooden treads was missing, a hole to the void that opened beneath to the empty plot next to ours, a small jungle of sorts. My mother remembered seeing rats there as big as cats, fat and shiny from their fresh garbage diet that uncivil neighbors littered over the fence, but I'm sure they were all gone already by the time I lived there. Otherwise, with my innate love for animals and the benevolent portrayal of rodents in cartoons, I would certainly remember them. But I digress.

I loved to go up the stairs to the roof. The stairs would clang and wobble under my feet, and we had to watch for the missing step. I could not go alone, of course, but I'd ask my mother to take me up there. It was a big adventure for my three-year-old self, as close as I could get, in the impossible flatness of the Pampas, to feel like I was

on the border of a tall mountain cliff like my idol, Heidi. Once we arrived at the top of the stairs, there wasn't much to see or do inside the shed: It was the trip that was exciting. I remember my late grandfather's billiard trophies rusting on boxes high on shelves, more boxes with old magazines, and dust, thick dust everywhere, even the air as the sun rays lit up the floating speckles, that I imagined to be snowflakes.

Stairs took me up to my home. Stairs took me down to my playground and my grandma's house and higher up to adventure. Two months before I turned four we moved to a bigger house, in a nicer neighborhood, with a proper garden and flowery wallpaper in my room. However, I was not happy: the house had no stairs.

*Susanne Kux-Ebert*

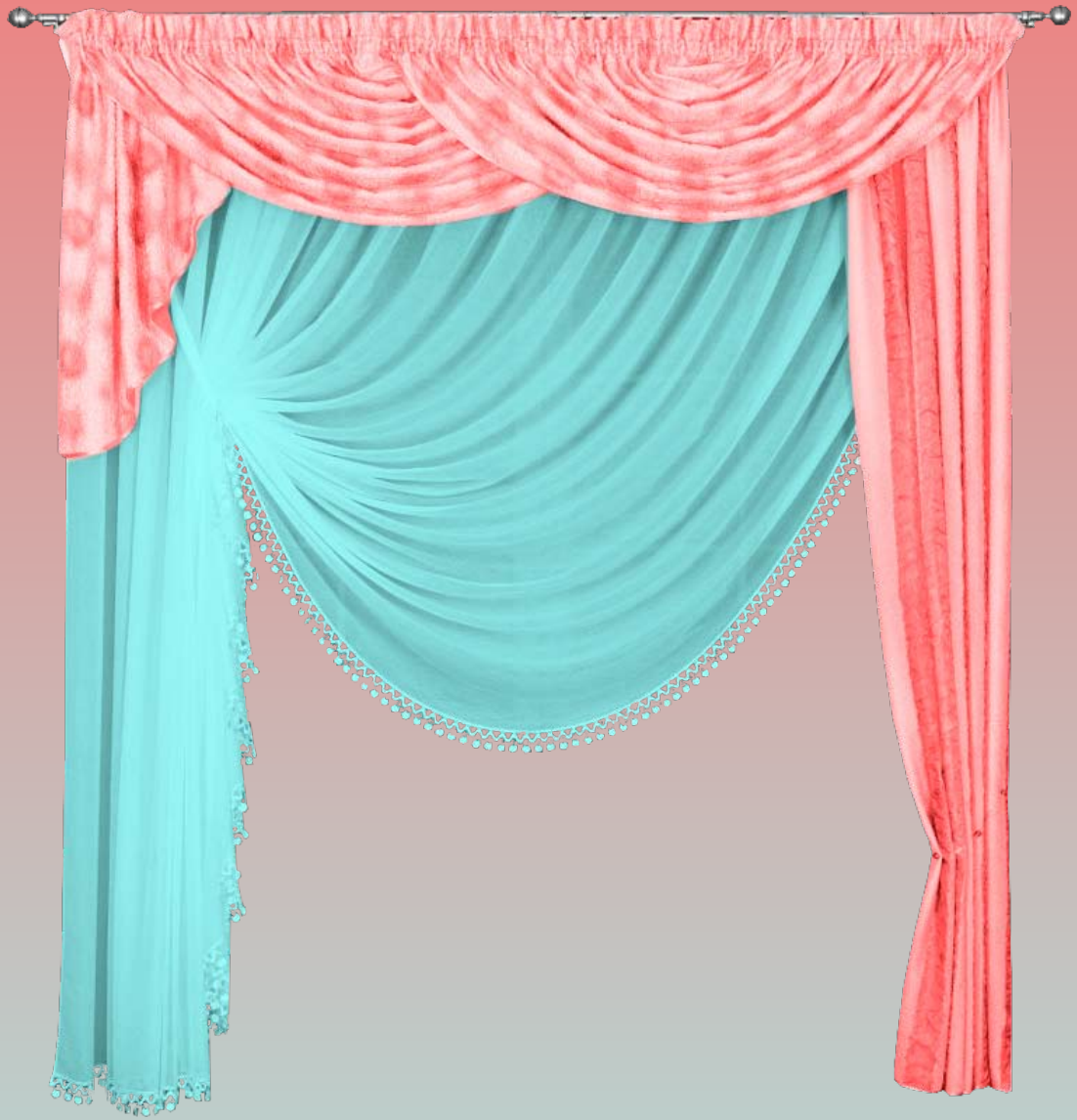
# **Modernization of Pedestrian Zones**

The ideal situation inside a pedestrian area is a vehicle-free atmosphere; vehicles could disturb, via pollution, people's desire to have a good time while shopping. Pedestrians are walking, strolling and are interested in a variety of different products. But customers enjoy finding advantageous shopping areas inside a comfort zone via small vehicles instead of carrying shopping bags by hand.

Modern shopping areas are inside a building complex with short distances to every shopping point. Nowadays we have pedestrian malls like the Hessen Center in Bergen-Enkheim and the Main-Taunus Center, where there is an ideal situation: there is a huge parking space for each mall, and short distances to the mall's shopping area.

In comparison, Bad Homburg's pedestrian zone is a very long, hilly street and has all kinds of different retail shops. This vehicle-restricted area is connected to Bad Homburg's infrastructure by bus lines and nearby parking spaces around the area. Only during limited hours can products be delivered directly to shops, when delivery vehicles pass and pause in the pedestrian zone. In reality, those restricted hours are flexible, and sometimes cars and trucks are passing by while pedestrians are sitting comfortably at cafe tables.

However, an ideal pedestrian zone is rare to find. It even seems like something imaginary. A pedestrian-friendly town square inside surrounding traffic areas still leads to confrontations at pedestrian crossings. All in all, a city center needs a pedestrian zone, but to create one, there should be an analysis of historical and modern areas inside a city. Combining them with a modern pedestrian zone in order to support business could work efficiently.





Martha Schmidt

## **Living With a Balcony**

You may see her in the night leaning over the railing high above the street. You wonder what she is doing there. Obviously, she isn't on the balcony to smoke. No. Sometimes you see her smoking. Not in a hurry as if she has to do it secretly or as if she is addicted to nicotine. No. She smokes just because she enjoys it. Calmly, naturally relaxed. So she walks up and down the balcony with a cigarette in her hand. In her left hand. With her right hand, she holds her left elbow. Now and then she stops walking to watch something far away near the horizon or to bend over the railing to see what's going on right under her balcony. When she is on the balcony without her cigarette, she lays one palm on the railing and draws it behind her going from one end to the other. Or she stands right before the door leaning with both hands on the railing, and scrutinizes what's happening around her.

She spends a lot of time on the balcony by night and by day. It's definitely not because she is alone or has nobody to talk with. No. From time to time she rises up from the railing and turns around towards the open door to say this and that into the room. What she says must be funny. You can hear laughter coming through the curtain softly blowing in the door opening. And then you hear her laughter. Her wonderful laughter. It fills the air with joy and covers the surroundings with an atmosphere of optimism and enthusiasm.

Always, when I take my dog out, I pass the balcony. Every day and every night I hear this inspiring laughter live and it brightens me up.

Of course I had wanted to know who she was. But I had never got the chance to encounter her. Once only. Nearly. It was a nasty night. I had to walk my dog and hurried as a storm threatened. Suddenly I heard a 'cling'. It was a silver sound as if a bell of ice had tinkled. I saw a silver earring twinkle on the pavement. Hers? It was too late to ring any door bells. I took the earring home. The next morning I went to the house and rang a bell I supposed to belong to the flat on the highest floor. The door opened. Full of expectation, I went up the stairs. In the doorway stood a man.

I could hardly hide my disappointment. I showed him the silver earring. „Thank goodness!“ he exclaimed. „It’s the earring my wife has been searching for nearly the whole night. Come in, please.“ With new hope to get to know the person on the balcony, I entered the hall. „Tonya would be pleased to meet you, but she is working at the VHS,“ he informed me. „Let’s have a coffee in the living room.“ We entered a generous room that opened onto the balcony. The curtain blew gently in the fresh morning air. Sunbeams cast their light on the white furniture and the zebra hide carpet. Tastefully combined. Everything therein was tastefully arranged, yet without the coldness of contemporary design. Brightly cushioned chairs and a comfortable couch along the wall invited everyone entering this room to make themselves at home. Some toys were spread around a pink play-kitchen. „You have children?“ „Yes, we do. Two daughters. Five and three years old. The perfect spicy blend of our lives,“ he laughed and went to the kitchen. She has a nice husband, a nice family, I thought. And a rich family life. My eyes glided over the table covered with unfolded magazines and two wine glasses, side by side, remaining there from the last evening. Further along, I scanned the bookshelf and the cupboard overloaded with CDs on the wall facing me. The CD player was blinking, ready to play music. A CD cover lay open to feed the recorder with something new. I couldn’t discover which song it was. Nina Simone? Maybe not. Too old and too slow. Tonya would like some speedy Caribbean samba to sing and dance to. Especially to dance, I assumed.

Her husband came in with two cups of coffee. „Milk? Sugar?“ „Thanks, just black coffee.“ „If you’d like to smoke, we’ll go on the balcony,“ he offered. There are situations in which I regret being a non-smoker. This was one of them. Very nearly I blew my chance to go onto her balcony. Quickly I said, „But I would like to see the view from there.“ „Of course. Enjoy the wide view from our balcony. You must know that it’s why my wife wants to live here. And that’s why I’m jealous.“ I suddenly felt embarrassed. He saw my surprised face and smiled. „You must know it’s her passion to stay here and to enjoy this view. Once I reproached her for having more eyes for what happens outside the balcony than for me. But we have made an arrangement. She can stay on the balcony and make her observations as long as she wants as long as she provides me with the highlights she discovers. So I have the best entertainment every day that one can imagine and she is free to collect the impressions for her creative writing. You know, she’s a VHS teacher and a writer as well.“ „Oh!“ I was astonished. Maybe

I had already become a subject in one of her novels. „The balcony has become her muse,“ he went on in amusement. „It’s a ménage à trois: she, me and the balcony.“

We returned to the living room and I imagined him settling back on the couch in expectation of her comments from the balcony. He would lounge in confidence that it was the perfect arrangement.

What about when he notices that it’s a ménage à quatre?

*Nuria Obradors*

## ***His Shadow***

He's been following me all morning, the sneaky little bastard. And he's good at it, too. He doesn't always stay behind me; sometimes he's a bit further down the road, stops to greet someone, or wanders off for a few tense minutes in which I think I've managed to lose him (and I've tried to lose him too, several times, to no avail). Yet he keeps coming back.

I tell him to go, but he doesn't listen, firm on my wake as I keep on walking. The few people I've encountered on my way don't seem to see what the problem is – most just assume he's with me. But that's it: I have to get rid of him before getting back to my hotel, and I'm only a couple of blocks away now. So I turn around and stand my ground. I shout, I move menacingly towards him, dark and cute and bemused, and even throw a rock in his direction. The rock misses him, but drives the point home. I will not see him again.

I enter the hotel quickly, ducking my head, holding back the tears. Once in my room, I drop onto the bed and weep bitterly, the hopeful eyes of the poor little stray dog still stuck like a dagger in my chest.

He will follow me forever.

*Martha Schmidt*

## ***Filling in the Blanks***

A single remark by my neighbor, living to the right of my own home, disturbed my work. I was preparing to sit on my terrace and enjoy the calmness of the morning and the gentleness of the weather. My children had already gone to school and the kitchen had been tidied up. All that should be done was to write, to write the story I wanted to, that I had to. Everything had been arranged now. I just went out to cut twigs off my rose tree, which was bending into my neighbors' garden. I knew these neighbors living to the right of me didn't like roses growing into their garden. They feared the blossoms could touch their nice white wall. Swinging in the wind and caressing the roughcast wall, the blossoms would rub and the seed capsules would open. The pigments and the seeds would leave a grayish shadow on their neat façade.

I had intended to prepare everything perfectly and to cut this twig off my rose, which was reaching across the boundary of my neighbors' garden since the rain yesterday evening had bent it down. I had thought to put the rose, eventually, in the slim vase on my mantelpiece. Having cleared the twig, with the feeling of having done well, I wanted to start writing.

I was just standing in my front garden with the pruning shears in my hand when my neighbor came out of his house and went to his car, which he had parked in front



of his entrance. „Good morning, Mr. Stone,“ I said from between the twigs of my little cherry tree. „Oh! You got up that early this morning,“ he said. He could barely manage to keep down the snide tone in his odd voice; he could barely hold back the sneer on his shaved face.

I was dumb-struck and after a while I retorted, “I get up at half past six every morning.” With the rose in my left hand and the pruning shears in my right hand, I disentangled myself from the whipping twigs and fled into my house. “What the hell was that for?” I wondered. I took the vase, put the stem in it, and placed it somewhere in the living room. I went out on the terrace. I grabbed my paper and my fountain pen to write down my story.

But I couldn't. I couldn't go on with the sentence I had written just yesterday. It didn't work. “Fuck!” I had the words in my mind before I went out. I shouldn't have cut this cheeky rosebud. Now the cutting remark of my neighbor had spoiled my well-prepared working day.

“What an ass he is,“ I thought and my anger grew. “This damn asshole has disturbed my story!” The beating anger made me write another story.

It's always the same. My story becomes another story.

*Katharina Hepp*

## **On Words**

The later it gets the more I lose my words. All over the place. I must have left control in the kitchen when I got a beer, but when I go back for it later I can't find it, so I take a bottle of vodka instead. Then I bump into you and drop wariness, but before I can pick it up again you hand me intrigue.

When you talk to me I try to grab reserve and mystery, but they wriggle out of my grasp and disappear into the darkness behind the sofa, where they sit together for the rest of the night, laughing quietly. While I'm talking to somebody else, you leave the room. I can feel something digging into my back and reach for it. It's doubt. I roll it around in my hands, it's heavy and very cold.

Then you're back. You take it out of my hands and sit down next to me. Your hands are warm. Finally, I am all out of words. You're smiling. And there is no need for them.



*Jürgen Kruse*

## **Queuing**

Karen Berwick pays the taxi driver and leaves the cab. The happily married thirty-something mother of two wonderful teenage girls and part-time chemist at her husband's biotech lab is setting out to start a new career. The big railway clock above the main entrance shows 10:45. Time enough to buy the ticket and walk up to the platform. Mrs. Berwick extends the handle of her new carry-on and wheels it into the hall.

Despite being informed that there would be no need to stay overnight, she had bought the bag. "Much too expensive this piece, but probably essential for our long-distance commuter-to-be," Peter had somewhat wistfully commented. Seems as if he has finally decided to put up with the idea that she might get the job. If she doesn't believe in herself, she reckons, why should others? Yet, Peter, at least, should be an exception, even if he would have to hire a new nucleic acids expert and take on more responsibilities at home.

Maybe I'm overcautious, she thinks, but so be it. So she puts her second trouser suit and an extra blouse into the carry-on. It still feels rather empty. She thinks it's more comfortable to carry her shoulder bag separately. She presses the bag with her arm on her body and feels her new iPad mini in it. As soon as she finds a seat, she'll check it for any new messages.

She enters the station hallway through the left side entrance. The station building has recently been restored and now looks again like a triumphal archway with a smaller passageway on each side. Anyway, when she comes back tonight, she'll march through the archway like one of those Roman generals returning after a decisive victory. "You'll make it," Rebecca had said. "There are only two other competitors shortlisted. Internal applications are always placed in the final round. Neither stands a chance. One has the reputation of having a difficult character, the other one wants to work part-time." Peter sometimes teases her when she leaves the family for a short weekend with the 'girls': "Enjoy your old-girls-network and bring some nice recipes back." But keeping in touch with Rebecca since their university days is now paying off.

The station hall is crowded, and there's a long, well-ordered queue at the ticket centre slowly meandering up to the few open ticket counters; the queues at the ticket machines are even longer. She knows there are less frequented ticket machines on the platforms, so she takes the escalator upstairs to her platform and spots immediately the first free ticket machine.

It's one of the new touch-screen devices that have replaced the old ones with the mechanical keyboards. She touches the screen and the instructions lead her step by step through the procedure until 'purchase completed' appears, followed by 'insert payment'. She inserts her credit card and the machine responds 'error' and then 'purchase cancelled'. She starts again from square one. This time the address finder refuses to work. When she is tapping 'reset', she becomes aware of the short queue behind her.

"Mama, I know how it works. May I help her?" A maybe ten year-old girl in the line is watching her, whispering loudly to a woman carrying a stylish fire engine-red backpack.

"Shush! Nora," Mama whispers back. "The lady is certainly able to manage it herself." The young man directly behind her tries to look over her shoulder. "Don't worry," he says, "you still have seven minutes."

She feels her mouth becoming dry. She hates this symptom of anxiety. The body produces stress hormones, the blood's glucose level rises and you begin to get thirsty. Don't worry, it's natural, she tells herself.

Somewhere behind her, a mobile phone rings, "Yes, dear, I see you over there. You'll probably be faster. It isn't moving here. Aha, yes, you're right. Would you mind buying one for me? Okay, that's fine. Wonderful. Really nice. I'm coming over." There's a slight shuffle in the queue as the guy defects.

From a group of young people walking past Mrs Berwick, someone shouts, "Do you know what insanity is? I'll tell you: Doing the same things over and over again and expecting different results. It's from Einstein." The group laughs and the queue giggles.

The loudspeaker announces the train arriving and the queue behind Mrs Berwick dissolves. An elderly lady who had watched the spectacle from some distance comes up and says, "Don't worry. It's not your fault. There's no such thing as machine-human-interaction. This thing can't learn but we can." Mrs Berwick and the elderly lady smile at each other and step back when they feel the air whirl of the incoming train.

\* \* \* \* \*

These events, you may rightfully call them trivial, occurred between 10:45 and 10:57 a.m. If you are interested in what happened later that day, read the following brief account.

Of course, Mrs Berwick could buy a ticket on the train and found a comfortable seat in First Class. She had just settled in when Rebecca called. "Congratulations," Rebecca hollered, "you've made it. Your two competitors withdrew. The big boss has decided that you get the job. Interview cancelled. Be happy and take the next train back to your loved ones and your lab. Bye, bye, dear. I'm already on my way to the next meeting."

Mrs. Berwick, who knows everything about deoxyribonucleic acid and something about cooking, had prepared herself for the interview by learning some key terms of corporate life. Flexibility, she memorised, refers to when, where, and how work is done. So when the next stop was announced, she took handbag and carry-on, left the train and spent a wonderful day in a beautiful, historic town she had never been to before. The train back home arrived on time. She strode triumphantly through the archway, took a cab and looked forward to a nice evening with her family after this exhausting workday.



Kate Fistic

## Cheap Date

"I need you to give me €1,000," Susan says before we've even ordered drinks.

"Right..." I rub my top lip with my finger, expecting her to elaborate, but she doesn't.

"Why?" I venture.

"Well," she begins, "it's a bit embarrassing."

"Oh?" I'm intrigued. Susan is no stranger to embarrassing situations; in fact, it's one of the things I like so much about her.

"I've done something." She shifts uncomfortably in her seat before leaning towards me conspiratorially. In anticipation I mirror her, turning my face slightly so she has access to my good ear.

"I've..." Just as she's about to confess her latest debacle, the waiter approaches. He notices the apparent subterfuge in our exchange and begins to back away, but Susan sees him and bolts herself upright, pulling her lips into an insincere grin and faux-casually ordering a white wine. There's a reason MI5 never called her back. I order the same and the waiter skulks away. We repeat our lean-in.

"Well..." she begins again. "You know the guy at work that I like."

"Jeff," I reply without a breath.

"Um, yes, Jeff. Well, he's throwing a party now he's reconciled with his fiancée." Susan makes air quotes around 'reconciled' and, intentionally or otherwise, leaves them hanging over 'fiancée.' I nod. I'm well acquainted with Jeff's romantic entanglements, though I was rather hoping that the aforementioned reconciliation would finally put paid to Susan's infatuation. I begin to calculate how long it's been since we've had a drink together without a side dish of Jeff.

"Anyway he's invited everyone from the office. I obviously can't not go."

"Why not?" I ask contentiously, smiling as the waiter brings the wine over. He seems to linger momentarily as if hoping to pick up a state secret. He'll be disappointed.

"What do you mean?" Susan looks confused.

"Why can't you not go?"

"Because then he'll know."

"Suze, darling, he knows."

She purses her lips. "Well, maybe, but anyway, he can't know that I care."

I nod, though it might equally have been a tic.

"So... I've called someone." She sips her wine nervously while I say nothing.

"You see, there's this service..." I feel my eyes narrowing. "Where you can call someone and they fulfil your requirements, you know... romantically."

"Susan! Have you called a prostitute?!" I demand incredulously and apparently more loudly than intended.

"Shh! What?! No!" She glances around, flustered, trying to ascertain how many of the complete strangers in the bar have both heard and care. Concluding none, she adds, "No, not a...." She mouths 'prostitute.' "A consort."

"A consort? What, like the Duke of Edinburgh?"

She frowns. "Sort of. Just for the evening. You can hire these... gentlemen... who accompany you to events and make you look, well, fabulous."

"Fabulous, huh?" I mock gently, smiling and sipping my wine.

"Yes, obviously it's totally non-sexual. They pick you up, drink tonic all night, say witty and intelligent things and drop you off at 11pm, no funny business, nothing."

"Sounds rather like my first boyfriend."

She sighs as if I'm not taking this seriously enough.

"So I've made a booking with a.... consort... for Jeff's party. His name is Cesar and he's an architect. Well, he's not actually an architect, obviously, but he studied architecture for a couple of years so he pretends to be one very well. He's also tall."

"Well, that's important."

"The thing is, the party's next Thursday and I don't get paid until the following week."

She bites her lip and gazes at me like an orphaned puppy. "So, I need you to lend me the €1,000 now. I'll pay you back, obviously." Her tone is breezier than I'd like. Susan still has several of my DVDs and both of my Le Creuset – long ago borrowed, psychologically written off. She once donated one of my dresses to Oxfam by mistake.

"He costs €1,000?! For €1,000 I think I'd want the Duke of Edinburgh. At least he could be relied on to say something inappropriate and liven things up."

"Well, technically he costs €800, but I need a new dress. Obviously."

"Obviously." I sigh, reaching for my mobile to make the bank transfer.

The waiter brings the bill. Susan puts her hand on it.

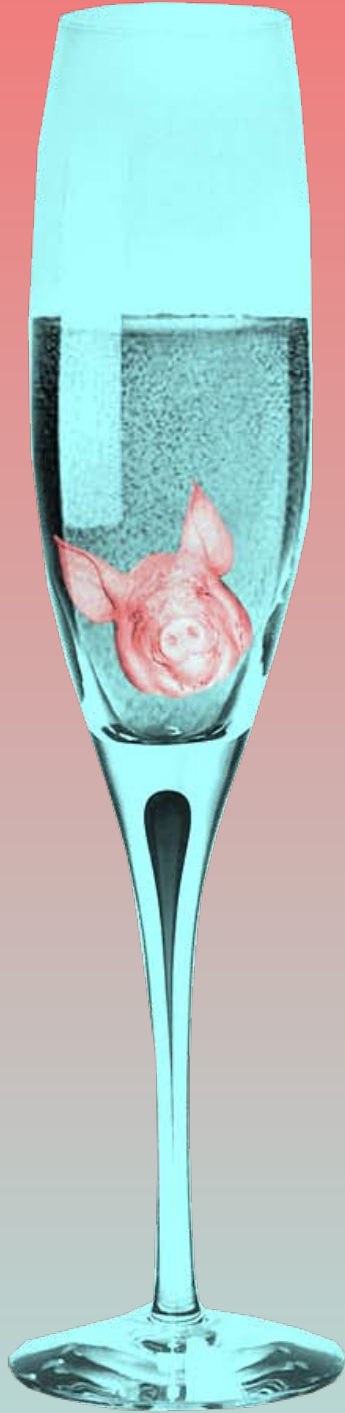
"I'll get this," she winks.

*Martha Schmidt*

## **The Ear**

Doctor Mores woke up with a headache as if he had slept a fortnight after a wild party. He found himself in a bed in a room that seemed to be a suite in a luxury hotel. The sharp rays of the street lamp shone through the breezing curtains, and dazzling spots jumped on the satin pillow. He heard the hum of the street as if muffled by an impenetrable haze. He had no idea how he came to be in this bed. His temples throbbed. He massaged his forehead and the base of his nose as he always did when he felt tired on his night shifts. On the back of his left hand, he recognized a deep violet bruise that was already turning brown and yellow at the rim. Like the hematomas that the cannulas left on the patients' hands.

He couldn't imagine why he might have been treated with a cannula. His temples pulsed and his right ear rang. He scratched his ear. Wah! He screamed. This was not his ear! It felt harder and thicker and hairy. Like the hairs of his beard. With the tips of his fingers, he went along the outline. There was no curve; there was an edge instead. Anxiously, he withdrew his hand. He felt completely confused. The blood pressed in tremendous waves against his skull and squeezed his eyes out of the eye sockets. His throat was dry and sickness captured his body. Paralyzed with fear, he lay for what seemed like ages before he cautiously arose. His gaze fell on the cupboard opposite his bed. Pieces of memory pierced through his throbbing brain. He stared at the cupboard. Wasn't it the same cupboard? The same room where he had been after the Faculty of Medicine's 125th anniversary? With that medical student he had met at the university party, that sweet only-child suburban girl? His teeth were chattering with fear. He couldn't remember his teeth ever having chattered. One of those spoiled, naive girls, sheltered and brought up under her mum's eagle eyes. He trembled from head to foot. He clenched his fists; otherwise, he thought, his fingers would fly away. Those shy girls, knowing nothing other than to play with puppies, and nicely knitting and sewing puppy clothes, anxiously protected by their mums. It was easy to involve such a puppy student in small talk. His brain pulsated like a heart-lung machine. Those puppy mummies who thought they could take on the profession of a surgeon. It was easy to give her a glass of champagne with some drops in it. Beads of perspiration collected on his burning forehead. He breathed shallowly.



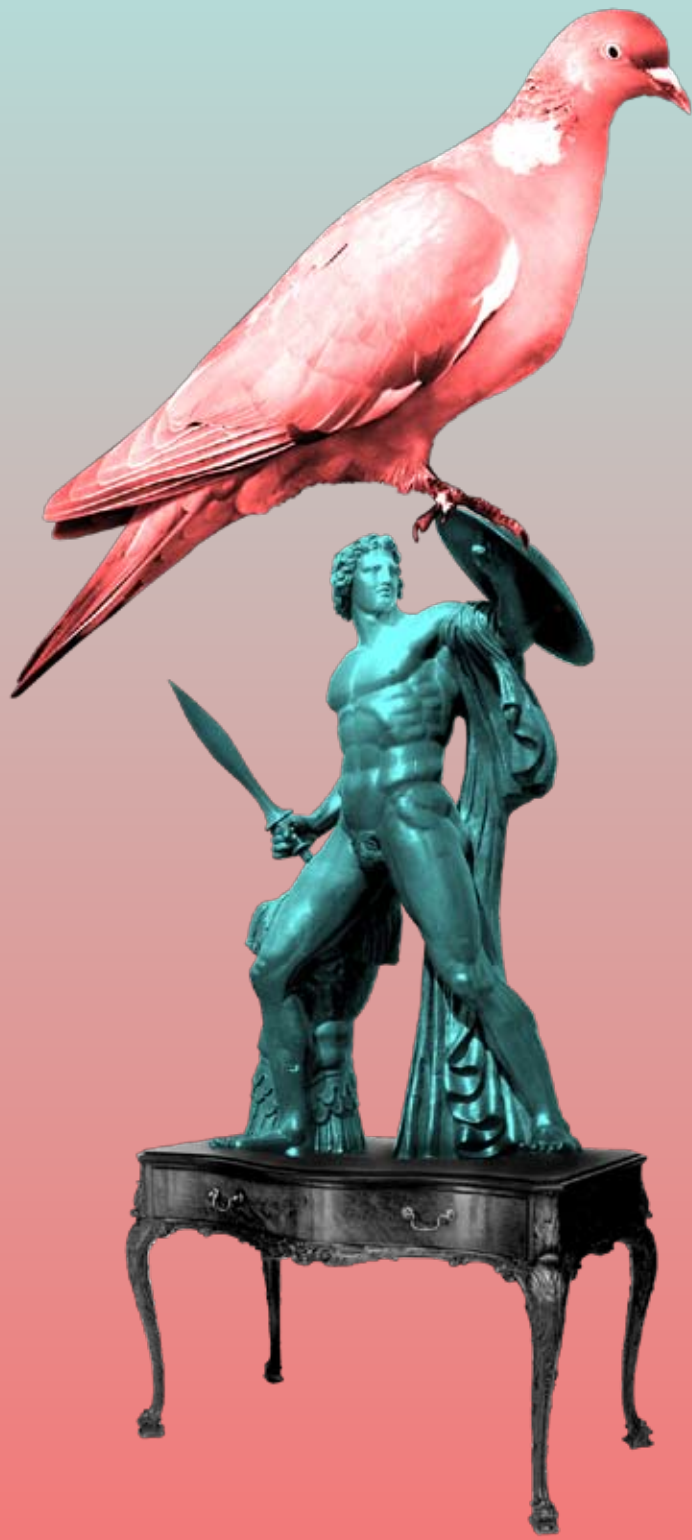


This arrogant suburban puppy! He ached. It was easy, then, to take this puppy with him in the car. He squinted at the cupboard, with the lopsided handle of the left door. Yes, it was here. Her dress got caught on this handle as she staggered in the room, and the cloth tore when she stumbled and finally fell on the bed. This puppy surgeon. This surgeon of a bitch!

Doctor Mores turned his head to the window. The curtains mixed the dark of the night with the sharp neon light of the street lamp. Bizarre figures appeared on the pillow. The black figure moved up and down, up and down – ferociously stitching like the needle of a tailor’s industrial sewing machine. A gust of wind blew the curtain upwards and a fierce face emerged, then immediately disappeared with a scornful sneer.

Doctor Mores stared at the lopsided handle. What day was it now? A piece of refreshed memory drained in his wounded brain. The day for the ceremony? Hadn’t he been at the 130th anniversary of his highly acclaimed surgical department? He rubbed his burning eyes. Where this specialist of the Queen’s Hospital delivered an address... this young but famous facial surgeon? Charles remembered more and more. This international, well-respected specialist mentioned that it had been the great experience she once had had with this university department that had made her a passionate surgeon. Charles felt proud when this famous and exceptionally attractive facial surgeon came to him with champagne and clinked glasses obviously, especially, with him.

But – what happened then? He couldn’t remember. His head was bursting with pain. The twinge of his right ear became stronger. He hesitated to touch it again and tried to get out of bed. His naked body shivered. He wobbled slowly to the bathroom. He switched on the light, moved to the basin, supported himself on the basin rim and looked in the mirror. His eyes nearly popped. His right ear was gone. In its place was a perfect – and by every trick of the surgical profession – stitched on and already nearly complete pig’s ear.



*Jürgen Kruse*

## **Memories**

Last year, Ivor and Megan, our neighbours for 15 years in Berlin, moved to the small village of Alfriston, about 100 km southeast of London. They had inherited a typical English cottage, pre-Victorian, timber-framed, thatched, with an antique brick fireplace. "Come and visit us as soon as possible," they invited. "There are so many things to see here. Sussex is full of historic sites, manors, castles, and architecture, Tudor, Elizabethan and Georgian, to name but some. Even the historical record of our village dates back to long before the Normans arrived in the eleventh century."

So we lost no time, packed our bags and hit the road this spring to see our friends and experience the beautiful southern English countryside and its cultural heritage. And indeed, Sussex is gorgeous with its pattern of small forests, fields and meadows; the small, quiet roads lined by tall hedge banks and vaulting trees remind one of the picturesque scenery of a John Constable landscape painting.

We had sightseeing trips to historic houses and castles, guided tours through heritage centres; visited village museums, some of them open-air; we even had a ride on a historic bus around a park dedicated to the industrial past of the area. We walked over the Battlefield of Hastings (audio tour) and saw a fortress built some two hundred years ago to defend the English south coast against the expected invasion of the Napoleonic forces.

Ivor and Megan were really wonderful guides into the past of their "new neck of the woods" as they called it. Asked why they had so diligently delved so deeply into the local history, they said it had helped them to develop a sense of belonging to their new place. "Naturally, you need to know your neighbors and find out where all the amenities are around here," Ivor remarked. "You can rest assured, we live in the here and now. Yet, to put down new roots you need a sense of belonging and this includes a certain knowledge of the local history."

And Megan assisted, "Think only of the museums, the historic monuments, and the memorials and landmarks we've shown you; all signs of our cultural identity.

And, what's more, the people around here identify strongly with their country's history." I could have replied that more Englishness probably survived in the countryside than in Britain's cities with their multicultural population, but I kept my counsel, and for the rest of the evening the conversation turned to less serious topics.

"I do not doubt," my husband said on our way back to Berlin, "that a certain knowledge of local history can help newcomers feel at home. Yet, if something like cultural identity existed, it would have probably been more the common language, religion, ethnicity. Nationality would be the key term, not locality." He paused for a moment and added with a sad undertone, "Just look at the state of the world. These characteristics divide more than they include."

We live in the much-discussed era of globalization, where not only products and services but also cultural habits become more and more uniform worldwide. It may well be that this is one of the reasons why characteristics that distinguish us from our neighbours, nationally and locally, become more and more important. Our public bodies responsible for the preservation of our cultural heritage use this argument. If you translate their anthropological and psychological reasoning into plain language, they claim that caring for the so-called cultural heritage is fundamental to our social and individual wellbeing.

The socially and individually good is a complex thing. It consists of many factors, so why should not a rich and visible cultural heritage contribute to it? However, I have always suspected that the main reason for the considerable public engagement in this area lies with the high-and-mighty. They want to keep the memory of their "great" forebears alive in order to put themselves in a historic line with them. Why not use past glory to pep up my present low approval ratings, some of them may think, even though this idea does not always work as the following example may show.

In 1992, the heads of the European Union and the American governments planned a series of big events to celebrate the fifth centenary of Columbus' arrival in the New World. The governments on both continents were sure that the common jubilee would find widespread support among their peoples and improve the strained international relations. But, alas, the political leaders on both sides of the Atlantic had

grossly miscalculated. Instead of praising the civilising achievements of the European colonisation of the Americas, the public discussion focussed on the oppression, degradation and the annihilation of the indigenous peoples and their culture.

I remember another example of how the present generation redefines its cultural heritage when public opinion changes. Probably every TV station on our planet showed the tearing down of the Saddam Hussein statue in Baghdad that marked the end of the Battle of Baghdad in 2003 during the invasion by the US-led 'coalition of the willing'. The funny thing is that the eradication of a monument can tell us as much about how earlier generations saw their time as its preservation.

However, much of the preservation of our historic heritage may be determined or influenced by the political forces of the day. Inheritance, be it public or private, has a tremendous fascination for most people. I wonder whether there is but one among us who has never been to a museum or has never taken their photo in front of a, say, historic statue, or think of the thriving antiquity business selling hundreds of thousands of old pieces, and do not forget your own mementoes and heirlooms in the secret drawer of your (I am sure) genuine Chippendale desk at home.



*BR Fisher*

## **The Sting**

When I was a young boy, a man lived in my street who kept bees. His interest had grown into a large, successful honey business. That was just before he disappeared.

That year, over a dull winter morning breakfast, my father said, „Mr. Smart, the bee-keeper has disappeared,” adding, „he’s just flown away and left his wife and business.”

These words surprised me as I had spoken with Mr. Smart just a few days earlier when sent to purchase a jar of his honey. I remembered the occasion well because he was dressed rather strangely in black trousers and a yellow and black striped jacket. He was wearing large dark glasses and his speech seemed strange. He had developed a habit of adding ...zzz... to the end of words.

„So...Zzz, you need...to buy....zzz... some honey,” he asked, jerking his head backward and forward and flapping his arms like a chicken when he spoke. His nose seemed strangely long and pointed.

That same week a lady also vanished from my village. They say that she had arrived earlier in the year from some exotic tropical country. She was called Rose and always wore a strong, strange, wonderful perfume, and even in the autumn dressed in bright flower-like clothes.

I was afraid to ask my parents, but my natural instincts (which were just beginning to form) made me wonder if Mr. Smart and Rose had run away together.

## ***He Didn't See it Coming***

By the time I watched with utter disbelief the last gondola disappear down the summit, the blizzard had wrapped itself around the tip of pine trees and my skis had vanished right under my feet. While bone-chilling winds kept pelting my helmet with ice, the gondola carrying the last skiers and snowboarders swayed dangerously in the cross winds as it vanished from view behind sheets of snow.

The deserted alpine cafe shrugged its shoulders while I kept scanning the slope. Hoping to see Stuart's red anorak through the heavy snowfall, my voice echoed against the mountains as I called out his name. Rubbing my hands against each other for warmth I looked left and right. Nothing. No Stuart. Fear started to knot my stomach. As a crack skier, he loved to hurtle down the slopes. Last year while helicopter skiing with Stu, I had lost sight of him in the fog. I had gotten frostbite while waiting to be rescued. He knew damn well that since that day I panicked when left stranded in the mountains. He knew that. So why did he leave me, yet again, on the upper mountain with a blizzard blurring the land?

Flying ice-crystals kept needling my cheeks while the wind blew plumes and clouds of ice across the vast ridgeline. Listening into the wind, I held my breath. I used all my willpower to keep the budding panic from snaking to the surface. Finally I resigned myself to the fact that Stuart had done it again. How could I have been so stupid? I should have known better. I should have listened to my inner voice. I should have relaxed in the spa and had a massage instead.

Instead of getting pampered, I stood on top of a bloody mountain while dusk drew slithering shadows on the slopes. Like prickling, leggy insects, fear crawled up to my neck. Before the dam could burst I sat down, lowered my head between my knees, willing myself to stop hyperventilating. With the wind roaring and dancing furiously, I tried to breathe evenly. Huddling in the snow, I tried to stay calm. I kept my head low. I breathed in. I breathed out. Gusts of wind crept under my anorak. The cold invaded my bones. Willing the budding panic into the ground, I took a deep breath. I steadied myself and got up. I looked around. No sign of Stuart.



Zillions of snowflakes stormed towards earth while I stemmed the poles deep into the snow edging towards the ridge. Leaning against the wind, I looked down the deep slope. Through the blurring whiteness I tried to make out which way to go. Dusk had settled, but the snow still gave off a slight glow in the fading light. Gliding my skis over the ridge I hesitated. I waited. Left and right giant rocks loomed above mocking my fear. Slinging the poles over my hands and furious at Stuart and angry at my own stupidity, I fastened my shawl tight adjusted my goggles, and pushed myself off, venturing downhill into the twilight.

The wind howled. My skis screeched while they clawed into the icy slope. Ice particles kept needling my face, blurring the bit of vision I had left. I gritted my teeth. I kept poling downhill. Carefully curving and slithering downwards over the icy slope, fighting fear, cross winds and heavy snowfall, I didn't stop until I reached the wooded area at mid-mountain.

By then the wind had lost some of its fury, but had created whiteout conditions. Exhausted I stopped. I stood still for a moment; clearing my goggles while catching my breath. It was then that I saw it. I saw a dark moving shadow prowling and rustling between the trees.

Hello, anybody there? I shouted. As an answer, only the majestic pine trees moaned and creaked under layers of snow. Then I heard it, a deep huffing, snorting, and growling sound. The pulse in my neck started throbbing. My heart thumped painfully against my ribs. Holding my breath, I stood paralyzed, frozen to the spot.

The distant cry of a mountain eagle rattled me out of my terror. Throwing all measures of safety overboard, I folded my trembling body into a sporty S-line, and cutting through wind and swirling snow, flying over ice and humps I plunged, galloped, darted and winged with turbo speed downwards, all the while ice grating and slashing against my burning cheeks. While I got sucked into total whiteness I lost all sense of direction.

I didn't see it. I didn't see the wide hole in the slope. Hitting the dip with full speed, I lost my balance. The world spun on its axis. I got catapulted right out of my skis.

I flew through the air with flailing arms and legs, and while my skis somersaulted north, I got catapulted south. Time seemed to hold its breath while I tried to redress my position. Swivelling and turning in mid-flight, the ground grinned cruelly as I plunged into its open arms. With a throttled scream, I landed head first in meters and meters of snowdrift.

The world stopped spinning. The world retreated. Only frozen silence. Snow tunnelled into my mouth, eyes and nostrils. My heart missed a beat. I couldn't breathe and the world closed in. I started choking. I felt lightheaded yet strangely calm. Accepting my fate, I was ready for my demise when a muffled huffing snorting sound, a promise of being swallowed alive got me moving. I punched against snow and ice until I found resistance. I kept shovelling and pushing, wriggling and shifting bottom and legs out of the snowdrift. Out of the hole, I kept spluttering and sucking delicious air into my lungs. As I was about to clear the snow off my face I felt a sudden hush in the air. And heat. Body-heat from behind. Something approaching.

Then I heard it. I heard the growl, the puffing snorting sound. Then a foul-smelling raspy tongue started licking over my mouth. Another lick slurped over my nose and eyes. Tasting rotten meat, I sat still. I shuddered. Sitting still, not moving an inch, I kept pressing my lips firmly together as the tongue kept working on my face. Resigned, I accepted the wolf's kiss. Yet when the hot tongue continued licking gently, freeing me of snow and ice while nudging a cold nose against my frozen cheek, I risked opening my eyes, and I locked eyes with a huge black dog. I stared into the soft brown eyes of the hotel's rescue dog. The gentle giant kept licking me while wagging its bushy tail. Giving me one last lick, he slumped down, snuggling against my side with a contented sigh. Feeling utterly foolish yet relieved, I hugged the black cuddly beast, shedding tears of gratitude into its soft fur.

Getting up I retrieved my skis. Darkness had washed out the last light of the day. I shouldered my skis and followed the rescue dog into the woods. My new friend guided me through darkness, along crackling trees, through the humming forest back and into the resort.

Hours later, with my new best friend in tow, I stumbled into the hotel lobby.

He trotted off to get his well-deserved dinner. Me utterly wasted and dishevelled, trembling from exhaustion, a ghost of my former stylish self limped towards the reception desk. It was through the revolving door that I got a glimpse of my friend Stuart. In the red hotel bar. Having harboured a growing resentment in the last few hours, I strode into the candle lit bar. I found Steve showered and clad with a whiff of Hugo Boss's finest aftershave, dressed to the nines in smart grey slacks, black cashmere sweater and Valentino blazer, leaning casually with one elbow against the piano, holding a glass of Chateau Je Ne Sais Quoi, chatting and flirting with the handsome Italian pianist.

"Sweetie, there you are finally," Stuart said smiling, tearing his sparkling blue eyes away from the man. "I wondered where you were all that time."

Resolutely, I grabbed his glass of je ne sais quoi and drowned his smile. He hadn't seen it coming, as he stood with wine dripping down his designer blazer. He hadn't seen it coming, the end of our friendship.



*Helene Lebold*

## ***Paradise Now***

Over there, this young woman again. This time she wears a bright red bikini. What a perfectly shaped body she has, slim as the palm trees that softly move to and fro in the mild breeze from the sea. Her blonde hair matches the sandy beach and her blue eye shadow mirrors the sunny sky. She is heading towards a thatched roof on four posts. Underneath it there is a table loaded with an abundance of fresh exotic fruit. Papayas and mangos, the lot. Colorful, freshly prepared juices make your mouth water. A gentle breeze caresses your long hair. And then there is this man nearby in tight-fitting beach wear. He's looking in your direction, his glance overtly promising that it would be you, nobody else but you!

She gets up abruptly. The remote control falls to the floor. Distances are short in her attic. She opens the fridge. There's nothing left but a rotten apple. Tomorrow, at the latest by noon, her wages will be on her account. Pasta with some green onions will have to do for lunch. As usual.

## 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 English Writing Department.

To contact the department please address correspondence to  
*Julia Shirtliff, 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.



[www.vhs.frankfurt.de](http://www.vhs.frankfurt.de)