



**Deniz Utlu**  
**Towards Morning**

Novel

(Original German title: *Gegen Morgen*)

269 pages, Clothbound

Publication date: 09 September 2019

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# I

*Heavenly tiredness do I feel inside.*

Novalis, *Hymns to the Night*

## Gravity

I don't want to fly. Nadia's right; I should have moved out of the flat like Vince, we should have given up the lease. Then I wouldn't have to go to the airport now, board the plane and fly to Nadia in Frankfurt. I don't want to. I'd rather knead the strap of my bag. In this kitchen. On this chair. Here forever.

At the end of the hall are Vince's three leftover moving boxes. Ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen years in cardboard boxes – did we really live together that long?

The stairwell smells sharply of vinegar. The last steps are shiny with cleaning fluid. A man is wringing out a cloth, pointing out he's just cleaned the floor. We stand there, me on the landing, him at the bottom of the stairs, and stare at the drying wood of the steps.

A taxi up the autobahn to Tegel Airport, through the drizzle, past facades painted with 1970s advertising, the three tall chimneys of the heat and power station, the multi-storey car park that looks like a white robot next to the carriageway. Nadia writes: Have a good flight, looking forward to seeing you. I put the telephone down next to me on the back seat. I'd fasten a seatbelt for it if I could, and talk to it like a companion. Where are we flying? it would ask. High in the sky, I'd say, very high. Does the sky lose its colour up there? Are the stars close by? And is there any idea of time there? Will we have coverage?

A lot of flights have been cancelled today, the taxi driver says. At least it's not a terror warning, though, you never know these days.

In the queue to the gates, the veins in a man's neck swell up when I push past. We've all got flights to catch, a woman hisses. I have to take my shoes off at the scanner and I say I'm only flying to Frankfurt, I'll miss my flight if I don't get through in time. The man with the disposable gloves insists on me spreading my arms. As he strokes my armpits I think about how this is the only form of embrace many people ever get.

At the gate, a woman from the ground crew is just closing the barrier tape; outside, the bus doors are closing. If I'm too late I want to go home and get back in bed with my coat and my bag. Frankfurt doesn't need me. Am I too late? I ask, and the woman nods, says the system locks at quarter to, her hands are tied, and she looks at her wrists. There's a calligraphy tattoo on the left one. Sixteen, I say, it's sixteen to. She holds my boarding card to the scanner; it beeps. The woman opens first the barrier and then the door; the bus, which has just pulled off, stops again and the passengers look expressionless. Be quick. I don't know, I say. Heat comes

over me, under my arms, between my shoulder blades, lacing my throat tight. The rain has got harder.

The people on the bus stare at me and the driver turns around to look as well. Most of them are standing, cases between their legs or bags over their shoulders, books or newspapers in their hands or jammed under their arms, an old man holding a bouquet of yellow flowers. I feel the cold glass of the door against my back. A man with square horn-rimmed glasses and neatly combed thinning hair says hello: *Guten Tag*. He is small, with notably straight posture and a short neck. I nod in return. We've still got plenty of time, he says with a grin. His thick lenses enlarge his eyes, which he moves at irregular intervals behind half-closed lids like a lizard. His nose is so small it almost disappears underneath the glasses. At the plane, I'm the first out of the bus. I don't want to have to wait on the stairs with him.

In my window seat, I huddle into the corner. I listen with closed eyes to the sounds of people looking for their seats. A plastic bag crackles, overhead lockers open and close, a child counts down the row numbers, a baby cries. The turbines' droning begins.

Angular vehicles manoeuvre outside the window. Hello, says a man next to me. The lizard. We're slightly delayed but we're sure to make up the time. I'm not in a hurry, I say. He frowns.

We're flying.

We ought to be above Magdeburg by now, the man keeps talking, loosening his collar. It's white outside.

After a while the pilot announces the landing. He has only just received landing permission due to the high air traffic level in Frankfurt, he tells us, and we're approximately thirty minutes behind schedule. If it was up to me, we could spend hours circling above the city. The lizard smiles at me. What brings you to Frankfurt?

I'm visiting my girlfriend, I say. Everything about that sentence is wrong. I'm a moth, circling the city. The lizard tells me Frankfurt is always worth a visit. At that moment, the plane falls into an air pocket and the lizard exclaims, Ohhh, and gives an embarrassed laugh as if I'd caught him doing something indecent. Then we plummet again.

For the first time, I get a physical sense of the importance of safety belts. My organs go through a different motion to the body enclosing them. They expand; my stomach reshapes and presses against my lungs, makes breathing harder. A feeling close to nausea but different.

I see the noise in the cabin, don't hear it, see only children's wet eyes, damp cheeks, fingers digging into the fabric of the seats in front, the lizard pressing his head into his lap, his meagre hair stringy with sweat. I imagine us falling farther and farther, the last minutes of my life before the crash landing.

At the front, a book hits the ground in the aisle. Another bang at the back. I look around; the toilet door is slamming open and shut. A man punches the back of the seat in front. He's wearing a shirt and tie, his short blond hair cut blunt; he punches the seat again. I recognize a smile on his face. The man next to the lizard is smiling too, but joy and pain are impossible to distinguish. He holds his book open on his lap and tries to go on reading whenever a little calm returns. Where does he get that certainty from? Or does he ascribe no importance to the moment? Just one minute among all the minutes life has counted down. Sweat glints on the back of the lizard's neck.

I haven't seen my mother for a long time. She couldn't stand it if I died in a plane crash. *Couldn't stand it* means no longer living life as she knows it. Couldn't stand it means letting the dust win out in her flat. Couldn't stand it means neither opening nor closing the curtains. Leaving the kettle on the hob. Toasting mouldy bread. I know we're not going to crash. And yet, the possibility exists. My tiredness this morning, the man cleaning the stairs, the taxi driver. I shouldn't have taken this flight, I repeat to myself, I shouldn't have taken this flight. The lizard looks at me from below, his eyes huge at this angle.

Nadia would definitely try to get hold of me but my phone would be off. She'd call Vince, who wouldn't know a thing and would say everything was fine. Nadia wouldn't call my mother, not today. Nadia, leaving messages on my phone, first gentle, then with a trace of annoyance in her voice, then angry, then hurt; hours later, fear. My mother in five years' time, Vince in five years' time, the ash that my body would have become, in five years. I know we're not going to crash. Nadia, her future son strapped to her chest, still in Frankfurt, walking along the River Main and planning the closing chapter of her PhD in full stride. Vince in a huge converted loft apartment, playing with his future daughter's remote-controlled car. My mother in a home, a carer telling her off for spilling her soup again, can't she be more careful? And Ramón in an institution, bloated by his medication. I breathe.

Ramón – he appears before me on the plane, sitting in one of the front rows, still wearing his puffer jacket. He, too, very calm. As we fall, everything exists simultaneously, everything that once was and once was not and that only ever existed inside of me. A multiplication of all experiences.

I haven't thought of Ramón for a long time. Now of all times, in the minutes that might be my last, he pops up. Ramón, for whom there was never space, who was always too much, always superfluous, never welcome, only ever there. I find myself grinning. A grin that clenches facial muscles I never knew I had, that I feel on my bones like stiff leather.

Nadia accuses me of *a dismal disarray in time*. She says: You're thirty-three years old but you live like a student.

I say: Why not study at fifteen, sneer at fairy-tales at seven, believe in the power of love at twenty-three? Why not be a businessman at twenty and apply for an apprenticeship at seventy-five? First die, then live. Ohhh, the lizard repeats, and adds another smile of a man caught out. The organs in my body are falling.

Nadia and I one spring evening on Bergmannstrasse, the trees still bare, the weather mild, people sitting outside the cafés, the sky dark blue, lights in the windows, kitchens in the windows, pots and books, flowers. I want to hold onto the moment, stop walking, and she, arm linked with mine, has to stop too and we kiss, but everything around us turns into a station, conductors blow their whistles, trains pull out, people run along the platforms with their cases, and the kissing couple are standing halfway inside the train door, part of them already departed. Part of me has always been long departed. Me at twenty in the city forest, light falling through the gaps between the leaves onto the path, but I'm already on my platform, already on my train. Nadia telling me about our most eternal shared moment, about the windy day on the tower in Swinemünde, our faces peering out of our hoods and ravens strolling along the balustrade, she's telling me about it but I'm thinking, I have to go to bed early, it's going to be a long day tomorrow.

On this falling plane nothing has departed yet, I'm no longer on the hop. Any rush is unfounded, here. Gravity dissolves in descent, we're not falling we're floating, gravity and time. My indifference surprises me – the unforeseen possibility that life might come to an abrupt end doesn't bother me.

I'm falling. The lizard jerks his head up and gasps for air. Cups and bags are strewn across the plane aisle. A second of calm and peace in my curtailed life, a second of eternity prevails.

After a jolt we start to climb again. Gravity falls back into place and presses us into our seats.

Ladies and gentlemen, the pilot announces, we're going to have to abort our landing in Frankfurt due to a severe storm. We've requested permission to land at Hannover Airport.

The passengers talk over each other. A woman with three children complains she'll miss her connecting flight to New York. Sometimes, I say to the lizard, everything takes you back to your mother. The lizard gapes at me. What?

The tension doesn't ebb until some time after the pilot's announcement that we're flying to Hannover. A girl with plaited hair picks up her book and resumes reading immediately. I hear a man laughing, then a woman. Back to quiet conversations that mix with the roar of the turbines.

We land in the city of my birth.

My mother doesn't know I'm here. She's sitting on the sofa in the flat where I spent my childhood and adolescence, or standing in the hallway and taking off her shoes, or putting her shopping away. I'm sitting on a plane with its doors open. We're waiting, we're told, for an improvement in the Frankfurt weather conditions. The engines are turned off, people are talking in whispers. Only an older man is telling a loud story about hiking in Spain, a storm there too. The flight attendant is leaning against the door frame, looking out at the runway. I unfasten my seatbelt and walk over to her, tell her I want to get off. She says we'll be resuming the flight at any moment. I insist on getting off the plane, tell her my mother lives here, in Hannover, in this city where I didn't want to land. She takes a step back. I tell her I haven't seen my mother for a long time and I say we never know whether a missed opportunity wasn't the last one we had. I tell her about the flat, about my mother and Vince. The flight attendant paddles her hands – she'll ask the pilot, alright, for God's sake. I wait by the open exit, below me asphalt, beyond it fields, in the distance fences, behind them more fields, the wind whistling. We've landed our plane for a picnic. The flight attendants will be handing out picnic baskets and electric blankets any moment now; I bet someone plays the guitar.

A fox darts across the field and stops twenty or thirty metres away from me. It scratches its snout with one paw and looks straight at me. Do you really want to get off? It has a woman's voice. Did you hear me?

I turn around; it's the flight attendant. Do you still want to get off?

When I look back out, the fox has gone.

Behind the travel agency and airline counters sit employees in suits with appliquéd badges in the colours of each company. Like I did as a child, I sense the height of the ceiling with its cylinders that look like truncated pipes. I see myself from above, crossing this silent building,

my footsteps making no sound either. Hours of my childhood passed at the luggage carousels in this terminal, on the way back from Turkey, Greece and Italy. Vince and I sat together on these plastic seats a few years ago – more than a decade ago. We'd run into a boy from our school. I only remember the encounter, not his face or his voice, and only because we heard later that one of the boys in our year had killed himself, the same one we'd met at the airport. He'd taken tablets, Vince was told, and was found in his bed days later. I couldn't remember ever talking to him before we ran into him at the airport, but Vince said they'd often played football together. I can still envisage his body, the boy's body, in a black hoodie, lying in a single bed, facing the wall. I hadn't been there, of course, I don't know what he was wearing or how his room looked, but I see this image when I try to remember more about him. And the image of the supermarket behind our high school, because I heard he lived above that supermarket. The cobbled road, the roundabout with a tree in the middle, office buildings constructed with architectural ambition and a double façade, the outer façade painted pink. Schoolyard, cobbles, supermarket, roundabout, tree, double façades, pink. No face.

After Vince told me about it, we went back to our rooms and went on revising for our double-entry bookkeeping exam. Even though I ought to have dropped out of uni at the very first mention of accruals and deferred income. But I decided to be sensible, as my mother had advised me, and accruals and deferred income were definitely sensible. So Vince went back to his room and did the practice exercises from the tutorial, and I went back to my room and read the Commercial Code, and Ramón, whom I'd barely thought of for years, who appeared to me in the falling plane, suddenly fell along with me, who hadn't said anything back then about the death of our old schoolmate above the supermarket, went back to underlining every sentence in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

[...]

## Amoeba

I fall home. Onto the floorboards, sanded down and varnished, running oblique to my legs. Creatures live in the gaps between them. My bare feet are freezing cold; I scrape them over the gaps, luring my pets. This is what the afterlife looks like. If you die in a plane crash, you end up in your best friend's emptied room. You wander eternally around your old flat.

I write Nadia a message saying I've got home, and then delete it. I drink water out of a bottle; the plastic crackles, the water gurgles – there are no other sounds, they seem out of relation, too large for this space, the flat, too loud. The wallpaper is ripped in places where Vince's wardrobe and shelves once were, dust bunnies playing about the skirting boards. I am him and he is me, and he's lying on the other side of the wall in my room. The wall is thin, like all non-loadbearing walls in Berlin's turn-of-the-century buildings. Turn the bloody TV off, I yell into the empty room. The only answer is the echo of my voice.

Can you turn the TV off? calls the person who is me, now, while I'm lying on the floor in Vince's room that is no longer mine but vacant, imagining I'm Vince. I imagine I am him, lying here, watching TV, hearing myself calling from the next room, and I call over, myself: OK, in a minute. Then I leap up, yell at the top of my voice: Goal! Gooooaal, goooooaal! My voice turns somersaults. We launch ourselves at each other – I've come running, Kara, out of the next room. I have one free afternoon and you have to start shouting! He falls to one side, Vince, much taller than me and at least ten kilos heavier, lets me tip him over but swings his upper leg at me as he falls and takes me down with him, locks me between his legs in a stranglehold. I grab at his thighs, can't get them apart with my arms, try to reach him with my legs but all I do is turn in a circle – seen from above, we're a clock with its hands being wound forward, his torso the big hand, my legs showing minutes and seconds. Suddenly he picks up speed and manages to shake me off. You dirty dog, I yell, and roll away. We're both on all fours, facing each other like two stray mongrels. I bark at him, he barks back, I yelp, he yelps along, we drop down to the floor, lie head to head – two dogs howling at the ceiling. I give one short and two long yowls, then he replies with three short, one long, one short howl. I'm out of breath, my seat bones are hurting on the hard floor; I lean against the wall. I think things are getting serious with Michelle, Vince says, we want to move in together. He's still flat on his back, looking up at the ceiling. I pick up one of the bottle-tops from the floor next to his bed, take aim and hit him smack on the forehead with it.

Grey cobwebs dangle from Vince's ceiling, thumb-thick and moving gently in every draught, dust caught in them. Vince has only just moved out, ordered removal men on the internet and got them to lug his furniture for him. He had split up with Michelle at least twice by that point, couldn't stand the anger with which she often confronted him, her anger at his 'escapades' as he called them, with a certain pride – split up twice, made up twice, now sharing a two-bedroom flat in Mitte. He wouldn't have noticed if I'd been smashed to pieces in a cornfield between Berlin and Frankfurt. I hold onto the wall as I get up, my body heavy. I shuffle over to the cobwebs, reach up for them but they're too high. I put my fingertips on the wallpaper and run my hand along the wall. My hand gets caught at the spots where the wallpaper is torn. The door between our two rooms, which we papered over. A drawing pin that once held a photo of a façade in Lisbon he took himself, now pinning nothing, just stuck in the wall. The radiator in the corner, a piece of clothing trapped between it and the wall, Michelle's underwear; I shove it back. The wooden frame of the balcony door, the thin glass, the zinc handle, a second door behind the door, the balcony, the ashtray full of rainwater, the cigarette-butt fishes. Dead ivy, grown a whole metre, gone brown long ago now. Flowerpots with no flowers, only earth. In the soil a cigarette, half-smoked, the paper brown from the rain. I take it between my first and middle fingers, not smoking it, sit down on the white metal chair with its romantic-style curlicues. I never sat here with Nadia in all the years. It's Vince's balcony but when he went away for a while, we could have had Sunday breakfast here, or now that Vince has moved out we could have spent our evenings here. Nadia could have planted herbs like she always wanted to. I pretend to smoke the cigarette, smelling cold smoke and earth and rain. How often did I sit here with you, Vince? Even after we graduated?

You know what, I'm working on this study, I've been entrusted with calculating the costs of a life, and shall I tell you what's one of the most horrifying insights of economics? I stand up, resting my lower arms on the edge of the balcony. I put out the cigarette in one of the flower pots and go back inside. My voice echoes in Vince's room. Existentialist insight of economic theory: For everything I do, there's something else I don't do. For everything I've ever done, there's a dark other side where all the things I didn't do pile up invisibly. Every time I choose for myself, I exclude another possibility for my nature – these are the opportunity costs of my existence. From a certain age, you can't buy back any other option. It's as if an auctioneer gave you three hefty blows on the head with a wooden hammer on your thirtieth birthday: sold. You are what you are, now. You speak this amount of French, that amount of Spanish, you've got this much education in history, biology, philosophy, this particular sense of humour, you're this or that entertaining at a dinner party. The decisions have been made –

now put up with the consequences. You didn't know any better? Should have read the small print. You can still study medicine but you'll never be a thirty-year-old doctor; you might be a forty-year-old doctor with wrinkles that tell of his struggle and the long route to his medical degree, all the years in his thirties when he lived on next to nothing, an impoverished student while his friends started families, drove sports cars or spent their nights on expensive drugs in hip clubs. Did you realize that? Did you know nothing can ever be repeated identically, because everything you do determines the nature of the person you become, the person you are now? Would you have studied economics if you'd realized that? Vince, for fuck's sake, I'm talking to you! Now I'm yelling. The first theorem of welfare economics: Resources are used most economically in competitive equilibrium, brought about by the sum of individuals' decisions. The first theorem of existential economics: Every decision in favour of something is a decision against something else; the individual will have to bear the painful costs of this self-denial.

'Humans as amoebae.' That was how Professor Kurt Zarr, at the time still an assistant to the chair of economics and game theory at the Sorbonne, described the human individual in 1963: an amoeba which, up to a certain point in its life, keeps extending its pseudopods over and over to reach food, and thus is permanently changing shape. And then comes the point – it has changed shape umpteen times – the moment when it takes on a fixed form. From then on, it can only reach a certain kind of food available to its shape, and it believes – that is, the human being believes; the amoeba doesn't believe anything – that that is the whole world, that's all there is. But one or other amoeba senses there must be something else beyond that, it senses an emptiness inside, the lack of the things it has decided against when it made its choices over and over again. It loses its peace of mind. For the rest of its life. That is its sorry fate, fixed in a set shape but now rocked by raging turmoil, and the discrepancy between Appearance and Existence grows. But of course, they don't teach you that in a master's degree in economics or international business studies.

I leave Vince's room. The instant I open the door, someone holds a plastic cup up to my face. The hall is crowded with people, drinking beer or wine, vodka or rum and smoking, smiling at me, their eyes loaded with alcohol and lust. The music from my room crosses the hall into the kitchen, mingles with the many voices. A couple are kissing greedily in the shade of the gas boiler. A guy I've never seen before is mixing cocktails. There's Vince, already. You just don't listen, I call out to him. What did you say? Amoebae. What?

I'm falling. My stomach expands. Is the floor moving or is it my legs trembling? I'm falling, the whole building is falling, with me inside it, my lungs and kidneys inside it, my heart, the building, me, we're falling.

Lights on: I'm in the old pantry next to the kitchen, where Vince has set up his study. Nadia is sitting at the desk on the office chair. There you are at last, she says, getting up. I brush her hair behind her ear, kiss her on the temple. We look at each other. She's resting her arms on the table. I unbutton her blouse, underneath it her black bra with lace and a silk bow in the middle. Her eyes resting on me as I stroke her belly with the flat of my hand, circle her navel and stretch my fingers under the top of her trousers, as my fingertips slide lower and reach the curly hair and then glide between her labia. She lunges forward and I slip my finger inside her as we look each other in the eye.

I sit down on the office chair. There are two cables on the white table-top, next to them a paperweight made of a World-War-II bullet casing. On the wall is a photo of Vince and Michelle, a self-portrait taken by Vince, or at least his arm is visible at the bottom right of the picture. He's wearing sunglasses, a cigarette between his lips, Michelle is pouting; on a shelf behind them is a nasal douche. Did Bonnie and Clyde douche their nasal passages after their bank robberies? Were they married? Did they have kids?

I open one of the drawers beneath the desk: broken pencils, coloured pens left over from our schooldays, dozens of ballpoint pens and markers. I pick up the thickest pen I can find. On the edge of the desk, I draw the outlines of fingers in black, at the spots where Nadia rested her hands. I put my fingers into her black digits; they smudge. I wipe the ink across the desk, making streaks, reach for the pen again and write Nadia's name, wipe it off but it's still visible, now inside a cloud. I write  $OC(E) = -\frac{\Delta L_m}{\Delta L_l}$ : The opportunity costs of my existence are equal to the negative value of the ratio of missed to lived life. And wipe it all away again. I take the pen and draw lines along the wall, run it over the wall until it won't write any more, until I drop it.

The threshold to my room has cracks in it; my creatures live in them too. To the right of the door, where the wardrobe used to be, there are now three removals boxes in a pile. To the left is the fuse box, photos we stuck on to conceal it. Vince and me, aged thirteen, with carefully serious faces. No one knows, not even his mother who took the photo, that we'd smoked our first joint shortly beforehand. A picture of a uni friend's wedding, us in suits but no ties.

Underneath the fuse box is a shoe cabinet containing no shoes, only the router, on top of it the post, piled up unopened; the clay angel, a hand-made candle-holder I once found on the street,

crooked with a broken arm; keys with fobs; a laser pointer, stickers, perfume samples; a thumb-sized mini-vibrator, a giveaway from a PR agency; countless keys whose locks no longer exist; a hair clip belonging to I don't know who. My key ring is next to the bowl. Underneath it a dried rose, a photo of Ramón, scratched, black and white, in the background the panelling of the lecture theatre. Really and truly, a picture of Ramón – how can it have been here all these years and I haven't seen it, or I've seen it but not registered it? Come here, Ramón, tell me something about media theory or American football, you know what, it's all over with Nadia and me, give me the gift of your indifference, and above all, make my voice stop echoing in this flat.

In the kitchen, I plump down onto the wicker chair. The palm on the windowsill in front of me, the only plant I've ever bought myself. It had shed its leaves and I watched it slowly dying, but then green shoots suddenly grew all over again.

Who do you think has been watering it all these years? Vince asks.

Blessed art thou, saviour of the house plants, I answer.

Since when have you been religious?

You're the one who pays taxes to the church, I say.

I'm gonna leave the church soon, he says.

Leave me out of it, I say, it's none of my business, and anyway that doesn't change anything about your duty to carry water to the windowsill when I'm not here.

Vince puts a hand on his chest: I will do it.

But will you do it conscientiously and with intent?

What intent?

You have to say: I draw this water, given to us by the waterworks of this city that has become our refuge, to offer to this plant that it may nourish its roots, grow green and maintain its relations to us.

I shall say a prayer to the water just as you wish, and this plant in this kitchen, with its ceilings so high that no one can reach the cobwebs, this plant in this kitchen I shall sprinkle carefully with the holy water that it may blossom and grow for all time.

Very nicely said, and now go and pay your tax to the church.

I don't need to.

I knew it, you've set up a direct debit to the church that's supposed to reward you with heavenly paradise, just like with all your other insurance policies.

I have.

Get out of my sight.

Because you're always overdrawn and I have to pay your share of the rent regularly?

How can you profane the afterlife with bank transfers?

You can tell you've been up talking to Ramón all night, again.

It wasn't me doing the talking.

And now you have to take it out on me?

I have nothing but the best intentions, dear sir.

Then get off your butt and do the washing up.

You and your direct debits and washing-up liquid, you're telling me what to do while I'm fighting for your place in heaven?

The dishwasher's gone mouldy, can't you smell it?

Come on, let's hold the branches of this palm that doesn't belong here, that's only with us as an envoy out of benevolence. You hold the left one, I'll hold the right one.

Gentlemen, comes the sudden sound of Ramón's deep voice. Isn't it high time to dine?

See, says Vince, you can tell you've spent all night together.

We'll have to go hungry, Ramón, I say, the only thing on the kitchen table is a bulb of garlic, but wait until we've finished here.

Vince and I approach the plant, face first. The spiky leaves stab at my cheek. Our eyes closed, we lean deeper into the green, Vince from the left, me from the right. If you listen closely, you'll hear a noise like a snail, a very slow, wet sound. And then something tears, a short loud burst like a fast, hard rip in cardboard, followed by an intense smell of garlic. I open my eyes: Ramón is in the plant with us. Pardon me, he says, and belches. Our heads touch. His skin is bad, two scratched spots, his facial hair grows irregularly, one tuft above his cheek and one above his throat.

You're disgusting, says Vince.

I wanted to have a listen, too, Ramón says.

We stare at each other with the leaves in our faces and on our heads, and we laugh, Vince's and Ramón's teeth and lips immediately in front of me.

Stop it, Vince laughs, pushing Ramón away. Ramón burps again and laughs some more.

You're both revolting, I say, any attempt to make you into human beings is doomed to fail.

What's it got to do with me? Vince asks. Ramón has already spread out along the sofa by the kitchen table. I sit down at the table and Vince perches next to the palm on the windowsill.

Can I have another clove of garlic? Ramón asks.

Go and buy yourself something to eat, says Vince.

Have you got five euros? asks Ramón.

What happened to the five euros I gave you the day before yesterday?

You'll get it all back, Ramón says, it's the start of the month next week and then I'll get money from my gran.

And then we'll start all over again, says Vince.

Have you got five euro or not?

Vince shakes his head and looks out of the window, but all there is to see is the reflection of the palm; it's been dark outside for hours. On the table are the remains of the broken-up garlic bulb. The white skin – like bird feathers – shines against the dark varnish. Ramón doesn't move on the sofa, staring past Vince and me. Vince breathes out loudly and knocks his fingers on the wooden windowsill. Then let's just cook something, I say, what's the problem?

The problem is that he – Vince waves his hand in Ramón's direction as if throwing something away – that he comes and goes whenever it suits him, never calls beforehand, and if you say I haven't got time today, I need a bit of peace and quiet or I have to revise for my bloody financing exam, he turns up at the door anyway.

Stop it, I say.

It's true though, isn't it? We have to leave the house at eight because we've got our stochastics test at nine, and who ends up ringing the doorbell at four in the morning?

You'll still be complaining about that fifty years from now, Ramón whispers.

I'll have done something very wrong if I still know you fifty years from now. It's no wonder your mother's always chucking you out.

Ramón still doesn't move; he's sitting on the sofa by the kitchen table and staring at the fridge. Vince grabs a cigarette, lights a match. He moves the flame to the cigarette like touching an insect's feelers. The fire illuminates his face, the angry eyes looking at the tip of the cigarette, the match, the short firm intake of breath. That's how someone lights a cigarette when he's convinced he's always in the right. The sound of Vince's lips as he takes a drag.

The garlic feathers on the kitchen table. Ramón rises slowly from the sofa. Wait, says Vince, you could at least do the washing-up.

Vince, leave it out, I say.

Half of the plates in that mouldy sink are his, he can do the dishes now and then.

Ramón stands in the kitchen door for a long time, then he takes off the jacket he'd kept on the whole time, slings it onto the sofa, stomps to the sink, raises his arms and slams his hands into the plates. In the kitchen silence, a glasshouse collapses, the dishwasher splashing in all directions. Nadia is suddenly standing in the doorway, her feet bare, eyes sleepy. She gives us

a wordless stare, me, Vince, Ramón. Water drips from Ramón's face to the floor. I look over at Nadia; I know that look on her face, she's angry. I follow her stare – Ramón has taken his hands out of the sink; they're bleeding.

What have you guys done? Nadia asks. Ramón sits down at the kitchen table and watches the blood and dishwater dripping off his hands onto the garlic feathers. I lean forwards, meaning to touch his shoulder, but he hisses: Don't touch me. Nadia washes Ramón's hands, pulls the glass out of his skin.

What on earth are you doing? says Vince. We, he says, what on earth are we doing? His fingers are trembling, his lips are trembling, what on earth are you doing, his voice, ever quieter, coming not from inside him, coming from outside, he moves his lips but the voice has nothing to do with his mouth.

I go to stand by the window. I'm alone here. Nadia is in Frankfurt, Vince is in Mitte, and where Ramón is I don't know. Alone, I stand by the window; what on earth are you doing, what on earth are you doing? My forehead almost touches the glass.

The kitchen looks even darker when I turn back around. The coffee machine isn't in its place by the door any more. The saucepans are missing from the cupboard. I hear dogs barking. I look out of the window again; nothing to see out there – the barking is inside the flat. I jerk the kitchen door open. They bark at me, three dogs, two the height of a human torso, one larger, all black. They cavort along the hall, jump up at me, encircle me, stare at me with their many eyes. Where have these dogs come from? Who let them in?

## II

*'But what have I turned away from?'*

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*

*'We always didn't know each other at all.'*

May Ayim, *blues in schwarz-weiß*

[...]

## Attraction

The stairwell light goes off. I lean against the bannisters. One step above me, Ramón is lying on the floor outside the front door. The darkness belongs to the sounds, to the slamming doors in the homes of the strangers I share a building with, to the birds on the windowsills, the barking of a dog, the distant ringing of a telephone. Ramón makes no sounds. It's the reverse – he extinguishes them. Anything that falls to the ground when he's nearby falls almost soundlessly. Not because it doesn't cause any noise, but because the sounds are absorbed into Ramón. No one knows what fate befalls the sounds absorbed into Ramón. Do they echo inside him or fall silent? I look at the hill outside my front door, barely distinguishable from the darkness on the landing. Ramón is not sound, Ramón is a hushing.

Ramón. My voice echoes in the stairwell. Ramón, I say again. At last, his puffer jacket moves. How long have you been here? he yawns. I take a step up and hold out my hand.

The dogs are barking inside my flat. They run at Ramón, jump up at him, panting, sniffing. Ramón strokes their heads as he looks around the hall and peers towards Vince's room. When he goes into the kitchen the dogs follow at his heel. He takes a glass from the draining board, fills it up with tap water and plumps down into the wicker chair at the kitchen table. I've only got cauliflower, I say, and it might have gone off.

I cook cauliflower; sliced in two, it looks like half a brain. We share it with the dogs, eating together. The dogs on the floor, us at the table. Ramón's eyes alight on *The New Handbook of Quotations*, under a flower pot on top of the washing machine. It's his; he left it behind, in precisely that spot on top of the washing machine. As you can see, I say, not much has changed. I tell him Vince always meant well with him, always tried to persuade him to come back to uni, went through his finances with him, asked in the library and cafés if Ramón could work there. I say all that but I know perfectly well that not only Vince bossed him around, that I also banned him from speaking. It was at a party at our place, where Ramón had pursued a friend of Nadia's through all the rooms and hadn't stopped asking her if she knew about the cosmos and had ever asked herself how nuclear physics could liberate us linguistically – he hadn't stopped talking, his breath smelling of alcohol, hunger and sleeplessness. In front of all the people sitting in my room, I had ordered him to go in the kitchen and 'keep himself busy' on his own until I went to fetch him, saying I'd had enough of him harassing the girls.

He took wonderful care of me, Ramón says. In the background, the dogs slurping and our forks scraping against the plates. I ask him how he spends his days. He tells me he's mostly at his mother's place, sometimes with his grandmother or in the workshop where he was supposed to do an apprenticeship, now and then at Kai's.

That guy Kai you went to primary school with, I ask, the one from your neighbourhood? Ramón's only friend from his childhood and teenage years, as far as I know, although Ramón had never used the word 'friend' to refer to Kai, saving that word for Vince and me. You two, he'd said, are my only friends. And yet when I asked him if there wasn't anyone else, at kindergarten, at school, someone he met up with to play football or hang out or steal vodka from the supermarket, he named the name Kai.

One time, the kids in his class were allowed to choose who they sat next to, he told me, at the age of nine or ten. They had run towards each other, the class arranging itself like an atom breaking down until they all had a partner, only Ramón left over, standing alone in their midst, squinting at the others and then down at the linoleum, the white chewing-gum islands. In place of one of the islands appeared two dirty shoes, and when he looked up he saw Kai's face. Later, as a teenager, Ramón would stay at Kai's place for days because they were allowed to smoke weed there, as long as they gave some of their stash to his mother. Kai lived with his mother in a bedsit; she slept on the sofa and Kai had a single bed that folded down out of a cupboard. And where did you sleep? I asked Ramón, and he answered drily as he stared at the screen of his huge laptop: In with Kai, in his bed. Sometimes they wouldn't say hello to each other for weeks when they ran into each other in the neighbourhood, for no particular reason. Then they'd share a bed again for days or weeks on end. Did they share a cover too? Then there were the nights with nightmares, the hours towards morning when another person's breath feels like the last link to this world. In a night like that, I imagine, Ramón reaches out for Kai, more sleeping than waking, and pulls him closer. The hot breath in his face. The eyes opening up. For a fraction of a second, unsure of where he is. Free-floating bodies in broken-open space. In the darkness, the whites of his eyes, blurred eyebrows. The breath hotter and hotter and the heart beating into the other's chest. Every touch would be felt somewhere else too, between stomach and spleen, down in their ankles. Ramón's hand running through Kai's sweat-soaked hair.

I pile our plates in the sink and put the kettle on for tea, the dogs following me, tails wagging, from the table to the sink, from the sink to the kettle. I talk fast, talk a lot, my voice sounds unfamiliar; I haven't heard it for a long time now. I tell him that so much here reminds me of him, not just the Alicia Keys and Rihanna albums, there are also bound to be other books and

CDs. There's still a photo of him in the hall, of him and me in Lecture Hall 101 with the wood panelling in the background. I pour the tea into mugs and put them on the table; Ramón stares at me. What's the matter? I ask.

Nothing, I'm listening to you. He talks slowly, sits there calmly, and when he reaches for the mug he moves his arm like a snail stretching out its feelers. In contrast to his slowness, I feel my heart racing, notice how loudly I've been speaking. Now it's silent and we drink our tea, but the silence is different to the usual one here between these walls – a silence after speaking. I ask Ramón if he still goes to gigs on the ship sometimes. Been a long time, he says, and I call out – noticing again how uncontrolled my voice is: Come on, let's go there again. As Ramón strokes one of the dogs' heads the bags under his eyes are so dark that I could vanish into them at any moment.

We don't talk much on the train. I watch our reflections in the windows, in the neon shine between the raindrops and the city's traffic lights and lit-up flats. I haven't been out for a long time, I say. I only see Vince rarely these days. And all the guys from back then, I don't see at all – are they still alive? Who was the one with the muscles? I laugh. I recognize Ramón's laugh by the extra moisture in his eyes. His mouth barely moves, its corners stiffened as so often; it's his watery eyes that give away his laughter. In lectures, he could laugh himself silly at the lecturers and only the tears almost running down his cheeks made his fit of laughter visible, something only I knew, and Vince and perhaps one or two others. We went to that freshers' party with that guy, didn't we? He walked around like a rabid bull, I remember, and he kept thumping himself on the chest. He saw these students – they were medical students a year or two younger than us – and he wanted to smash their skulls in. What am I doing here, Kara, he yelled, I'm only a builder at the end of the day, look at these kids, look at them, what am I doing here, Kara, what is there here for me? Ramón's eyes get even more watery, a tear trembling between his eyelids.

And you, he says, you got off with that girl on the dance floor, you practically ate her up. The laughter between his eyelids drips onto his cheek. I laugh with my mouth.

In the station concourse at Ostbahnhof, with its snack bars and pharmacy and the flower shop in the middle, a man with stringy blond hair asks us for a few euros for something to eat. Three travellers are standing in front of the boards showing the departure times while the flower seller, a man with a moustache, paces up and down outside his square shop and figures shuffle around searching the bins for deposit bottles. The ceiling is very high and only the tube lighting reveals that it's an enclosed space.

We step into the night with the illuminated taxi signs and the wind blowing into our faces. We walk down to the street and over the crossroads to the bridge, past parked cars, the red light of a petrol station in the distance, then trees, then more trees and then a patch of wasteland probably awaiting development. As we descend the steps into a dried-out canal repurposed as a park, a rip opens up in my coat sleeve, which is now a leather jacket, my shoelaces shorten, my biceps tense up and I suddenly feel them more clearly, my hair shoots down over my forehead and obscures my eyes, and I toss it back and take the joint Vince hands me. I take two drags and pass it on to Ramón, who's walking on the other side of me.

It worked, didn't it? We had no trouble after that, and I laugh my youthful laugh.

You mean you can control him by moving your tongue inside other people's mouths? What a talent, Vince exclaims, taking a slug of his beer.

What do turtles do at night, by the way? Ramón asks. We look over at the pond, a black surface in the night. That's where the turtles live. They show themselves by day, climb onto their jetty, drop down into the water. We listen to see if we can hear them now. It's silent. The only sound the embers crackling into the paper, cars in the distance.

Sleep, probably, says Vince.

They have a great life here, swimming all day, fed breadcrumbs by rich tourist girls because they think they're so cute.

Just like Ramón, Vince says.

Who says I'm cute?

Our footsteps on the gravel. Ramón and I walk without speaking. Then I say: Wait a sec, and I find a bush to take a pee. Urine falling on leaves and branches creaking and wind rustling. When I've done up my flies and gone back to Ramón he's still standing exactly where I left him, hasn't moved, standing there motionless. We walk on, out of the park. I buy us some beers at a kiosk.

People are smoking and drinking in front of the ship, the ground littered with empty wine and beer bottles. Music echoes from the ship's belly. A girl squatting on the ground among the bottles screeches with laughter, a guy asks us whether we want to buy 'something', and we climb the steps to the deck. Inside, it's loud and hot, people on the dance floor melded into a single body, a dark, swirling entity. Ramón goes straight to the back wall by the bar. I fight for the barkeeper's attention, squeezing forward between the people to the bar. I feel the heat of their bodies, and through all those bodies flow veins, and through all those veins flows blood, a heart beats everywhere, stomachs and lungs everywhere, over there a girl with a blond ponytail and bare, sweating shoulders, underneath her shoulder blades muscle fibres,

right underneath them her lungs, filling up with the bad air of the room, emptying and then drawing it in again. All the lungs and hearts are at very close quarters in this room, as though they might swap bodies; almost irrelevant which heart beats in whose body. I return to Ramón with two beers. He's still wearing his puffer jacket.

Fists and open hands emerge from the dark mass on the dance floor, twitching to the rhythm of the basslines. Ahead of us, where the bar's light still reaches, a girl is dancing in ragged tights, swaying her torso back and forth. Ramón and I seem to be the oldest people here. Even the barkeeper, who I thought was older at first glance, is almost certainly younger; he just looks older because his job lends him authority. I have a job too but I don't feel like it, I'm not older than the barkeeper, I'm younger, not older than the twenty-year-old girl with the ripped tights, I'm the same age. Just going on a bit of a walkabout, I say to Ramón; my new flatmate nods. Clutching my plastic cup of beer, I push my way through to the dance floor. The bass here thuds through all your limbs, through muscles and organs; I feel it in my belly and my skull, my shoulders following its commands as if automatically, twitching to the rhythm. Now I'm standing behind a girl and moving with her. Her hair flies into my face; I smell lemons. On the next bass beat I'm driven onwards. A man, thin with bare muscular arms, makes hand motions as if breaking something to the speed of the beat. Underneath his skin are thick veins spreading out like tree roots. There's a boy who puts his hands between a girl's thighs as they dance, rubs his backside against her lap; he has big hands and now he's running them over the girl's face. Four teens jump on the spot, high-fiving and yowling. Three older men alongside a group of girls; one of them looks over in annoyance now and then while the men pretend not to notice. Here's where the dance floor ends and against the wall, a young woman is sitting on a stool staring sadly into the crowd. The lights flash across her face – her eyes are green, entirely, no pupils. I ask her why she's sitting here all on her own. She shows no reaction. I'm about to repeat my question when she says: You need anything?

What have you got? I ask.

Everything, just tell me what you want: amphetamines, coke, ecstasy, codeine.

Only now does the penny drop. I say: I don't want any of them. Her pupil-less eyes turn away from me and back to the black I stepped out of – the green of her irises like the standby light on a machine powering down.

Instead of Ramón, I find a picture of a bear beside the bar. The barkeeper pours drinks with unbroken authority. I look for Ramón in the dark corners of the room, in the toilets with the

portholes in the doors. I go up on deck. It's not exactly warm, but still there's a guy stretched half-naked along a bench, others standing around in groups and smoking. A girl is leaning over the ship's rail to vomit. I find Ramón on a bench at the prow. His hands in the pockets of his puffer jacket, he's staring out at the night, at the old factories on the other bank of the Spree. I've been looking for you, I say. The water moves beneath the bright lights of the dance floor, shining out of the windows in the ship's belly. I feel the bass in the soles of my feet.

For a long time, Ramón says, I was angry, but it doesn't matter anymore. It doesn't touch me anymore, you get it?

What doesn't touch you? I ask.

Ramón keeps looking straight ahead, at the factory buildings or through them. The only thing that touches me is that nothing touches me anymore, he says, as if he hadn't understood my question. Then he turns his head slowly, his eyes are wet, and he says: This way, I'm closer to God.

He's not surprised at my amazement, Ramón tells me. Talking to an analyst about God is like explaining bookkeeping to a gorilla. Mind you, he says, that's not quite right, he doesn't remember that much from economics, but he does remember the experiment with the chimpanzees and the brokers. In a behavioural economics setup, researchers got chimps to make investment decisions on the stock market. The brokers had to choose between the identical alternatives – on average, the apes did better. So a chimp would probably have more understanding for God than an economist like me, he says, for whom nothing exists beyond causality.

Thanks, I say with a smile, you're probably right.

If I'd ever taken an interest in quantum physics I'd know that the way we look at things has an influence on the things themselves, Ramón replies. In a physics experiment in which light is shone through slits, the light hits the projection surface as a wave, but if you look at the exit from the slits the light is particles. So it makes sense, he tells me, that the physicists joined forces with the psychoanalysts – both groups assumed there was something beyond causality, an acausality that is not coincidence. You know, Ramón says, that Eve used rationality, used arguments to persuade Adam to pick the fruit from the tree of knowledge?

I've heard of that theory, I say. Shall we make a move?

I'm trying to explain to you why the only thing that still touches me is the fact that nothing touches me anymore, but with rationality alone you'll only ever judge and not understand – it's as if I was watching the earth from another star: I see what happens to me but I'm

somewhere else already. Seen from here, the difference between a kiss and a slap isn't all that big anymore, they're both nothing more than ways people touch each other.

We leave the ship and walk back to the train. Drunks line our path. At the station, a man is yelling insults at the night: You bastard. Teens light cigarettes and smoke with grand gestures; this is a no-smoking station.

When I open the front door, the dogs jump right up at Ramón and lick his hands. Ramón leans down to one of them, holds his snout shut and stares him in the eye until the dog starts to howl, then he lets go and strokes him on the head. We put down blankets and pillows and my sleeping bag in the corner of the room where Vince's bed once stood. We'll get you a mattress, I say, but we'll have to improvise for tonight. Ramón lies down on the sleeping bag in his puffer jacket. The dog he just stared down in the hall snuggles up to him. I lean against the wall in the opposite corner. It's funny that Vince doesn't live here anymore, I say. We lived together from the day I left home.

Does he still work so much? Ramón asks.

I notice fatigue overcoming me, my body growing heavy, with a bit of luck I might sleep now – Ramón, tell me something, tell me a story, I say, and my eyes fall shut.

Heavy breathing. Trembling with cold, I wake up. Candles all over the room. Ramón is alternating between jumping-jacks and press-ups. Afterwards, he sits down on the floor and wipes off the sweat with a towel. Then he starts over from the beginning, after a while lying down on his front and pushing himself up into a press-up, sticking his bum in the air, pulling his legs in close. I feel my lower back flinch. Ramón swipes his tongue once across his lips and pulls his legs a little further to the fore; the pain in my back intensifies. You don't go to heaven or hell only after death, he says quietly, you go just before it, just when you're taking your last earthly breaths. He says: Most people born into this world are biological entities that disappear again after a number of metamorphoses. I turn my head to each side, in pain.

Ramón drops back down onto his front and then rolls into the corner where I put the blankets for him. My eyes fall shut again.

The dogs are standing in front of me and panting. One lays his head on my knee, his pointed teeth shimmering white between his chops, and the whites of his eyes – he's gazing at me – are fat, as if about to burst.

The sleeping bag is opened out, empty. The candles are out. Ramón is gone.

## Opportunity Costs II

The first time Ramón wore his puffer jacket was on a summer's day. His grandmother had bought it for him, he told us. The heat bounced off the asphalt, the cars parked on our road glowing lumps of metal. He was standing on the street outside the door to our building. His face, scrunched up in the bright light, was covered in beads of sweat. I had to go to the pharmacy; he followed me. We saw people in light summer clothing; a girl in hotpants made space between us as she passed, semi-naked builders stared down at us from scaffolding. Ramón seemed not to notice any of it. Aren't you hot? Why the jacket? I asked after a while. I love this jacket, and you know why?

Because your grandmother gave it to you?

Because you can hide so much underneath it. I could have two shotguns and a Kalashnikov under here and no one would know, and handguns.

And then?

And then I'll put a bullet in everyone's head that gives me shit, every one of them, I've put up with it for half my life.

He meant Berlin. He meant Hellersdorf, his neighbourhood. He meant 'Who's afraid of the big black man?' He meant the glares at him and his mother, which said whore, which said bastard. He meant the neighbours lying that they didn't have any salt when his mother sent him round to ask. He meant the woman on the supermarket till when he clamped his money between his lips, his hands full with shopping, and she told him not to dirty the money if he wanted her to take it. He meant the old man on the bus who would rather stand than sit next to him.

It wasn't the first time Ramón had talked about killing passers-by. He made a pistol out of his hands and aimed it at a man I sometimes saw around the neighbourhood. A blond guy with spotty skin, pale with sagging shoulders, and although he was slim everywhere else he had a pot belly. Ramón held his hands out at head level as the guy darted towards a wall.

Stop it!

I'll gun them all down.

In the pharmacy, I said: I need something for headaches, but the man behind the counter didn't listen to me. He was watching Ramón wandering along the shelves like a sleepwalker, bouncing with his legs, running his fingers along the packaging. He's OK, I said, he's with me. Now the man looked at me with the same suspicious look as he'd used on Ramón. I need something for headaches, I repeated, but Ramón interrupted us.

I've got a question, he called out across the shop. You must have stuff here that's dangerous. I mean, I read something about it, there are these substances you can mix together and then they blow up. Is that kind of thing freely available?

I said: Take no notice, he thinks it's funny. Just give me some Ibuprofen and we'll be out of here.

Did you not understand my question? I'm just curious, I mean, anyone can shop here.

Ramón, I yelled at him, shut the fuck up.

I'm just asking, he said, and went on bouncing along the shelves.

No one else wanted him around, no one else wanted him at their parties. He was only accepted when lots of people were there, so many that uninvited guests were always tolerated. Other students from our course asked why we let him in, when he was sitting at his laptop in Vince's study while we revised profit margins in the kitchen. Because he's cool, Vince said, unlike boring swots like them who did all the practice exercises to pass the exams, but didn't give a shit about anything else.

Was our friendship part of the sunk costs for Ramón? How much had he invested in us, Vince and me? Or in his friend Kai? How much of that does he still carry with him now? What utility does life have for him? And death?

If we imagine the utility ( $U$ ) of life as a curve, is its slope  $\frac{\partial U}{\partial L}$  then positive or negative? Does the utility increase or decrease with an additional unit of life?

$U(L)$ ; mit  $\frac{\partial U}{\partial L} > 0$  oder  $\frac{\partial U}{\partial L} < 0$ ?

At the office, I spend all day thinking about Ramón and don't get much done on the study. Or I'm working on the study the whole time, doing nothing else, because thinking about Ramón is always also thinking for the study: Does life have a diminishing marginal utility?

Conventional utility functions assume that the utility an individual gets out of a specific good or service increases when they consume more of it: For a lepidopterist, two butterflies to add to their collection are better than one, three butterflies are better than two. But according to Gossen's law, described by the economist Hermann Heinrich Gossen in 1854 his algebraic poetry collection *The Laws of Human Relations and the Rules of Human Action Derived Therefrom*, the third butterfly is of less utility than the second, the fourth less than the third, and so on. The size of the enjoyment (Gossen wrote his poems with *enjoyment*, not yet with *utility*) constantly diminishes with uninterrupted enjoyment ('uninterrupted provision of

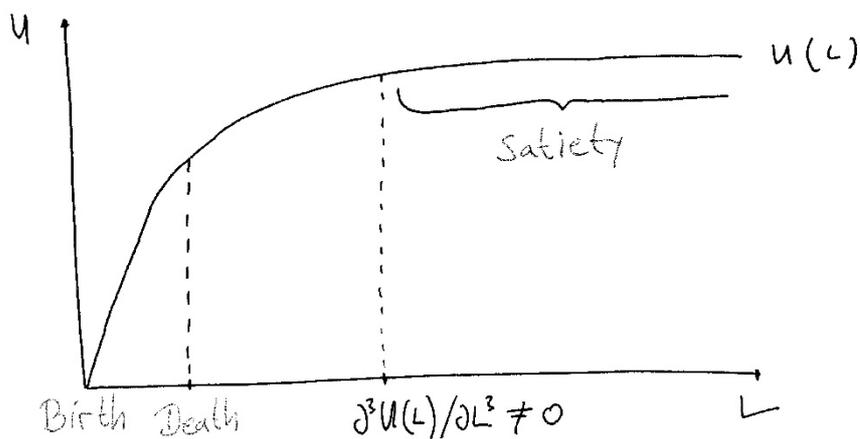
enjoyment’). Does the same apply to life? More life is more ‘enjoyment’ – but where does this enjoyment cease, with uninterrupted ‘provision of enjoyment’? Is the third unit of life worth less than the second? And what units can we measure life in anyway, what is its currency?

If we assume a diminishing marginal utility of life, does Gossen’s law of saturation really apply? That is: Does a point exist in life at which an individual under observation is saturated with life, because additional life units bring barely any additional utility?

The diminishing utility, considered as a logarithmic function, describes an ‘enjoyment’ that isn’t reduced on a linear basis; instead, the reduction increases progressively as the amount of the good enjoyed rises.

$$U(L) = \ln L$$

So the third unit of life may be worth less than the second, but it might still be worth almost as much as the first unit, while a significant reduction in the utility or enjoyment might only come about on the hundredth or five hundredth or five thousandth unit of life. If we were to measure the units of life in years, for simplicity’s sake, that might mean that Gossen’s saturation point lies beyond the length of a lifetime. That is, death prevents us from having enough of life. However, it not only protects us, but also prevents us from full enjoyment of life, namely: enjoyment to the point of saturation. Perhaps we’d have to live five hundred or a thousand years to reach saturation point. To be satisfied.



Is there any way to bring this satiety, which might occur centuries after death, back into our lifetimes, to a point shortly before death?

[...]

## Infinite

I park the car outside the Philharmonie, opposite the Staatsbibliothek. When Ramón wasn't at our place, then he was most likely here. I call Vince, let it ring. Cars stop at the junction with Potsdamer Straße and then drive off, new cars stop, drive off. I could watch them forever, listening to the ringing tone. Just as I'm about to hang up, he answers: Can I call you back later? He's gone, I say. Who? Ramón. He'll turn up somewhere – listen, I'll call you back, I'm at the office.

Vince is right. Let Ramón throw himself in the River Spree or beat his mother to death or blow himself up in a department store. He's probably just sitting somewhere and watching American football videos or studying the Holy Roman Empire or Meister Eckhart. And me? I ought to head over to Vince's office and go for a beer with him after he knocks off work, and if he hasn't got time I'll go on my own.

Ramón would sit at the same desk in the State Library for days, just reading books he'd brought along himself, or watching political documentaries and sports clips on his laptop, his ancient laptop. Sometimes he'd ask other students if they could spare some change; not many gave him anything. He'd wait a long time if there was no desk free because time had no meaning for him; he'd wait until a spot came up. No one sat down next to him. When he came to the library with Vince and me we'd all hunker down over our books, us because we were revising, him because he had nothing better to do. More often, though, there was no place; all I knew was that he was somewhere in the city, bedded down at night in Görlitzer Park, sleeping in a corner of the Neukölln shopping mall, roaming among the huge detached houses in Grunewald.

No matter how long I haven't been here, nothing has changed. The same foyer with its white pillars, lockers on the left and café tables by the windows. Next to the staircase, above a switch box full of brightly coloured diodes, Prometheus hangs several metres up, cast out of cement – not the shackled Titan but the light-bearing hero. I climb the steps to the reading room, the grey-beige carpet absorbing the sound of my footfall. I walk lengths along the rows of desks, on one side nothing but backs, on the other tense faces, high above us the ceiling like a sky, chandeliers shaped like spaceships and planets, at the end of the huge hall with hundreds of readers and floors of bookshelves, the enormous windows like in a hangar. I roam on around the space, a girl whispering to a young guy behind a shelf; they know they have to be quiet and they fall silent as I pass them. Beyond the cafeteria windows, students

grip their coffee mugs like important people. I walk on, PhD candidates hunched over in small rented rooms, an old man in a trench coat, his hair combed to one side, glasses with bottle-bottom lenses, reading a heavy book. I see myself reflected in a lampshade, my contorted image growing into the student I once was, seven or eight years ago. My shoulders have shrunk down, that happens quickly at revision times; Vince and I ought to hit the gym soon and lift a few weights. Our exams are in two weeks, students we know everywhere, how am I supposed to concentrate here, the aisles between the shelves transformed into a catwalk. I can't solve differential equations with multiple non-independent variables like this; I get a different result every time, mistakes always sneaking in somewhere, a minor mistake that complicates the equation so much after three calculation steps that I take forever to solve it, to solve it wrongly, two, sometimes three or more hours instead of the fifteen minutes allotted for each one. Vince has saved a spot for me. He's wearing a glittery tracksuit. Where've you been? he asks. In the future, I say. Have you finished the practice exercises? Come on, let's go walkabout. We need to get you a new pair of jogging pants for next time – all the girls look away when I walk around here with you. Vince puts his hands in the pockets of his dark, shiny jogging pants and we head for the cafeteria, taking the stairs to the second floor. There are people reclining in reading chairs with their eyes shut; we position ourselves by the balustrade. We have a view of almost the entire reading hall from here. At one desk, facing us, sits a girl with dark curly hair; she raises her head and looks over at us. Damn. What's up? Vince asks. She saw me staring at her. Serves you right for staring, you vulture. Shut up, I say. Do you know who she is? I've never seen her before, is she at our uni? She's in at least three of my courses, her name's Nadia, Vince says. She's usually annoyed in class, but we all are. We talked at the last summer party, she teaches boxing or something. Damn, I say, she's looking again.

Now she gets up. She's wearing a blouse with a slight gap to the top of her trousers, her jeans tightly fitted and showing the motion of her thighs, which rise and fall like a daddy-long-legs as she walks towards the stairs. She disappears underneath the balustrade but glances up at us just before. Then she climbs the spiral staircase to our level and stands facing us.

What effect does all that staring have on you boys, huh? she asks. Does it help you wank off better when you get home?

It does help a bit, says Vince, but I interrupt him before he starts sharing his masturbation stories, and I extend my hand to her: I'm Kara.

What are you doing here? Ramón is standing facing me. The library's about to close. A few young people are still at occasional desks with their books. Many of them are packing up.

Nadia's desk is free, the desk where I saw her the first time, many years ago. And I'm reminded of our snowy drive, when the city was snowed in and iced over and everything was white. White buildings, white streets, white leafless trees and white parked cars. No one was crazy enough to drive along the snow-covered roads, only us: me behind the wheel, Vince drumming on the dashboard from the passenger seat, and Nadia and Ramón in the back. We drove through the night, no destinations, no decisions. The buildings in the government quarter we reached at some point were monsters on a white field, the federal chancellery a cyclops worshipping the moon. Nadia and I skidded onto the field far away from the others, dived into the snow. The next day, we made an anxious decision to stay friends, not to become a couple. Later, Nadia told me her relationship with her boyfriend was as good as over after that, even though they stayed together a few more months and Nadia and I didn't get together until after uni, years later. All that had started off here. But where Vince was standing back then, Ramón is now, not leaning cool against the balustrade like Vince, hanging more than standing. His head is inclined to one side. His wire-rimmed glasses are far too small for his face. You can see the carelessness with which he picked out a cheap pair of frames at the optician's, not trying them on, not looking in the mirror.

I like this place. This is where I first saw Nadia, I say, and I point the desk out to Ramón from our floor, which protrudes into the hangar of the reading room. Ramón looks in the direction I'm pointing in but his gaze goes somewhere else. Is he looking at Vince, seven or eight years ago? Does he see himself sitting with us at one of the desks? He's still sitting at these desks, unchanged, the same laptop, the same posture, the same person. Only his cells must have been renewed entirely, but what do scientific explanations change? He doesn't look older. I say: Come on, let's go.

Ramón follows me at a slight distance. I feel his hanging head at my back, feel the weight of the transparent bags holding his books and laptop in my own arms. We walk along the shelves, between the rows of desks. A face peers from behind a pile of books and eyes us. We push past it; out of the corner of my eye, I see Ramón brushing against the pile but the tower doesn't topple. We go down the stairs. Ramón removes his puffer jacket from a hook and shrugs it on. I throw open the exit door but Ramón doesn't bother using his hands, shouldering the glass. We drift across the road. Ramón, a spectre in his oversized jacket, invisible in the breaking night; a car that would otherwise crash into him would glide right through him now. And with his invisibility, mine increases too, between these cars and their lights that shine right through us. It's only in Ramón's presence that I notice the hunch to my shoulders, the falling of my footsteps. Outside the cubist Philharmonie building, its lit-up

façade shining golden, we get in the car. Where do you want to go? I ask Ramón.

I don't care, he answers.

I start the engine and head eastwards because that side of the road is less crowded, turning left soon afterwards.

There's the hum of the engine. There are the floodlit monuments on Unter den Linden. I could drive up and down the boulevard to the TV tower and back to the Brandenburg Gate until late at night, until the tourists are asleep and the streets are empty. Humboldt University, the Lustgarten, the cathedral and on the opposite side the construction site where they're reconstructing the royal palace. They should never have torn down the Palace of the Republic as if the GDR never existed, I say. Should someone blow the thing up now or wait until they're finished?

I prefer the old Iron Tooth one, Ramón says.

Iron Tooth?

He laid the foundation stone for the palace, back in the fifteenth century, Friedrich II. of Brandenburg – there was a Friedrich of Saxony at the same time, Frederick the Gentle.

How do you know all that?

Read it somewhere. He founded the Order of the Swan for his knights, the Brandenburg one did – the idea was to bring together clergy and aristocracy, and then they also tried to regulate the aristocracy's feuds. Although the tale of the Swan Knight is about a nameless knight who turns up in court and metes out justice with his sword. I give him a quizzical look. Kids' stuff, Ramón says. The Swan Knight? No, politics. Didn't you study politics once? But not to learn by rote that we all act rationally, so the free market will liberate us. He looks out of the side window.

I stop outside the soup place on Adalbertstraße in Kreuzberg. There are framed photos on the walls of the restaurant – the chef and the waiters posing with celebrities. All the tables are occupied. We sit down alongside two men; they briefly interrupt their conversation and then the older one says: Elyas, boy, I won't let her back in this time. You can't keep going on about this, the younger one answers. I wonder what connects the two of them, whether they're related. The older man doesn't seem to be the father, otherwise he wouldn't call the other one 'boy', or would he? Not the father, but someone who's known him a long time, since he was born. There's no one like that in my life. Apart from my mother, nobody has known me since my birth. My father left us, my grandparents are dead. Before they died I rarely saw them.

The waiter comes to our table and the two men pay their bill. Ramón and I order lentil soup. We came here to eat together once before, years ago. It's been about ten years now since we first met. Does that mean anything? Does it mean something to Ramón? Or to Vince? It does to me, here on this evening, in this restaurant where I've been ordering lentil soup for a decade; the number of years we've known each other means something to me. But what? I'm not the nostalgic type.

Ramón stares at the bottles of olive oil and vinegar in a metal rack on the table. The waiter who brings us our soups is wearing a shirt and waistcoat; I notice it every time I come here. Ramón starts spooning his soup straight away. I don't touch mine.

He never cared, always came only to eat, sleep and sit at his laptop in the kitchen, to borrow money. And Vince gave him money and sent him to Hasenheide Park to buy hash. While I was with Nadia in my room or alone or with someone else. And yet sometimes he was there, Ramón was there when I doubted everything. My choice of degree subject, Vince, my life. He wasn't there for me, not like a friend who gives you a hug, who says we'll get through it, but he was there, in the room, next to me, someone breathing whose body heat had an effect on the room temperature, if only marginally. – Come in but keep quiet, I don't want to hear anything. Alright, alright. That was too much already. – Sometimes I'd open the front door and not say anything and let him past me into the kitchen, where he clambered onto our sofa in his great dirty shoes. I'd take a cutting board out of the sink, dry it off, chop onions and garlic and cook for us while he lay on the sofa and stared at his laptop. He wouldn't put the laptop aside and join me at the table until the food was on the plates. I don't know, did Ramón's presence ever really reduce the feeling of abandonment that kept coming over me, or did it only ever intensify it? Sometimes just the fact that he was sitting there chewing, in the same room as me, calmed me down.

I push my bowl of lentils across to him. No appetite. He goes on eating, not raising his eyes. His long thin body is bent over the table. I see the roots of his hair from above and the spoon disappearing underneath his pointed nose after he's dipped it in the soup. He's turned his elbows outwards, pressing the hand without the spoon onto the table-top with his fingers spread. The spoon scratches the metal bowl. My arms grow heavy, my back likewise, I lean back in my chair and while Ramón is scraping the spoon against the metal I look past him, out of the window onto the street. A taxi drives by in slow motion, two smiling women cross the road in slow motion, Ramón's spoon, the bowl, the scraping. Let's stay this way, let's stay this way a long time, Ramón; only the sound of the spoon, the scrape against the metal, must never stop.

Columbiadamm is dark between the two parks at Hasenheide and Tempelhofer Feld, despite its width. No buildings on either side, few people, trailers parked up against its curbs. I've driven this road countless times. With Ramón as well, but that's long ago now. There are the black trees, there are the figures on the edge of the road, a fat chef, three metres high with a gigantic spoon and hat, an acrobat standing on her head, a tiger in mid-leap, ads for a circus. The engine hums and Ramón is on the passenger seat beside me, strips of light from the streetlamps running across his face. When I used to drive Ramón back from our place to the student hostel it would take me up to an hour both ways. He'd never ask me if I'd drive him, not out of politeness or reserve, but because he thought nothing was below him. I guess it was sometimes the most peaceful place for me, at night when the streets were almost empty, the autobahn, the tall trees and dark roads in Grunewald. Shall I drive you home?

After a long pause, Ramón answers: If you want.

What I want: for it to be quiet, for it to stay night, for it to rain, for it to be winter in summer and autumn in spring, for Columbiadamm to be ten thousand kilometres long and go through water. I don't want to go to heaven or to hell, and I don't want a new beginning. An endless loop is what I want, and the only sound the hum of the engine. This road in the night as the groove on a vinyl record, the needle jumping back to it over and over. I don't want a career or a family, money or love, I don't want any goals, just this road forever.

Stop the car.

Here?

Pull over, please.

I stop the car in the shadow cast by a dinosaur mounted on a trailer.

Ramón, shortly before graduating from school, the time before his break-offs, his drop-outs from uni, work, life, a year into the new millennium. He has good grades even though most of the teachers don't like him, an A for maths, a B for physics. Ramón, who's allowed to play in his year's streetball championship because he's one of the tallest kids. He scores two baskets, then volunteers to be substituted and sits stoned on the subs' bench for the rest of the games. At the party at the end of the tournament, he still raises a glass with the whole team, he too gets hugged, something is coming to an end, and because that which is the past is to do with themselves and with the others, everyone loves each other. Soon everybody's talking to someone, dancing or getting drinks – everyone has their place at this party, one of the last ones in their school career. Ramón goes outside, stands outside the door to the sports hall, listens to the voices and the music from outside, stays there a few moments, listening; a

chapter in his life is ending too. Then his legs move and he lets it happen – the music and the voices get quieter and quieter and he boards a train, heads into town. His legs carry him to the ship. He knows she's playing there tonight, although he can't say how he knows. He climbs the stairs up to the ship's belly. The room is crowded. Ramón is thin, his long body bending like a sheet of paper as he folds himself through the people until he reaches a dark corner where he leans against the wall. Hands everywhere: at the bar with banknotes, ahead of him in the air, the hands of the dancers and partiers. Only because Ramón is so tall does he see the singer, Elea. She's standing on the stage, her hair in thin dreads nestling like snakes from her head over her shoulders. She has painted a pink mask over her eyes.

How old was she? I ask, I ask now as Ramón tells me about her, like back then in Grunewald, just that now we're parked on the edge of Columbiadamm. I don't know. But I didn't really think about it. All I know is that the others were still in the school gym. I saw photos from that night later on, they were all hugging and kissing and I was on the ship, listening to Elea's music.

Ramón hardly ever listens to music, in my memory. Once he came over with five CDs and said I could have them, he didn't need them anymore. I said he could sell them. But he said he didn't want anyone else to listen to them, no strangers. Do me a favour, take the CDs. They and the quotation handbook were the only items I ever got from Ramón. *As I Am* by Alicia Keys, a close-up of her face on the cover, black and white, her lips slightly parted, the incisors symmetrical, her skin smooth and pore-free and pale. If you didn't know any better you might think she was a white singer. Ramón couldn't stand the words *As I Am* written over that picture. And then he was on the ship, at the very back in the darkest corner against the wall, and listening to Elea's music, looking at her on stage. Her voice filled the room, full of power and clarity, and it hit Ramón. In that room humid with beer and sweat, with all those people he didn't know, with their hats and scarves and necklaces and unbuttoned shirts, people he didn't care about, on that ship, was where Ramón first cut through time and space.

What does that mean? I ask.

We felt our way along the trees until our eyes got used to the darkness and now there's a silvery field in the moonlight, with us wading through it. Ramón's walking ahead; I follow him across the clearing in Hasenheide Park. We find a bench and look back from there at the trees and up at the un-starred sky, but it's not black. The trees are black, the sky is violet, the clouds pressed into it like giant fingers.

Her voice, Ramón says, when she sang I was suspended in that voice. I felt my breath, I heard my heart beating, I felt the blood in my veins, and there had never been anything else.

After the gig, Ramón, who had never chatted up a woman, who had never talked to any stranger, went up on deck, where Elea was standing around with her band clutching cocktails in plastic cups, where her laughter peeled so brightly that it surpassed all other sounds, where everything glowed, and he positioned himself in front of her and the man next to her, who could have been her boyfriend, Ramón didn't know. Ramón ignored him and everyone else in the group, and said: I need to talk to you. He was standing far too close to Elea's face, as I imagine it. What about? she asked.

Ramón turned on his heel and left, hearing someone say: What's up with him? But nothing was up with him; he who could bend his body like paper bent to the ship's rail, along it to the stairs, down to the riverbank, sat down on a bench between lovers and leftovers and looked out at the water, over at the factory buildings on the opposite bank. He sat there for two hours, not daring to stand up or turn around – not wanting to meet Elea's eye.

The fingers in the sky dissolve and leave behind a delicate mist suspended against the violet. I'm cold; I clench my jaws. Ramón looks back at the clearing, grown lighter now, and I watch him looking out at the field here or out at the water from the ship and over at the factory buildings on the opposite bank of the Spree.

Do you know those moments? he asks me. He means, or so I translate it, the moments in which we no longer know whether we're in the universe or the universe is in us. He means the moments of great fulfilment and magic, not because all absurdity is suspended, but because life solidifies in a single instant and that instant rises above every fate. Ramón doesn't look at me; it's still me staring at his profile. He doesn't expect an answer. Ramón doesn't ask questions out of curiosity or interest in others.

Do I know those moments? I don't know much, just that I'm cold and that the sky is changing colour. While I'm still watching Ramón from the side, I see Nadia outside the record shop.

We hadn't seen each other for a while. I was writing my master's thesis. It was a spontaneous arrangement; I had called her, allegedly for no reason. She was wearing a short blue dress that reminded me, in the wind, of the sea, and looking at the jazz albums in the window. I stood behind her and my face appeared in the reflection between Bessie Smith and Fazıl Say. Nadia turned around and that moment in which time stopped grew out of the rain and the surface structure of her lips. I didn't know whether I stood outside that shop with Nadia for a second or a whole year.

There'd been more of those moments: my first kiss, far too late, once I'd been dreaming of it for months and no longer believed in the real possibility of lips that would part for me, and then it happened almost in passing in a department store. She'd just stuffed a dress in her bag and we pretended to be a couple, she kissed me and then said she had a sore throat and had probably given me tonsillitis. She had. Two days later, I got the worst sore throat of my young years, but it had been worth it. I remember being prepared to have my tonsils taken out without batting an eyelid, for that kiss from her. And then Janine. I hadn't dared to talk to her; I was in love with her and the older boys never left her side, and when we ran into each other one night and shared a walk home together, from the clubs to our parents' homes, it happened at the crossroads where we had to part ways. Her mouth was like melting butter, her smell of cigarettes, beer and peach. Those were the moments. Or when I stood before a large crowd in a square in Hannover, spontaneously grabbed the microphone at the rally and recited a verse I had on the tip of my tongue to the people. They were all quiet, all listening, my voice went into the crowd from all directions, and there was this one person – shoulder-length hair, red coat – who looked me in the eye, and it was as if I were speaking just for her, as though the whole of humanity were contained in her eyes. Or Vince on the morning when we boarded the ferry together, somewhere in Italy, our first time travelling without our parents, and I felt him so clearly beside me, far clearer than I'd ever felt someone by my side before.

Yes, I say to Ramón, I know those moments. He's still staring straight ahead and I put my hand on the back of his neck. He feels bony. Ramón doesn't react, but the fact that he doesn't get up and leave is almost a kiss.

For weeks, Ramón went all the way to the ship almost every day. Sometimes it was closed; then he'd go for a walk. He'd lie down on the grass, extend his arms and legs away from him and stare at the sky. He'd extract empty deposit bottles from the bins and underneath the benches, spending the money he cashed in on chips, sleeping on a bench by the houseboats and taking the first train home in the morning. He went on doing it until he stopped, from one day to the next, and simply stayed at home, lying on the sofa and reading books or going to school – he'd already done all his exams and it looked like he'd passed them, but the school year wasn't yet over – or sitting on the swing in the playground until the Nazis turned up. He'd hear them in the distance and turn into a shadow against the wall, creep off unnoticed.

And then? I ask.

The summer was over, Ramón had stopped thinking about Elea, he got on the train again, he knew the trees and the lampposts in the park, he ate a kebab, he peed off the houseboats' jetty

and belched into the evening. Then he climbed up the ship's narrow staircase into the party space. It was crowded, as always, the barkeeper pouring beer, unbuttoned shirts, hair piled on top of heads, hands, dimmed lights, basslines, Ramón. He pushed his way to the middle of the dancefloor and swayed his long thin arms like two pendulums, his feet taking tiny steps back and forth, his head nodding. He looked up and in the silhouette between a man-bun and an open mouth floated Elea's face. This time her hair wasn't plaited; in the red light it was like a sun rising from her head. Eight, nine, ten, eleven people were dancing between Elea and Ramón; Elea wasn't dancing. Ramón stopped his feet from moving, only his arms still in motion. Did she see him? Was she looking past him? He wound his way through the crowd until he was facing her. Elea's eyes, her long lashes, her firm mouth.

And then the park in the night without lampposts, where he walked with Elea. Every footfall a step into the darkness. There must be trees somewhere, there was water somewhere, homeless people lying on the grass, shooting stars at shoulder height, the moon was a fruit on a tree. Elea's scent now also settled above the park's grassy surface. Ramón breathed in deeply and with every breath he also breathed in the forests and the lakes and the towns and clouds, the concrete and the dead and the living, the playgrounds and the autobahns, the centuries and the days of the week. Ramón was immersed knee-deep in the night and he wasn't a child anymore, he was a grown man, he could come and go as he pleased, sometimes didn't come at all, knew the history of the Greeks and Romans, the Old Testament, shaved with disposable razors stolen from the shops. I don't know where we are, where you are, where I am, I don't know when, he said.

I like that song, Elea replied.

Sing it, Ramón exclaimed.

Oh, now you're giving me orders all of a sudden, she laughed.

The lights along the river appeared and Ramón and Elea stopped simultaneously. Come, said Elea, let's sit down here.

Wait, Ramón said, and took off his jacket to put on the ground. The night cooled Ramón's body quickly but he shivered in silence.

You're ice cold, Elea said when her elbow accidentally brushed against his, and she put her arm around him, her hot hand touching his back above the kidney. Heat raced across his back and chest, spread across Ramón's body like spilled warm water inside of him. They were barely speaking by now but she warmed him and he stopped shivering. Then he finally said something again, Ramón who found it so hard to speak to a person he liked. Ramón, who had never spoken to a person he liked apart from his little sister, told Elea he had been to her gig,

on the day of the streetball championship, and had seen her voice, a blue mist that he inhaled, and since then he'd breathed differently. Elea smiled – a laugh, silvery, rising as a trapeze. Ramón shifted away from her, an involuntary impulse, unsettled by the laugh, but he wasn't ashamed of his confession. Deep blue, dark blue, once neon blue, almost black blue: Elea sang a mist, one streak grew and grew and got ever more transparent until it dissolved, another floated down from the sky and settled over the blades of grass and Elea's hair, on the tip of Ramón's nose and Elea's lips – blue dots like stars and fishes. That was the moment. But there was also a renunciation.

Elea got to her feet, pulled Ramón up, draped his jacket over his shoulders. Now his body was freezing in the places where she'd touched him. On their way back to the ship, they passed figures in the dark, walking hunched over and carrying sacks. Hello, one of them said. Got any bottles? another said, scanning the ground. Elea and Ramón moved away. At the ship, he said he had to go home. She said she was going back in. Ramón nodded and watched her climbing the narrow staircase.

And then? I ask.

Nothing. Almost nothing. Weeks later, months, years later, he met her again by chance. He was already lugging those transparent plastic bags around with him by then, soon no longer transparent because he folded them so often to put them in his pockets. He carried his ancient heavy laptop in them, with a big clunky power adaptor and his thick books. The bags dangled from his long arms, cut off the blood in his fingers, his shoulders stooping from their weight – they stayed that way when he set the bags down. It was summer, countless near-naked shiny bodies flattening the grass in the parks. Vince, Ramón and I were roaming between the human islands. What are you doing? Stop staring. I'm just looking for a spot for us, Vince said.

Eventually we squatted down but Ramón was gone. We spotted him at the end of the field, a tall shape swaying with the grass. He was speaking to a woman. She was wearing a red top that left her shoulders bare. I can't believe it, said Vince. Who is that? No idea.

Did you see her again after that? I ask Ramón. No.

We walk deeper into the park, along the trees, silent for a while, and then I ask: What happened on the night with the Nazis?

Ramón doesn't react for a long time. Just as I start to think he didn't hear me, he answers: They kicked me in the face when I was lying on the ground, but it wasn't that bad. It hurts afterwards, but you don't feel anything while you're getting kicked.

A warm sensation in Ramón's face; he knew it was blood. Tears pricked his eyes. A physical reaction, not a mental one. He lay on the ground and looked up, saw trousers with zips and buttons, belts, grinning faces in the lamplight. He felt hands grabbing him from behind, dragging him up, felt his shoulders, his arms, his head. Something warm hit his face, his jaws were pressed open and then came a second and a third stream, and liquid gathered in his mouth and he heard them laughing, and a saccharine stench sent his bile rising. Then they finally took their hands off his face. The stench of piss had already soaked into him, a part of him; he looked up again and saw a shaven head, and he recognized Kai looking him in the eye.

Only when branches break underneath our shoes do I hear anything but the wind. Ramón is walking a little way ahead again. The contours of his skull stand out against the darkness. A curved line leads from his ears to his jaw. A sad line, I think. And yet I know the line isn't sad, it's just the lower ridge of his jaw, seen from an unfamiliar angle, by night in the park. Ramón dragged himself home. His mother and sisters were asleep. He dragged himself to the bathroom, took off his jacket, sweater and everything else until he stood there with his upper body bare. He inspected his face in the mirror above the sink. His right eyebrow had split, blood and dirt stuck to the cheek below it. The eye was swollen shut, as was his nose, a fat clump of flesh set crooked in his face. He parted his lips, through great pain. His teeth were blood-red. As he washed, he couldn't feel when he touched his face; everything seemed numb. Looking back at the mirror, he saw Rahel standing behind him. His little sister, still a child back then. She held out a towel to him; he dried himself off. Rahel took it back and rinsed out the blood under the shower.

For the first few days afterwards, Ramón stayed at home, stayed in his room, didn't go out, not into the living room, not onto the street. Rahel brought him food when their mother was out. When she was in, she insisted that Ramón sit at the table or she'd let him go hungry. Not until weeks later did he leave the house again regularly, but he stayed in Hellersdorf. Then he signed up for his compulsory community service, worked in a hospital and moved into a flat-share in Lichtenberg with another guy from work. He stole tablets from the medical supply cabinet. Neuroleptics: Risperdal, Serdolect, Dogmatil or Zeldox. Ramón swallowed anything and everything. Sometimes he couldn't sleep for weeks, restless and tired at the same time, couldn't keep still even though he had no energy to move, and then he woke up back in hospital on a drip. He was suspended from community service but they didn't press charges for desertion. Once he was released from hospital he moved back in with his mother. For the first time, they found something like peace together. His mother's boyfriend didn't talk to him

and he even snored less, or so it seemed to Ramón. He was allowed to come and go as he pleased. He did it anyway, but this time his mother didn't yell at him or refuse to feed him. She even bought him the books he wanted. It didn't bother him that Rahel turned the TV up loud next to him and spent hours watching cartoons and ads while he read. One day, he ran into Kai again. He had let his hair grow back, with a new beard to match. They stopped in their tracks, their faces close, and said nothing for a long time, until Kai was called over by his mother waiting for him at the entrance to their building. Kai turned away and left. A few days later, Ramón rang at his front door and was let in. His mother had cooked spaghetti, which they ate without sauce. It was late, and Kai folded his bed out. Ramón heard him praying in the night.

We walk along the road back to the car, past the chef, the acrobat and the tiger. The car's parked underneath the dinosaur. We drive past the mosque, past the former airport's radar tower and the huge Nazi structure of the airport itself, where people from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan are now housed. We drive, and it's as if I were listening to Elea sing, as if her voice were ringing out of Ramón's silence, mingling with the engine noises, rising from the car into the night sky and morphing into aurora borealis, difficult to see because of the yellow light of the streetlamps.

Months after Ramón had met Kai again, he signed up at uni and I was outside the lecture theatre with Vince, and a girl from our course brought him over and said: This is Ramón, he's new, seems to be OK. Later he sat on the back seat of the car and came home with us.

Ramón is silent now. Nor do I say anything. We drive up Martin-Luther-Straße into a different time. Beyond the Landwehr Canal, we see the tower blocks on Potsdamer Platz protruding from the skyline like the hands of a city giving a sign that it's still alive, somewhere underneath. The golden Viktoria floating above Berlin, led by the eagle on her helmet – we leave her behind us. Snowflakes fall into the beams of the streetlamps on Straße des 17. Juni, and into the car's headlights. Within a matter of seconds, the cityscape is made up of gleaming snow, the white trees of Tiergarten on either side of us, our lane, the Brandenburg Gate, everything swathed in white. We drive in a circle, Vince drumming on the dashboard beside me. Ramón is hunched on the back seat, and in the mirror I keep meeting Nadia's eyes, slightly tilted inwards so they look stern. Sometimes she looks out into the snowstorm, sometimes ahead, straight at the rear-view mirror, and I'm never sure if she's looking me in the eye.

Behind the federal chancellery, the snow masks any demarcation of the road from the empty space around it. We're alone in the night with monsters: The chancellery is a cyclops, the Reichstag a pair of jaws open to the sky. We glide at walking pace, under the gaze of the gleaming monsters. They stalk out of nowhere at the ends of their fields. We could drive another hundred kilometres into this nothingness, straight on forever, the earth is flat. The car swings around, we spin on our axis, everyone screams, one huge yell. The image of the open mouths, the teeth and flared nostrils is decoupled from the high and low voices, and around us the snow falls obliquely – it's us inside a snow globe.

While we spin on in the snow in another time, Ramón and I are now arriving at my road. In the flat, the dogs leap up at us again and run with us into Vince's room. We don't turn on the light. In the slight glow of the streetlamps that reaches the flat, the dogs remain invisible, only their eyes shining, floating around the room like maybugs. Ramón drops down onto the blankets in his corner. I stay standing in front of him.

The car turns more slowly, finally stops revolving and merely slides across the snow. A brief silence. Then Vince and I burst out laughing. Ramón – I can see him in the mirror – looks around with a grin. Nadia starts shaking her head but I know full well she's suppressing a laugh. The four doors open one after another: passenger seat, driver's seat, back left, back right. We disembark from the spaceship with which we've landed in this night devoid of people, leaving the doors open. We place our footprints onto the unfamiliar landscape, each bearing a grin like a lit torch. Nadia and I wade through the snow towards the cyclops. After a few metres, we stop. Vince and Ramón have vanished, only Vince's laughter echoing between the walls of the government buildings. We draw hopscotch squares in the snow. Nadia draws the boxes, I write the numbers. She throws my glove. I land outside the lines every time and have to start over again. Come on, she says, put a bit of effort in. I jump out of the game, she runs off and I chase after her but she's faster. Her hair, long and dark, blows out from underneath her hat. Her tight jeans, her brown winter boots with fur cuffs beneath her knees, her jacket ending slightly above the top of her trousers. I can't catch up with her, I keep running, I'm out of breath. There's her hair, there's her hat, red, there are her jeans. I get faster or she gets slower, her hair tickles my face. I use all my strength to accelerate one more time, then I slip and slide under her feet. We fall, slithering towards the cyclops, sliding, laughing, lying on top of each other in the snow. Her face close up in the moonlight, her lips and cheeks, cold skin, hot clouds of breath.

I look into Ramón's face, gleaming in the light from the road.

A face made of parchment. Her mouth, my mouth, my mouth on her mouth, I taste her breath, cheek, neck. I undo her jacket and bury my hand under the layers of clothing. It gets a tiny bit warmer with every layer, the sweater still cool, the blouse underneath it lukewarm, then there's a vest and underneath that the body radiates warmth. I pull at it, it's stuck in the waistband, I tug until it slips up and my hand fits through. Lips glowing on my mouth; they part and I touch another tongue with mine; it's very soft. Something hammers through the jacket, sweater and blouse, the bicuspid valves of our hearts trying to beat their way through. Every kiss stores all a person's previous kisses, every kiss stores all humanity's previous kisses. And in every kiss, all the kisses from three million years of human history are repeated. Teenagers' heartbeats, secretly behind the bins in the schoolyard, the first humans in Africa, Anthony and Cleopatra, sailors on leave in eighteenth-century Marseille, the crackle of the thick fabric of baroque dresses. Anyone who ever kisses embeds their consciousness in the unconscious of the world; a current passes through the kissers, flowing through the first human and all her descendants.

Nadia and I slide through the snow, her mouth closes around mine, my mouth closes around hers, her breath heats my cheeks. She's lying underneath me, then suddenly twists herself on top. Her hair's snow rains onto my face. She slips onto my thighs, undoes my trousers. Cold invades my lap. There's the sky, now moonless, night-grey clouds, black light. Nadia drives out the cold with her mouth. I brush her hat off, grip her curls with my fingers and let the movements of her head lead my hand, the clouds digesting the city's lights. Something inside me presses together and I draw Nadia's head upwards. She stands up, unfastens her belt, lets her trousers down, plants her brown boots next to my arms and kneels down on me. I grab her knees and raise my head, her navel moving ever faster, wind blowing through her hair, she rises and falls, clouds still above us, Nadia's hair in the wind, her mouth, the night, I grip her thighs and press against her with all my might. Then I drop back, she drops back. She's lying between my feet and I'm between her boots in the snow. The cold invades our bodies only gradually. Nadia slides off me and we pull our trousers up, lie side by side. And both at the same time, out of nowhere, we laugh. We shovel snow over each other, flat on our backs, exhausted after three throws and huffing our breath into the cold air. We pull each other closer but it doesn't get any warmer, lying in the snow. Our lips touch.

Every kiss is a storage facility for all previous kisses, every kiss a storage facility for time – the corners of my mouth touch Ramón's lips. The cold draws back from Vince's room. Ramón's hand on my knee is warm. I feel the warmth through my cold jeans, flowing along my leg. His face in the darkness, the long nose. The dogs breathing. His cheeks are cold.

Ramón's cheek so close to my eye. The shadow of a dog behind us on the wall. We lie together in silence.

Nadia sits up, looks around: What's happened here? she exclaims. All around us, snowflakes are falling from the sky, each as big as feathers from white birds, from seagulls, geese, swans. Nadia opens her hands and there's a feather on her palm; she gives it to me. Above us the sky. Beneath us the field. Arm in arm, we wade through the snow. The car comes into view. Someone's waving at us, coming closer; it's Vince. We had a joint outside the Bundestag, he says, for the German People. Ramón's asleep in the car. We get in, quietly. I drive off. In the rear-view mirror, I see Nadia stroking Ramón's hair.

My fingers feel his cropped frizzy hair.

The monsters bid us farewell, with the federal chancellery, the cyclops, moving alongside us, all the way until we leave the government quarter. Vince is asleep now too, hunched up on the passenger seat. In the rear-view mirror, Nadia's hand is still on Ramón's forehead, her head leaned back.

Our faces very close, our eyes overlapping, looking like a single eye. I drop backwards, into the blankets against the wall, his head in my arm.

Towards morning, the dogs wheezing; I wish I could listen to it forever. It's still dark outside but the increase in sounds – a motorbike, the beep-beep-beep of a car reversing – reveals that the day has already begun. My back hurts from the hard floor. I lean against the wall next to Ramón. The dogs' bodies are tiny islands, dotted about the darkness of the room. Ramón is asleep with his mouth open. His nose extends almost past his top lip. My teeth chatter gently, a sound only inside my skull.

[...]

### III

*But why are you so worried about my going away?*

*We've plenty of time before I go, an eternity!*

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

[...]

## Nothingness

[...]

On the street, I'm dazzled by the sunlight falling past small dark clouds. I'm not cold anymore. I drop my coat on a café chair in passing. Above the trees, the clouds are unevenly black, like shadow puppets of a giant house spider spreading its legs and mouthparts across the sky of the Quartier Latin. I got off the train halfway, as always. The currency of mortality is measured in solidarity. If solidarity is rescinded, mortality is devalued. That changes nothing in the run of things.

I walk through the rain. The sound of water slapping onto stone and gravel. Roaring engines from the road at every traffic light. Car horns in the distance. The spider is as big as the whole quarter. One of its feet fills the width of the street; the other seven are placed on other streets and roofs. Passers-by duck their heads and pick up their pace. The spider moves along soundlessly, not a sound to be heard when it sets a foot down, breaking nothing, not the asphalt or the grey-blue tiles on the roofs; at most, a bicycle falls over.

I follow the spider. From Rue Mouffetard, when I look up at the sky, I see the exoskeleton of its belly. People crowd into doorways or hide underneath their umbrellas. I walk past a bookshop, into a white café with a large courtyard at the end of the road. Steps lead up to a garden. Behind it, a room with water pipes and padded benches. Men and a few women talking. They hush their voices when I enter. I drop down onto upholstery and a man puts a glass of sweetened mint tea in front of me. The air smells of apple and tobacco. The men peer over at me with mistrust. I slurp my tea, leaving the glass at my mouth for a long time after every sip, breathing in the minty steam. On the wall above me is a mirror, made up of many small mirrored mosaic tiles. I see myself in it, staring back from various angles. I close my eyes, as if for the first time in weeks, only my multiplied eyes above me remaining open, blinking in irregular unsynchronized patterns, some of them staring without the slightest twitch. Out of twenty eyes, I watch myself resting, my head tipped back, my hands holding the tea glass in my lap, my legs crossed. I hear someone saying: *C'est dieu qui donne la vie, et c'est lui qui la reprend*. The voice comes from behind the wall I'm leaning against. I follow it. It's a kind of screening room, a cinema at the rear of the café. There's no film on right now. Instead, everyone is leaning down towards a man speaking in a hushed voice: They may insult you, they may humiliate you, but you may never raise a hand against another person. He will recompense you in the afterlife for the worldly injustices. For it is He who makes

recompense, it is He who gives life, and He alone who takes life. He may put you to the test; stand firm. Evil spirits have blinded these children. Now they must justify themselves – to Him. Blindness does not rid us of guilt. For He has given us understanding so that you may decide for yourselves. And these children did not load this guilt upon themselves just yesterday, guilt does not come from one day to the next, guilt does not assault us; guilt grows. If we make ourselves guilty, it feels harmless – harmless and petty, pollen from a flower. Something we believe is only our business and nobody else's. False! Our guilt concerns us all. Long before we think a deadly thought, long before these children made the decision to take up weapons, long before they first considered committing murder, before even a drop of blood was spilled, their hands were stained with blood. They let resentment into their hearts, and there it grew. In a world of humiliation, the humble leave their posts. Where the death of one person counts and no one cares about the death of others, life has already been damaged. Can we blame the humiliated for resenting their humiliators? Let Him decide, for it is not my task to place blame, and neither is it yours. But let me observe this: The humiliated let resentment into their hearts, breathed it into their lungs. They had not yet noticed they had been humiliated, did not yet know the meaning of the word 'humiliation'. Accepted it as we accept a common cold or the prices on the Métro. And yet it was them, them alone who nurtured that resentment and dreamed of inflicting humiliation themselves, and only then did evil spirits come and twist their lungs. Evil spirits are wandering outside, standing at the threshold and watching us, wandering, feeling the resentment in our hearts – they smell it as dogs scent fear. You will say: But had they not been humiliated, they would not have nurtured resentment, and the evil spirits would not have scented it. And I say: False! We have not yet spoken about the humiliator, he has his own story, a different one to the story of resentment. And behind the stories of the humiliator is another and behind that another and another, and that goes on and on until we end up back with him who let resentment into his heart, and hence we end up here, in this room, with you, with me. We are back at the beginning: He has given you understanding that you may not be blinded by demons, that you may open your heart to love and... Someone taps me on the shoulder: Monsieur, either in our out, this isn't a zoo. Sorry, I say, and he nods.

I leave the café, cross the street, walk on to the Jardin des Plantes. In the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, I visit the axolotls. One of them resembles Professor Kurt Zarr. We look each other in the eye for a long time, and I know just as well as he does that I could change into him, I could climb into the aquarium and be him, and he would be me, and then he'd be standing outside looking at me as I lay motionless behind the slowly rising bubbles in the

water, watching him watching me, and then Professor Zarr would leave the museum and the Jardin and buy a tie in the nearest shop, and I would spend fifty years glaring at silly children behind the bubbles, and one day an economist would give me a cold stare and I'd be ready to step out of the aquarium again, and in the nearest shop I'd ask the salesman if he'd ever heard of Europe, and the salesman would describe the way back to the Muséum transnational d'Histoire naturelle for me.

## The Living

I sit down on a bench in the Jardin des Plantes behind neatly trimmed hedges – reigned-in nature. Between the treetops, blue sky without clouds or birds. Across the path, I spot two squirrels. The nearest one has its hands together as if to pray, its back rounded. The further one is reaching out its paws for the other. They remain motionless, and only after a while do I realize they're dead.

A message from Rahel. She's written to me, at last she's written to me. I'm relieved, but at the same time something inside me constricts. She writes: You're here too? That means she's in Paris! Is she or was she with Ramón? Why is she only getting in touch now? I type: Why are you only getting in touch now? and then delete it immediately. Instead, I type: How are you? and delete that as well. Finally: Can we meet? I'm in the Jardin des Plantes.

People stroll through the park. The couples press up against each other as if they had something to defend. Those walking alone hide their hands under their arms or in their pockets, looking at the ground as if in danger of falling into an abyss, and when they raise their eyes they stretch their faces to the sky like someone asking for something to hold onto. Rahel answers: Yes. I write: Where are you? In Château Rouge. Can you come to the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, to the Jardin des Plantes? When? Now. After a few minutes, her answer comes: I need an hour.

The gaps between the branches above me; I could stare at them for years. An attempt to decipher the calligraphy of plants. I walk through the Jardin des Plantes to the museum building.

The dinosaurs' ribs. The light between the Tyrannosaurus Rex's jaw bones. The never-ending neck of the Diplodocus. The Triceratops's nostrils and the Carnotaurus's legs – even its calves come up to my chin. Behind a vertebra supporting the lowered skull of an Allosaurus, Rahel appears. First her hair, spilling out of the hood it refuses to be contained by. Rahel looks around cautiously, behind the spine of this creature a hundred and fifty million years old, then she spots me.

We walk between the creatures made of bones, grazing through the museum's halls. Are you here on your own? I ask. Yes, she says, I am now. Where are you staying? At Mourad's place. He's a good guy, said I can stay all week if I like. How do you know him? Internet. It's easy for girls to find a sofa to sleep on. And Ramón? She stops in front of a squat skeleton, the

Lystrosaurus, a herbivore. I'm done, she says, done with school but especially with my family and him. He asked me if I'd come with him. I told him I'm leaving, but on my own. I'm not his sister anymore, we're not friends. We lived a shitty life together in a shitty flat. That's all. She extends her bent nose towards the Lystrosaurus case. I say: Isn't that enough to make you siblings? She says: No.

Rahel turns away from the bones and walks on; I follow her. She's wearing black leather boots, tight black jeans and a leather jacket over her hoodie. The leather is cracked between the shoulder blades. A father is holding his daughter's hand and they stop at the Iguanodon; he kneels down, strokes her hair and points out something about the dinosaur's bones. Rahel's eyes graze them as we sit down on the floor at the edge of the room. In front of us, a mountain range of bones. If I look straight ahead for long enough, the separate creatures go out of focus and all I see is freestanding bones in this hall with its skylights and all the people, entire families wandering among the skeletons. They must know what's happened; everyone in this city knows. Had they planned this trip to the museum with their children for weeks and didn't want to postpone it today? Or do they bring their children to the museum every Saturday, perhaps a different one every weekend, so that they learn at an early age which geological layers this earth has, which history this country has, which animals there are and were, and all they can find to hold onto on a day like this is that routine? Who would it help if they postponed their museum trip? It won't bring the dead back to life.

No one cares. In a deeper sense, no one is interested in what happens to anyone else. Interested out of sensationalism, out of boredom, for entertainment or distraction, yes, but never, almost never a deep, existential interest in other people, except perhaps out of relief at having been spared disaster themselves.

I say: The kids love dinosaurs.

From the side, I can see Rahel's teeth; she's breathing through her mouth. Her teeth shine white between her violet lips. She's still almost a kid herself. She says: When I told him I wasn't coming with him, I was taking off on my own, he said he remembered my father, he was less of an asshole than our mother's other guys. He said he'd wait for me.

For Ramón, waiting can take place between two pages of a book. Or in the library. Or on the street. At his grandmother's place. In the holy something or other.

We haven't got much time, Rahel says, just a couple of hours. Then my plane leaves.

[...]