Adrian Duncan is an Irish artist and writer. His debut novel *Love Notes from a German Building Site* won the 2019 John McGahern Book Prize. His second novel *A Sabbatical in Leipzig* (2020) was shortlisted for the Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year. His collection of short stories *Midfield Dynamo* was published in 2021 and longlisted for the Edge Hill Prize. His third novel, *The Geometer Lobachevsky*, was published in April 2022.

Praise for *A Sabbatical in Leipzig*

'Adrian Duncan writes with emotional accuracy and what seems like effortless precision about work and exile, about buildings and cities. To his narratives, he brings a mixture of the exact and the visionary. To his characters, he brings a rawness of feeling combined with an urgent need for them to make sense of the world. Duncan's novels *Love Notes from a German Building Site* and *A Sabbatical in Leipzig*, and his collection of stories *Midfield Dynamo*, make clear that he is an original voice, a writer who has come to recreate the world on his own terms'
Colm Tóibín

'Adrian Duncan is one of the most interesting Irish writers at work today. Those who have read his novels, *Love Notes from a German Building Site* and *A Sabbatical in Leipzig*, will remember the peculiar way his protagonists see the world and the unusual shapes his narratives take as a result. It is as if the text is teaching you how to read anew'
Niamh Donnelly, *Irish Independent*

‘At the very forefront of writing in Ireland’
Michael Cronin, *Irish Times*

‘To channel the human condition through the worldview of an engineer in this effortless but immensely technical way is highly unusual in fiction, especially in an era of Anglophone interconnectedness and the drift of literature towards a reparative or ameliorative function which must be obvious and accessible to achieve both market reach and wide-ranging relevance. *A Sabbatical in Leipzig* is not trying to be this kind of book. It’s not trying not to be this kind of book either, but its plain-spoken, obsessive commitment to life as an engineering project which is not just a cute or enabling metaphor but a dull thing of plans, measurements, physics, accuracy and functionality makes no attempt to bring the reader into a blunt-edged or humanist vision of engineer-as-symbol. It’s far, far more intelligent than that. The thing is, the engineer is a symbol, and his view of the world is deeply, compassionately human – you just have to earn this realisation because *A Sabbatical in Leipzig* is not interested in spelling it out’
Niamh Campbell, *Los Angeles Review of Books*

‘What’s beautiful about Duncan’s writing is that he doesn’t use sentimentality to tug on the heartstrings of the reader … Michael’s matter-of-fact manner of speaking is unintentionally humorous in many places – reminiscent of a sort of Eleanor Oliphant character in the way he describes life events with the tone of a bemused outsider’
Nicola Spendlove, *Crossways Literary Magazine*

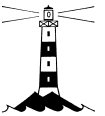
'*A Sabbatical in Leipzig* is a masterclass in … paying attention to the minutest of details and looking at the world with keen eyes and a quiet but curious mind. What I enjoyed so much about this beautiful, pensive book is how it made me look at the world differently. I love the way he writes about angles and intersections, about tracing paper and shadow images, about bubbles and porcelain in such precise, luminous prose, in sentences filled with images that take your breath away. An unusual gem of a book'
Justine Carbery, *Sunday Independent*

'Despite (or, indeed, because of) the narrative style's starkness in imagery and prioritising of analysis over emotion, *A Sabbatical in Leipzig* is both haunting and devastating'
Anna Benn, *Dublin Review of Books*

# A SABBATICAL IN LEIPZIG

# A SABBATICAL IN LEIPZIG

ADRIAN DUNCAN



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This is a work of fiction. All characters, businesses, organizations
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of
the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

All drawings that appear interspersed throughout the
main body of the text are by the author.

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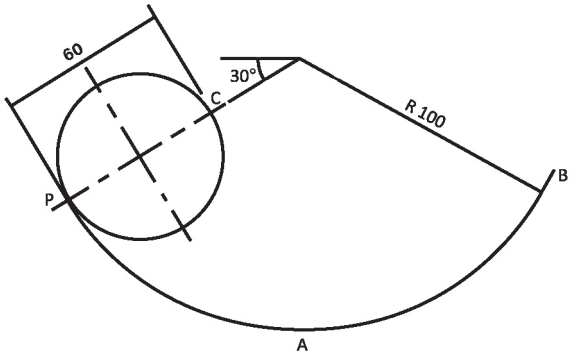
*To my father, Adrian*

*This figure shows a circle which rolls along the arc PAB for one complete revolution. Also shown is the initial position of a point P on the circle.*

*During the rolling of the circle, the point P is unwound as an involute of the circle from P to C in a clockwise direction.*

*Draw the locus of P for the combined movement.*




—1995 Irish Leaving Certificate Technical Drawing Examination Higher Paper 1, Question 5

*[T]he more I attend to the effect produced by my words when I utter them before these bodies, the more it seems they are understood, and the words they utter correspond so perfectly to the sense of my words that there is no reason to doubt that a soul produces in them what my soul produces in me.*

—Géraud de Cordemoy

# PROLOGUE, FROM A PARALLEL PLACE

IN THE MORNING when I wake in the warmth beside her, our arms criss-crossing each other, connecting and sliding at points, I remember different steel suspension bridges I designed as a younger man. As we shift and we re-attach, I often visualize particularly small connections I invented, inspected, signed off, then, some time later, revisited and instructed to be repainted, repaired or replaced.

One morning, lying next to Catherine, I recalled a connection I designed many decades before to the underside of an enormous bridge that arced across the mouth of a tidal river in an isolated place in northern India, and, as she squeezed my forearm and her foot rubbed against my shin, I realized I'd miscalculated the moments and stresses that my connection was

required to transmit. I bolted from the bed, envisioning collapse and disaster. I rang an office in Delhi I often had dealings with and insisted – standing in my underwear in the warm plant-lined hallway of my apartment – that I speak to an old colleague, who, when she came to the phone, told me she was surprised and pleased to hear from me again. She said I need not be alarmed because the bridge in question had been replaced three years before, after it had been all but swept away one night by a storm. Was anyone killed? I asked. No, she answered. Were we at fault? I asked. No, she replied – it was a one-in-two-hundred-year weather event.

I replaced the handset, steadied my breathing and went to the kitchen to brew a coffee. I brought a cup for Catherine too.

I returned to bed and we re-embraced differently. I lay there waiting for the sun to come up a little further before I took a sip from my cup.

I fell into a deep sleep towards which I seemed to draw Catherine too, and we didn't move again until later, far later than we had hoped, and we missed the peaceful Semana Santa parade that passes under our balcony every year, and this left us sombre and regretful for the rest of the day.

# A SABBATICAL IN LEIPZIG

I'VE BEEN WAKING EARLY these last few days. The mornings here in Bilbao are airy and light, and I find myself rising well before six and standing in the kitchen of my apartment, looking out the window and into the courtyard below.

My window faces west, and sometimes at this hour the morning light reflects off one of the east-facing windows a few storeys further up on the building across the courtyard from me. The light is not so strong that I can't look into it; I can look into it for a few moments longer than if I were attempting to look directly into the sun. I sometimes think, if I could arrange the windows on the east-facing façade and the corresponding windows that share my west-facing

façade in such a way that for a few moments each morning I could re-direct the sun a couple of times over and back across the courtyard and into my window, then, while standing here in my kitchen, I could peer into the light for a few moments longer.

The delicacy of this arrangement of angles would mean that the sun's alignment with them would be more fleeting than if I were relying on just one window to redirect the sun towards me. The windows receiving light from each other in this way would slide more quickly out of their coalescence, but I believe the closer this complicated arrangement of windows would bring the chances of me seeing the light, and the length of time I might witness this light, to zero, then, I believe, the more beautiful I would consider this light – light I consider to be already quite lovely. I don't know my neighbours, but I am sure if I asked them they might collaborate with me and we could achieve the various angles of incidence required for me to stand for those few moments longer in my kitchen looking into the rising sun. If my neighbours on both the west and east side of the courtyard agreed on this arrangement of windows, and all of us were agreed to rise at the appointed time on a clear morning to witness our lines-of-light experiment, we could then convene down in the courtyard after the sun had disappeared and listen to how each person's

experience of this light had made them feel. Their responses, though, would surely only suggest to me further questions. I then would find myself considering the quality of the glass in each person's kitchen window. I would ask myself: Were some windows double-glazed? Some single-glazed? Some recently replaced? Recently cleaned, both inside and out? What might the iron content in the glass be? How was each pane of glass cast? And what were the conditions of the casting and cooling? How might all of these factors have affected the zig-zagging channel of light over and back across our courtyard? And what sorts of losses might have occurred in this transmission? But more so, I might then learn something about my neighbours' characters by virtue of the care they show to and the knowledge they have of their kitchen windows.

A few instances ago I took up the same spot I'd assumed the last few mornings at this time, but the window across the way that usually reflects the whitened sunlight into my eyes was itself not hosting the sun. It sat instead on the edge of some unearthly luminescence. I stepped a couple of feet to my left and the reflected sun slid into view. Last night was warm and I realized this neighbour across the way must have wedged open their kitchen window to allow cooler air to circulate through their apartment as they slept.

Then, a few leaves belonging to the expansive chestnut tree in our courtyard bobbed down into view, interrupting the light reflecting off my neighbour's window, and this protected my eyes from the pain of slight overexposure I usually feel when I look for too long directly into the reflected light. The shadows of these bobbing leaves were being cast onto the dust on the outer face of my windowpane. I looked at the shadows a while as the bright flicker of the sun in the near and not-so-near distance came and went. I could not tell if I was looking at the movement of these many phenomena landing onto the dusty glass or if I was looking at the stillness of the sheet of glass itself as it partly received and admitted this movement.

This morning I woke suddenly with a pain in my knee. This happens often when I sleep on my stomach. I rolled onto my back to relieve the pain, and as I lay there a flow of mental particles depicting elements of buildings from my past appeared before me. After some time I decided that it is high time for these constructions of mine to be compiled and surveyed. I am too old, though, to do this survey. I cannot travel to these places, and if I could, I would not be able to access the nooks and crannies of each building and bridge I would need to access to carry out a survey thorough enough to ease my worries. As

this thought unspooled, the name of the last place I lived in, the city of Leipzig, came to mind, especially the dot over the letter 'i' near the centre of the word, and either I moved towards it or it expanded concentrically towards me, until it filled my field of vision. Then, realizing the pain in my knee was unlikely to abate, I rose.

During the last few years of my career I mentored a young Danish engineer. I think of him often in the morning before I have my coffee and while I comb my hair. I think of the exemplary way that he could see. I do not know if he is alive or where he is now or what he might look like, but I am sure he is the only person I would trust with carrying out a survey of this kind for me.

I take a sip from my coffee and look back out the kitchen window. I can see the whole courtyard darken menacingly, then brighten again. A bird flies overhead. Its shadow runs up the rippling tree like a small dark animal fleeing the ground.

YESTERDAY I RECEIVED delivery of a second record player, a second amp and a second set of speakers I'd bought by postal order some weeks previously. Each morning, after a coffee and before I spend time honing my German-to-English translation of a set of

short stories I've owned for years and that were written by a Robert Walser, I sit and listen to some Schubert. I am no expert of classical music; I barely ever listen to music – outside of the two records I own of Schubert's work. And from these records I have only ever listened closely to the first movement of his *Trout Quintet* played *allegro vivace*. I first heard this piece of music when I was a young boy working as a clerk in my father's office on the main street of my medium-sized hometown, B——, in the Midlands of Ireland. My father was a salt and turf merchant, and before I decided that engineering would be a suitable course of study I spent the winters of my mid- to late-teens working in my father's office under the tutelage of the senior clerk, Gerald, a man with a short moustache he dyed the same jet-black as the thick wiry hair that sprouted from his head. Gerald smoked often and played the transistor in his office quietly. One day, when I called into his office to run a certain set of numbers for a certain account past him, I heard the last few bars of what I learned a few moments later from the radio presenter's soothing voice was the first movement of Schubert's *Trout Quintet* played *allegro vivace*. *Franz Schubert's first movement of the* Trout Quintet *there, played* allegro vivace. But by the time I left the office, having received instruction from Gerald on

how to finish out my work, I had forgotten about the feeling from when I first entered the office, the feeling that insisted I find this piece of music by this Schubert and play it in its entirety to myself some day. It was not until a number of years later – on the day after we buried my mother, and we, my younger brother and my three older sisters, were gathered in the sitting room of our home in the second floor of our three-storey townhouse and my father, a few rooms over, played a record of classical music – that I thought again of this Schubert. It was not the first movement of Schubert's *Trout Quintet* my father played that time, but whatever the music was it reminded me of that moment years before when I entered Gerald's office, it directly below where my siblings and I were then sitting. Despite, on the day after my mother's funeral, being reminded of this piece of music by Schubert, I didn't act upon it until another day over two decades later when Catherine found this piece of music in a record shop called da Capo, a narrow ground-floor property halfway down Sternwartenstrasse in central Leipzig. Da Capo was the sort of shop where a person could potter around for hours undisturbed listening to records while sipping a beer or smoking a cigarette. Neither Catherine nor I smoked or drank, but we would potter around for hours in this new city, in this new, to us, record

shop, looking at the various vinyls, second-hand and unused. It was here during our first week in Leipzig that we came upon this album of Schubert's work. I still listen to it each morning before I get on with my day. It's one of those handsome East-German Eterna Edition records from the early 1970s with a white sleeve. This one holds an image of a snow-covered mountaintop with conifer trees dotted in amidst swirls of eddying sleet, a reproduction of a painting by a Casper David Friedrich called *Morgennebel im Gebirge* (*Morning Mist in the Mountains*). It is an album of experimental symphonies, expanded versions of the music known as the *Trout Quintet* – and the first movement played *allegro vivace*, listed on side A, was the track I had been long seeking.

Some years after finding the first record, I came upon my second, again on a quiet Saturday evening with Catherine, sifting through the inclined planes of records organized in dense rows of elevated timber boxes to the rear of da Capo. It was also the *Trout Quintet*, but in this case played by a traditional quintet: Walter Olbertz (piano), Karl Suske (violin), Karl-Heinz Dommus (viola), Matthias Pfaender (cello) and Walter Klier (double bass), with the first movement in *allegro vivace* again listed on side A. I fell into the habit soon after of sitting in our spacious and bright living room in Leipzig, playing one version of

the first movement after the other – the experimental symphony first, then the quintet: symphony, quintet, symphony, quintet, symphony. What I enjoyed most was that the melody in both sounded at the same time similar and different, and the difference I enjoyed most was that I could discern the elements of the quintet version with a clarity that satisfied me to the point of almost replacing the pleasure I had taken minutes previously from the surging experimental symphony. Not only could I visualize each musical element of the melody being generated by the quintet, but I could also discern the sliding, complicated, explicit interconnecting and releasing that went on between each instrument, and I began my imaginings then of the five East-German musicians who comprised this quintet. Even these days in Bilbao, as I listen, I often still visualize the musicians placed in a V, stemming out either side of a black centrally placed grand piano – an arrangement that is: viola, violin, piano, cello, double bass. I rarely see any distinctive features in these musicians other than their sawing and plucking and gliding hands, but more recently I picture the cellist, Pfaender, towards the middle of the arrangement, he a thin man with a mass of greying locks bouncing on his head each time he straightens from his otherwise pensive crouch around his instrument, and I see too those mere phantoms around him

involved in hidden acknowledgments of each other. Pfaender seems to stand apart, though, almost as if he is soon to leave the quintet.

One morning a few months back it occurred to me, while I was refitting the slim rubber belt connecting the turntable of my record player to the motor inside, that I should play both pieces of music simultaneously on two separate record players. They are two pieces of music I love unevenly, like a daughter (quintet) and a stepson (experimental symphony); they are two pieces of music that when I hear them separately I still think sometimes of my brother seated and crying quietly in my father's living room on the morning after my mother's burial, as my father put a needle to a record of, to me, unknown music in a dusty room a corridor away on the first floor of his townhouse on the main street of our busy but composed medium-sized Midlands town. When I first listened to these records, in the spacious apartment Catherine and I shared in Leipzig, I used then only to think back to Gerald and his smoke-filled clerk's office, but over time this memory has morphed and risen up one floor into my father's sitting room, where my brother still quietly cries, his arms across his chest, his dark hair dishevelled – and he sunken into my father's armchair, his shoulders bobbing.

My hope is, in playing both records simultaneously in my sitting room today, to push these images up a further storey of my father's townhouse into what was once a bedroom with a single window, which the three youngest of our family – my brother, Allen, my sister Louise and I – used to peer out of when we were children.

I PUT MY COFFEE CUP and saucer down on the table. I rub my knee. It's trembling under my weight. Some dust has swirled down from the roofs above and disappeared onto the leaves of the chestnut tree.

When I sleep on my stomach, and if my toes do not fall down over the end of the bed, the twist in my foot passes up into my body and over the hours of sleep this torsion leads to a great stiffness in my hips and knees. I sometimes think that sleep does me more harm than good.

I shift my weight and take one more sip from my coffee. I see in the courtyard below a young woman wearing a red bicycle helmet. She unlocks her bicycle from a timber railing; the chain swings to and fro as she drops it into her deep wicker basket. She checks her phone, then rolls her bicycle away. Across the top of the building opposite sweeps the shadow belonging to a tower crane I noticed yesterday evening being

erected at the top of my street – the steep and narrow Solokoetxe. The shadow of the boom of the crane slides to a halt halfway up the roof across the way and the shadow of something square appears, in the process of being lowered. The sharp scent of seared bitumen and roof-felt passes and I breathe it in.

IN MY LATE TEENS, while I was studying to become a civil engineer in Dublin, I would be asked during my summer break to come home and help out with my father's salt- and turf-merchant business and particularly to assist with the turf, which usually, the first few days after I sat my end-of-year exams, would have begun to dry out on the land and be near ready for turning. Each summer I resented my being returned to this mud. I was not then, nor have never been afraid of work of a physical or mental kind, but there was something in the suddenness of returning from the world of Newtonian mechanics I'd immersed myself in throughout the previous term that sat poorly with me, and for a few days after I would have cut a sullen figure cycling up to then trudging along the borders of the boglands – me on my way to work with my father's employees in hand-extracting turf from a deep if narrow seam of what would have appeared to the untrained eye as a mere sliver of domestic bog.

I own one family-related photograph; it is a black-and-white thing and was taken by my brother, Allen, on what was to become my last day of work on my father's strip of bog on a late September afternoon in the early Sixties. I was soon to return to Dublin and complete my final year of study. The photo is taken from a slight height and it shows me second from right in a row of four other workmen all about twice my age. We are leaning on the timber handles of our tools. Extending off into the background are black-brown plains of bog. The men are wearing caps and shirts and ties. I am not wearing a cap or a tie, but the top button of my shirt is closed. We are all smiling and it would seem to me that our shift is all but done. I am sure Allen had his reasons for wanting to capture this moment, and there are six motivations I've speculated on for a while now:

—He knew I would not return to the bog to work in this way again, and he, out of an anticipated feeling of nostalgia, wanted to document this place where I had spent so many of my summers.

—He would have wanted the photograph to perform as ballast against a type of intellectual high falutin' in me that he at the time, I guess, did not approve of. He was a creative person

but not academically bent, and he would have liked this photograph to have acted as something that tied me back to the land and work of this kind. (My suspicions for this come from him having developed three copies of this picture, one for him, one for my father and one for me – each photo creating a triangular kite of interconnection, and from each point extends further lines that converge, I imagine, on my back.)

—He wanted this photograph to remind me of him.

—This photo was simply one of the many other hundred or so he took at this time before this part of the boglands of Ireland was fully industrialized.

—He wanted this photograph to still me so that it might remind him of a version of me that he was somehow able to intuit as his favourite version of me, a person who was about to leave this part of the world, a person who would be changed by the wider world in ways that my brother foresaw and did not find to his satisfaction.

—He wanted to photograph me with these men my father employed for the wholes of

their lives and by doing so explain to me that I would always be somehow under my father's employ.

I think the last one is what I feel closest to now, and I believe this motivation as most likely to have inhabited something of my brother's artistic intention.

In a crowded café on Dame Street in Dublin in late October of that year, Allen, having skipped a day of school, presented me with my copy of this photograph. I thanked him, and then, not knowing quite how further to respond, asked him how his studies were going. He sipped his tea and shook his head.

THE PHOTOGRAPH IS eight by ten inches, two sizes above an average holiday snap. At my desk in my bedroom in my bedsit in Ranelagh, while completing my studies, if I found myself poring over an especially turgid problem in statics, I'd often, for respite, look up to the part of the wall upon which I had pinned the picture and take in its contents. In the evenings I'd take the picture down from the wall and imagine structures of different kinds emerging from the boglands behind – giant constructions in a variety of styles and shapes and scales. I had cheap lithographic reproductions made of this image, and in the evenings

I would draw into the distance of these reproductions the outline of further large buildings and various pieces of infrastructure – pylons, poles, transformers, chimneys, towers. The boglands stretching off into the background would become cluttered with tramlines and housing developments, and in the far distance I drew the outline of a power station with two tall chimneys and a cluster of substations positioned around its foothills, they quietly modulating the peat-generated electricity I was redirecting back out across the land and into its various townscapes, feeding homes and businesses with a flow of energy and light. Oftentimes, in my bedsit, when the evening grew late I would imagine, in one of the rooms of a house tucked away in the corner of one of my sprawling but well-laid-out bogland housing developments, a young boy crouched at his desk, with a lamp bent over his shoulder, drawing the misshapen form of a beetroot he'd happened upon earlier in the day – a beetroot which, during the high winds that whipped these landscapes the evening before, had been zapped by one of my power lines that had come loose and flailed down onto the soil below. I would then visualize this bloated beetroot growing and growing on the boy's page as he swirled his purple and green pencils outward, and this form would eventually fill my field of vision to the point of

near distress and I'd detach myself by looking back to my own tiny face in the foreground of the copy of the photograph I was drawing my schematics upon, me smiling cryptically at my brother capturing the empty boglands behind the four slim workmen and me, all of us leaning on our slanes.

I have long mislaid these worked-upon and drawn-over reproductions of my brother's photograph. My hunch is I threw them out once I parsed myself of the books and lecture papers I'd collected during my studies in Dublin, around the time I moved to London to work. I still have the original photograph. I am looking at it now. It is in a delicate aluminium frame, hanging on my kitchen wall to the right of the window. I often remove the picture from the wall. In recent years I find myself doing this with increasing frequency; I slide the photograph out of its aluminium-and-glass casing and rest it on my desk in my sitting room. One at time I then place A4 sheets of acetate over the image, onto which I draw with pen and ruler a variety of designs and shapes. These designs are less involved than those I indulged in on the evenings of my final year of study back in Dublin. Now I draw mere dots, arcs, polygons and triangles that float arbitrarily above the boglands in the background of the image, as if in doing so I am somehow besting my brother – as if, in doing so, I have finally

brought the abstract thoughts and new geometries I'd learned while studying in Dublin back to dangle over the bogs that Allen, it seems, was so keen for me not to forget. I have hundreds of these acetate sheets. I keep them in a box I made with glued-together plates of untreated birch ply. Some evenings I take these sheets out and place twenty of them at a time upon my brother's photograph and then slowly remove each layer until the image re-appears. Then I shuffle the twenty layers of drawings of black dots and arcs and polygons, place them over the image again and remove the layers once more, over and over, until I have vented whatever it is that urges me to undertake so repetitive an act in the first place. This oftentimes leaves me tired, and I oftentimes take myself almost immediately to bed and I oftentimes dream of near nothing, as if these simple lines and shapes and dots push from me the strange sense of dread that my usual catastrophic dreams of mishandled building materials from my past produce.

THE SUN HAS NOW LEFT the orbit of the window opposite and is inching up over the layers of glowing ivy sprawled in a rough diagonal gash across the east-