

International Praise for *Eurotrash*

“Christian Kracht’s most intimate book, it is also a tender and cruel love letter to his ailing mother. The way Kracht ushers in this encounter [with his mother] and interweaves it with memories . . . is among the best things he has ever written; [*Eurotrash* is] chilling and heartbreaking.”
—Jan Küveler, *Welt am Sonntag*

“This is the most touching, humanly mature novel Christian Kracht has written to date. And the funniest.”
—Denis Scheck, *SWR 2 lesenswert*

“*Eurotrash* creates so much pull and fascination that you simply can’t tear yourself away from it. . . . This narrator offers more than its predecessor [*Faserland*], to which [he] refers. He is richer in experience, more aware of his mortality, more complex. This lends an unexpected, melancholy warmth to what is so far the best of Christian Kracht’s magnificent novels.”
—Felix Müller, *Berliner Morgenpost*

“An astonishingly lighthearted story, a courageous novel that journeys into the heart of family horror without ever allowing itself to be crushed by it. It is unique among Christian Kracht’s works and probably also in German-language literature.”
—Sebastian Hammelehle, *Der Spiegel*

“Kracht proves himself to be a sensitive writer with good humor and poignant insights. There are scenes in this book that blow you away—in part because you yourself often have the feeling that ‘everything that does not rise into consciousness will return as fate.’”
—Ulrike Hug, *NZZ*

“Kracht’s novel is a tremendous work about the destructive power of silence—over decades, over generations.”
—Volker Weidermann, *Spiegel Online*

"*Eurotrash* is a book full of wit and slapstick, masterfully parodying and ironizing what there is to be parodied and what there is to be ironized."
—*Ö1 Ex libris*

"Disturbing, enlightening and wonderfully provocative like all Kracht novels."
—Ulrich Steinmetzger, *Freie Presse*

"A big, happy adventure novel, certainly the most heartfelt one Kracht has yet written."
—Felix Stephan, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

"This novel . . . is the logical continuation of Kracht's poetics. It is the brilliant literary circulation of memories by a great and admirably idiosyncratic author."
—Christian Metz, Deutschlandfunk Büchermarkt

"*Eurotrash* is a high point in Kracht's oeuvre. It is brutal in its bleakness, horrific in its ennui, and yet completely light and entertaining."
—*Stern*

EUROTRASH

ALSO BY CHRISTIAN KRACHT

The Dead

Imperium

EUROTRASH

CHRISTIAN KRACHT

translated by Daniel Bowles



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Eurotrash is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents
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*For my wife, my daughter,
my sister, and my mother.*

What is fully completely understood
leaves no trace as memory.

Jiddu Krishnamurti

* * * *

If you love Germany, you shouldn't visit it.

Jorge Luis Borges

EUROTRASH

I.

Anyway, so I had to go to Zurich again for a few days. My mother urgently wished to see me. On the phone she'd said I had better come quickly, please, which was so disturbing that I became terribly anxious and constipated the whole weekend long. Then there was this: I'd written a novel a quarter century ago called *Faserland*—a forgettable title—which ends in Zurich, out in the middle of the lake, somewhat traumatically.

The whole story came back to me again, in Zurich, down on Bahnhofstrasse, where I'd bought a dark brown, scratchy wool sweater at a sad little wooden stall, not far from Paradeplatz. It was already evening, and I'd taken some valerian, and the effect of the pills and the despair of an autumnal Switzerland and the twenty-five preceding years weighed, leaden beyond measure, on my mood.

Just before that I had been out in the Old Town. Over in Niederdorf there'd been an underground screening of *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, the last film by Guy Debord, completed just before his suicide. Four or five people had come, which was a miracle on account of the still radiant evening warmth and that bloodless, soporific movie.

And after the audience, which is to say a pair of professors, the projectionist, and a homeless man who'd wanted to doze in the cinema seat for a while, had said their good-byes and hands were shaken, I must have walked back down into the night toward Paradeplatz, without aim or purpose. And there, on the other side of the river Limmat, I came across a makeshift stall run by some Swiss commune, where two bespectacled women of indeterminate age and a kindly bearded young man were selling heavy wool sweaters and blankets in natural colors, which they had knitted themselves.

Compared to the clothing shown in the windows of the long closed but still brightly illuminated boutiques on Bahnhofstrasse, these simple woolen items possessed for me a homespun sort of authenticity, just as the women's smiles seemed, there's no other way to put it, suffused with reality and meaning. Certainly more real than the rest of Bahnhofstrasse, with its dozens upon dozens of Swiss flags hanging left and right, and the luxurious and useless baubles in the display cases. And, for a brief moment, when I passed them the hundred-franc bill, after taking off the sweater I'd impulsively tried on despite the chill, and receiving it, folded inside a light brown paper bag, I had the impression, perhaps also false, of having derived something meaningful from this transaction.

At any rate, I was handed the bag and a faded color brochure, which I accepted with mild embarrassment. I could dispose of it later unnoticed, I'd thought, and I said goodbye

with an awkward smile and strolled toward Münsterplatz, shivering slightly, with the idea of having a drink at the bar of the Kronenhalle before returning to the hotel, climbing into bed, taking another herbal sleeping pill, and turning out the light.

I now understand that my mother's affairs, which had forced me to visit Zurich every other month, this city of poseurs and braggarts and debasements, had completely paralyzed me for years. The whole thing had become vile, altogether heinous, it had become more than I was able to bear, than one should normally have to bear. My mother was very sick, in the head, too—not just there, but primarily there.

In order not to lose her, and so as not to succumb to resignation and hopelessness, I'd decided at some point to visit her every other month. In fact, I'd simply decided to accept the misery in which my mother had been wasting away for decades in her apartment, surrounded by empty vodka bottles rolling about, unopened invoices from various Zurich sable-fur warehouses, and the crinkling foils of her packs of pain medication.

Now, though, she had contacted me of her own accord and summoned me to her; as a rule she had always just waited until I showed up, in that two-month rhythm, in Zurich. Usually she would ask me to tell her some stories. Her phone call made me, as I said, even more anxious than these visits already did because she must have had some ulterior motive.

She suddenly had the upper hand; she had taken the initiative, whereas she would otherwise always keep silent and wait.

She had neither email nor a mobile phone, and she spurned the internet. Too complicated, she would say, and the buttons were too small. I guessed, however, that she refused it all out of arrogance and not out of the simple inability to use a phone. She pretended to like reading the newspapers and Stendhal. Her skin had the texture of dry silk, and she was always slightly suntanned despite never sitting outside on the terrace, among the hydrangeas.

Her housekeeper stole from her. Every other day her wallet was empty. Although she almost never spent any money, it was all invariably gone, just as her black Mercedes was gone one day, too: taken from her apartment building's garage and transported off to Macedonia by the Macedonian husband of her Macedonian housekeeper. It was miserable, but at least she wasn't in Winterthur anymore.

For that was where she'd had to celebrate her eightieth birthday, on the closed psychiatric ward. If one were to have a sense of humor about it, the scene was like something out of Dürrenmatt, only it was much sadder than in Dürrenmatt because this was not just anyone's mother, but my mother, and not just any psychiatric ward, but the one bearing the darkest and cruelest name of all: Winterthur.

I had forgotten or repressed that the clinic had another name, something like *Frankenstein*. It was something along

those lines, but I couldn't recall anymore. In any case, they'd released her from Winterthur—had been forced to release her, because only a court order could keep her in the mental hospital, and there wasn't one and there never would be one. You see, by her cunning manipulations, her brusque sangfroid, my mother knew how to convince whoever was examining her that everything was perfectly fine, that she had only to be allowed back into her apartment and everything would remain that way. She had only to be left to her phenobarbital, her cases of deplorable fendant—white wine in screw-top bottles at seven francs fifty—her subscription to the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, discontinued every week and promptly ordered again, and those mediocre expressionist paintings that her husband, my father, had given her during their marriage, while he'd of course kept the Noldes, Munchs, and Kirchners he'd filched in East Germany rolled up under his bed in the château on Lake Geneva, where he lived after divorcing her.

Thoughts of my late father's lost collection tormented me every time I learned that this or that work had been auctioned off at Grisebach in Berlin or at Christie's in London or at Kornfeld in Bern. They were pictures I had known since my earliest childhood, from our chalet in Gstaad. Every viscid brushstroke, every bluish yellow cloud trimmed in black, remained painfully familiar to me. And so, whenever I visited my mother, I was faced with the insolence of those third-rate German expressionist paintings hanging in her apartment,

left over from our family's extraordinary collection. Pictures by Georg Tappert, for instance, or Max Kaus, and it's impossible to say what was more wretched: my mother's condition or those sorry daubs hanging on her walls in Zurich, like framed mockeries.

The disintegration of this family had a fathomless despair about it. And its low point was my mother's eightieth birthday in the common room of the Winterthur mental hospital. She had sat there, clutching her knees, her greasy ash blonde hair in a ponytail, wearing a pale blue terry cloth tracksuit. The eight-hundred-franc bouquet of flowers from Bahnhofstrasse on the table in front of her; the sunken palimpsest of her face bruised by a drunken fall and coated with deep red crusts of blood, her eyebrows barely discernible now, covered by the zigzag of lacerations stitched up with dark thread. This was the *katabasis*: the decline of the family expressed in the topography of her face.

So instead of returning straight to my Zurich hotel, I did in fact go to the bar of the Kronenhalle, where the door always did exactly the opposite of what one expected. If you wanted to pull it, it could only be opened with a push, and vice versa. I took my seat there in the back, down at the farthest end of the bar on the right, over by the toilets; the tables at front were always reserved for Zurich bullies and their mostly Korean female retinue. It had been a very long time since I'd

gotten a table up front; they were always reserved, but not for me. I'd since given up hoping for one.

People visiting Zurich tended to think that the spirit of Joyce or of the Cabaret Voltaire would waft about them, but in reality, it was merely a city of moneygrubbing middle management and depressing hustlers and reserve lieutenants. At the bar in the back, right by the toilets, it was just as nice; at least you'd get the same three white saucers of salted almonds, paprika chips, and little pretzel sticks with your drink as at the tables up front, and if one day even that were no longer the case, one could still go to Kronenhalle's bar, because it didn't matter anyway.

Nothing mattered for my mother either. She may well have fallen on her face at her apartment again just now, tonight, depending on whether she had taken Ambien, phenobarbital, or Seroquel, meaning any one of the three drugs or all three at once, washed down with one or two of those very bottles of fendant for seven francs fifty. Then—after the fall and the footprints in the pool of blood and the neighbors' embarrassed faces behind their gossamer curtains and the white-orange ambulance and the emergency admission to the hospital and the subsequent readmission to Winterthur as well as the release a week later because there was no court order and the taxi ride back to Zurich, after which the driver would lift a thousand-franc bill from her wallet and give her no change but would instead offer his gallant arm to accompany her to the apartment door—then she would

remember nothing anyway, except of course that she had a pressing need to drop off a prescription at the pharmacy for yet more packs of Ambien, phenobarbital, and Seroquel.

On my previous visit, I had scrupulously mopped up my mother's blood from the marble floor with a bucket, a cleaning rag, and a wet washcloth, after which she'd become convinced that I must have slept in her bed and not at the hotel, that the hotel was all a lie, and she'd asked how I dared bleed into her bed and on the floor like that, the nerve of it, what in God's name had gotten into me.

Anyway, there I was, sitting in the Kronenhalle bar, while she was sleeping in her apartment and I was resisting going back to my hotel, yet knowing I had to because, well, what was I even doing here at this bar that so attracted and repulsed me?

So I walked back across the bridge under which the clear river Limmat was flowing out of the lake and the swans had tucked their crowns beneath their wings to sleep. I considered standing at the wall up in the Lindenhof for a few more minutes and perhaps smoking a cigarette among the falling foliage and gazing down on the darkening city of Zurich and its gloom, which I did not do, and instead I was standing outside the hotel entrance searching my pockets for the key, for reception was no longer staffed so late at night, when, suddenly and unexpectedly, my thoughts turned to my mother's father.

And I saw the collection of sadomasochistic paraphernalia

discovered after his death, in the bolted wardrobe of the guest room in his home on the island of Sylt, that tawdry arsenal of degradation which this old man, my grandfather—party member since 1928, *Untersturmführer* in the SS and employed by the *Reichspropagandaleitung* of the Nazis in Berlin—had gathered in his home on Sylt after the war and after the, alas, complete failure of his denazification process in the British internment camp Delmenhorst-Adelheide, and which he had made use of, if not in reality, then most certainly in sweaty reverie, during clandestine cellar trysts with the young au pairs he hired from Iceland. For only they, this old man, my grandfather, had thought, could adequately represent the Nordic ideal. The Norwegians, the Germans, the Danes were too weak—no, it had to be Icelanders, girls whom he would invite to his home as au pairs, to Sylt, girls in whose blood the sacred Edda sang eternally.

Had he ever managed, back then, to have himself debased by those Icelanders living with him for years on end? One of them I could recall in great detail, a girl named Sigríður. She had been about nineteen, tall, flaxen-haired, with Kyrgyz epicanthal folds, delicate freckles on her excessively pale skin. It was with Sigríður, hunched over the desk, the tips of their tongues in the corners of their mouths, that he pored over runes, that Nordic alphabet in which the German stewards of the Nordic race were able to read the past and the future of humanity: the entirety of that esoteric drivel was explored amid the piles of books crowding my grandfather's study.

Everything: Nazi flying saucers, Antarctic New Swabia, the World Ice Theory, and of course the SS expedition to Tibet, which my grandfather had helped organize as the liaison, so to speak, between the *Reichspropagandaleitung* and *SS Ahnenerbe*—all of this silliness was discussed with patient Sigríður while eating shrimp toast and drinking lemonade and waiting for the family to go upstairs to bed already because then perhaps, at last, would come that longed-for opportunity to be tied to the table leg with barbed wire by young, pale, freckled Sigríður. *Já, elskan mín*, she might have said. *Come over here, little man.*

Sometimes, often, I'd told myself, really, it wasn't an indication of mental health to be able to adapt to such a deeply disturbed family. And how I had ever succeeded, how it had even been possible to succeed in extricating myself from my family's misery and mental illness, from these abysses that couldn't have been more profound or unfathomable or miserable, and in becoming a halfway normal human being—this I was incapable of puzzling out as I lay on the hotel bed in Zurich staring at the ceiling, while outside, beneath my window, intoxicated Zurich youths caterwauled and celebrated their depressing intoxication.

My mother may have been thoroughly objectionable, and her case, as I said, completely hopeless, but maybe, just maybe, she had been able to maintain decency in her delirium. Maybe

she was firmly pursuing some new objective known only to her. Maybe she saw the future with different eyes. Or maybe she was simply afraid, as she was when she'd last called me, five years earlier, prior to the operation on her spine, and cried—though she never ever cried otherwise—and said she was so terribly afraid.

That was a moment I have never forgotten. I was standing in front of Balthazar in New York, it was spring, and people were streaming up Broadway, and I'd tried to soothe her over the telephone. You know, I told her, it's just going to be a little procedure, and so forth, but she had of course known, as she always knew everything in advance, that it would be the end of her normal life, that there would be complications after the operation, that the constant abdominal pains she'd already suffered when I was a small child would now manifest as a catastrophic infection dragging on for decades.

An infection which only surfaced after her spinal surgery, and which so strained her diminished resistance that she fell into a coma, had to be put on a ventilator through a tracheotomy, and thus lay vegetating for months in the ICU of the private clinic near Zurich, connected to various tubes, surrounded by pumping machines and grotesquely wheezing devices, by more or less well-meaning nurses and attending physicians who did their best not to let her die. This was in fact unusual in Switzerland, which has always had a special relationship with death.

In Switzerland one has the right to die, she had always

said, and that's what the doctors kept telling me as well. Even the clinic's ethics committee told me that, advising that I give consent for them to cease further treatment, to just turn the little plastic valve on the morphine tube up a bit, because how was she to recover from this, what kind of life would that be in the end? And really, life—what was that?

I, however, I found myself unable to let them do it, for I saw my mother in a Pucci bikini at the pool in St.-Jean-Cap-Ferrat whenever I closed my eyes, and not there on the gurney with that obscene tube jutting from the incision in her throat, beneath her wrinkled chin. And of course she woke up again, woke from her coma one morning as though nothing had happened, and a few weeks later she returned home in a taxi.

She'd always told me, my mother, that she could no longer swim in Lake Zurich, ever since Margie Jürgens, her best friend, had employed the Swiss company Exit for her assisted suicide and decreed that her ashes then be strewn over the clear, pleasant waters of the lake. My mother had said she'd swallow a bit of lake water by accident while swimming, and then she'd be drinking Margie, and that was a ghastly notion to her. That's not even possible, I would always reply, because how many original molecules of Margie were in a tiny sip of Lake Zurich? This wasn't at all about the actual amount, she'd always say, it was about the spirit one would ingest, not about the physical ashes, but about the immate-

rial. About the shadow of her best friend who would live on inside her, and that was something she couldn't bear.

And I remembered, while continuing to stare up at the ceiling of the hotel room in Zurich, my telephone call decades earlier with Margie, who'd wanted to sell me her house after the death of her husband, their beach shack, as she called it, on Great Harbour Cay in the Bahamas, where Curd had always felt so at home. A simple wooden house, hammered together out of planks, it had been their—Margie and Curd's—salvation, as she'd put it on the phone. The price they wanted for it I can't recall, but it wasn't much, even back then. I'd hesitated, however, or maybe didn't return the call because I was living in Asia at the time and the wooden house on Great Harbour Cay seemed too far away, as if located in a different, inaccessible world.

I remembered staying in Curd and Margie's villa in St.-Paul-de-Vence: the fragrant lemon groves, the cloying sweet of jasmine, a song by Harry Belafonte or Nat King Cole called "Perfidia." My father had always loved Harry Belafonte so very much, but no, I thought, no, it'd probably been Nat King Cole on the old Dual tape recorder on the marble side table, in the shade of the stone pines, who had sung *Perfidia, la perfidia de tu amor*.

And then I remembered the dark blue, almost purple cypress-lined hills in the distance, and my godfather, Eduard Rhein, whose given name I bore, half in pride, half in shame, between my own given and surnames. Eduard Rhein, who

would drive up to Curd and Margie's villa in his silver Corvette, waving, with one hand on the wheel, and who had told me I must always greet him with a kiss on each cheek, he was so fond of being kissed on both cheeks, wasn't he, he was also enslaved by that song, "La Perfidia de tu Amor."

When my godfather, Eduard Rhein, later died, they found in his flat on the Croisette in Cannes an electrically adjustable, priceless tapestry, and when they flipped the switch, the wall hanging slowly rose, and behind it they discovered a secret room filled with sadomasochistic equipment, just as there had been at the home of my mother's father, only in more sumptuous finishes: twenty-four-karat golden dildos, for instance, cascades of chains, pretty gas masks, and eyeless hoods in black velvet and steel. Did my father know of that room behind the tapestry on the Croisette? Had he perhaps been inside it once himself? Had he touched those chains?

The American Field Service sent my father, Christian, to America after the war to learn about democracy and bring it back to ravaged Germany, and he sent home quite obviously faked photos: of his graduation from the University of Montana at Missoula, for instance. In those black-and-white pictures, he can be seen standing in front of a dignified bookcase in his black academic robes, a mortarboard, also in black, crowning his slender, handsome head. He sent those photographs, inscribed in pencil on the reverse, to his mother in Hamburg—my paternal grandmother, whom I never got to know.

I had once inquired: the University of Montana held no records of his ever having studied there, let alone graduated. Neither the alumni association nor the university archives found a Christian Kracht. There were also photos that showed him at his fake job at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Then he'd returned to Germany, into the benevolent clutches of Eduard Rhein and British Major George Clare, whose parents had been murdered in Auschwitz and who worked in the denazification bureau in Hamburg as liaison officer to the newly emergent, democratic German press and who committed Axel Springer to eternal friendship with Israel, an effort that so repulsed many SS alumni that they went off to Rudolf Augstein's *Der Spiegel* magazine instead.

My father and Augstein often sat together in their favorite restaurant, Mühlenkamper Fährhaus. Each only ever ordered the *Schlemmerschnitte*—caviar and steak tartare on thickly buttered black bread—which, Augstein claimed, Hans Albers had always eaten there before the war. To accompany it Augstein drank ice-cold glasses of Linie aquavit, my father mineral water.

My father always told me that if I wanted to know the truth, I ought to speak with his friend Ralph Giordano; he was in the know about everything. After all, Giordano was the only one to have preserved civility for himself and for the Germans. And so I sought out Giordano in his high-rise apartment in Cologne to have him explain to me the state of affairs in postwar Germany, especially the integration of SS

alumni into every sector of West German society, be it politics, business, journalism, intelligence services, or advertising. And Giordano, with his silk scarf and muttonchops like Lampedusa's Leopard, talked for five hours and then sent me in turn to Major Clare, in England.

Major George Clare, whom I visited at his modest home in Suffolk a few months later, was wearing an English pilot's watch from Longines, a watch with a black face secured to a green, slowly disintegrating fabric band that he carefully unfastened from his wrist with slender fingers and held out to me, saying I should take it, please, it was for me. He also gave me his two books, *Last Waltz in Vienna* and *Berlin Days*, inscribing them with a fountain pen, its sharp feather nib scratching his and my names onto the first page of each, while outside the window in the garden the English rain softly misted the roses.

Thus were we bound to each other, Major George Clare and I, whereas Eduard Rhein had given me, his newborn godson, golden cups and golden sets of cutlery and a tea service, also of twenty-four-karat gold, fashioned by the jeweler Wilm in Hamburg, engraved with my name, and it seemed to me that behind this disproportionate largesse must have lain some vile, unspeakable secret whose meaning was forever to remain hidden from me.

Whenever I later turned over the wristwatch and read the inscription *Für Georg Klaar von seinem Vater Ernst*—that had been George Clare's name in Austria—then I felt

and glimpsed something that my golden cup from Eduard Rhein lacked: a context. This mug lacked the story of a Jew whose parents had been murdered, who had fled to England, had fought against the Germans, and had then returned to rebuild that country. My christening cup was, by contrast, merely a boastful golden thing the size of a beer stein, trivial. I did not understand it, nor would I ever. George Clare's wristwatch seemed a sacred relic, but Eduard Rhein's golden cup was merely an expression of avarice, a tool of deception, dead matter, dead gold—like everything in our family, dead and soulless.

That was also true of our summer home in St.-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, which my father had bought off Eduard Rhein, but also of the chalet in Gstaad, which had previously belonged to Karim Aga Khan. Everything was closely and inseparably interconnected. The golden cutlery and the various houses; the collection of German expressionists and the unsavory instruments of torture; the SS expedition to Tibet and my mother's protracted decline; the private Zurich banks, the conservative German press, and the shell corporations in Panama and Jersey.

It was as if for decades I'd been trailing along the verge of enormous malice and was simply unable to make it out, as if within my assumptions lay only further assumptions, as if I'd been stricken by a disease of the morphic field, a cruel perfidy radiating from the past. As if it had been put into my mind that the circumstances of my childhood and youth were in

some way special or extraordinary, when in reality they were steeped not only in bourgeois mediocrity—for that I'd have been able to accept—but also in profound menace.

If only I could read some ancient chronicle—the book of world memory perhaps, or the South Indian palm-leaf manuscripts—I'd know everything, I'd be able to understand, in an instant, all the connections that had remained hidden. For example, the repeated rapes, stretching over weeks, of my then eleven-year-old mother by a bicycle shop owner in Itzehoe, a town in Holstein, who made her swear an oath never to testify against him, after my grandfather had suspected the assaults and pressed charges, or else she would never get the pretty children's bike he had promised her. The charges were dismissed because the bicycle shop owner was a cousin of Itzehoe's Nazi mayor, Kurt Petersen, who had remained in office until the end of the war and, in the small hours of Sunday, April 3, 1949, attempted suicide along with his wife by ingesting—what else?—phenobarbital.

So that had taken place in 1949, when my grandfather had already returned from denazification and immediately set about reactivating his network of old SS *Kameraden*. His daughter had been raped, and the *Kameraden* would come to visit. And that name Petersen shot through everything like a treacherous key to understanding, while in reality it only clouded thought, the name Petersen. There was, I recalled, the painter Wilhelm Petersen, also *Untersturmführer* in the

SS, whose self-illustrated book *Danse Macabre in Poland* lay henceforth on my grandfather's end table, beside the bottle of egg liqueur and the two tiny crystal glasses, next to the worn leather wingback chair in which my grandfather himself sat, his snow white hair combed back severely, his hands folded calmly before him, humming an old melody which only he remembered—the one about wild geese that sweep through the night sky, in which the world is full of murder—while he, my grandfather, patiently awaited the sonorous gong on television that signaled the start of the evening news.

My grandfather, my mother's father, had been personal assistant to Horst Dressler-Andress, director of the Central Office for Radio and cofounder of Kraft durch Freude, who, after his arrest by the Soviets, had been able to get across to them through dialectical argument that he had essentially been a socialist within National Socialism and never in a million years a fascist. Thus he was not immediately put up against the wall or deported to Siberia but released, promoted, and courted. Dressler-Andress launched an unprecedented career in East Germany, especially as a politician for the National-Democratic Party, a cesspit of former Nazi Party members, and he was ultimately awarded the Order of Merit of East Germany. Upon reunification in 1990, however, the National-Democratic Party and its members were absorbed, one and all, into the Free Democrats—also the favored party of my grandfather in Kampen on Sylt, and the party of painter Wilhelm Petersen as well.

It was this very same Wilhelm Petersen who had made the paintings and drawings that hung on the walls of my grandfather's thatched-roof home in Kampen. One of his most famous works was actually called *Es reitet der Tod*, or *Death Comes a-Riding*. This then was what I'd been surrounded by as a child: on one side, my father's German expressionists, which is to say the degenerate artists, and on my mother's side, SS artists who painted pictures they titled *Es reitet der Tod*.

Wilhelm Petersen had been a war artist for the SS, expressly appointed by Heinrich Himmler, whose personal staff he joined. Later, following the war, when understandably enough no one wanted to commission paintings from Petersen anymore, my godfather, Eduard Rhein, tasked him with drawing an invention of his, the children's book character Mecki, a whimsical, slightly annoying hedgehog. In those books, which paired SS racial doctrine with an insufferable petit bourgeois mentality, in works like *Mecki bei den Negern*, the faces of the Africans Mecki visited were the most dim-witted, racist caricatures. Africans, wearing only grass skirts, stuck wooden spoons and whisks through their earlobes and spouted pathetic, savage inanities.

An African school appeared in that Mecki book, which in turn called to mind the time my grandfather, one evening in Kampen when things weren't proceeding in their usual orderly manner—something or other was cluttering the carpet, or everyone had dared to speak at once—suddenly

shouted, *It's like being at the Jew school here!* That was the only violent outburst I'd ever experienced from my grandfather. To me it had seemed as if the fabric of reality were breached, and I hid myself away, trembling with fear, in the guest room underneath the thatched roof.

The same guest room in which my grandfather's collection of children's books, consisting largely of works by Fritz Baumgarten, provided comfort and refuge. In the thirties, Baumgarten had dreamed up and drawn an anthropomorphic world—as in the Mecki universe, except *before* the Second World War—in which various songbirds, imps, and teddy bears frolicked about and sang German folk songs together, and beneath the surface, it seemed to me even then as a child, something creepy and dark was going on. As if concealing itself within those drawings by Fritz Baumgarten—genial, portending safety and comfort—was the baleful German soul, entwined in shadows.

It was the guest room in whose always locked wardrobe the implements of abuse would be found thirty years later, after the death of my grandfather, at whose funeral his wife, my grandmother, bearer of the bronze Cross of Honor of the German Mother for the five children she'd given to the Führer—among them my mother—had fallen to her knees at the open grave in Kampen and, weeping, let forth a heart-rending scream. *Just wait*, she called, altering the words of that Icelandic au pair Sigríður. *Just wait, sweet husband, soon I'll come down to you in the grave.*

Also in Kampen, on that island of Sylt, several streets away, the publisher Peter Suhrkamp had sold his house, likewise roofed in thatch, to Axel Springer, in order to afford the German translation rights for Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, which today seems to me a very good trade. In Springer's house, too, I'd frequently slept in a room right under the roof, where at night, when I didn't want to venture out into the corridor to visit the bathroom, I peed into the washbasin affixed to the wall—so often that the sink began to emit an acrid smell, and I poured lye and detergent and men's cologne into it to mask the stench. I was afraid Axel Springer would fire my father when he found out that I had been peeing into his sink. For my father always stayed in Springer's house when he was on Sylt, because he had always hated his parents-in-law. They'd been Nazis, he said, and were still Nazis, and he refused even to speak to them, and so he would always stay with us at Axel Springer's when he was on Sylt, never in my grandfather's house a little farther down the road toward the dunes, right around where Göring had once lost his dagger in the beach grass. For everything that does not rise into consciousness will return as fate.

And so, back in the closed psychiatric ward in Winterthur, while my mother's eightieth birthday guests were looking for the exit, she was taken back to her tiny room, her cell, her bed, her chair, her barred window. And there, she experi-

enced a sudden alertness, she hadn't seen or spoken to her siblings in twenty years, she became lucid, and as I sat by her bedside and gently held her hands, she told me about the bicycle shop owner in Itzehoe who had raped her.

With total calm, in the reluctant, quiet words of a child, she told me what had happened to her in 1949 at age eleven in northern Germany, in Itzehoe. She had been raped, again and again, and at this I cried, cried and took her in my arms, and told her that she was safe now, here in Winterthur on the closed psychiatric ward, and that she didn't need to be afraid anymore, and that something similar had happened to me, also when I was eleven, only in 1979, at my Canadian boarding school. Yes, she had always known about that, and had believed me, she said, even back then—she was just incapable of talking about it, ever, the pain prevented her, the pain of her own abuse and the shame of having been unable to prevent it for her own child, precisely three decades later.

My goodness, this life, what a perfidious, sordid, miserable melodrama it was, I thought, while continuing to stare at the ceiling of the hotel room, realizing that this was in fact the eternal return, our inability to pinpoint any beginning of time—*aeternitas a parte ante*, as a priest in Florence had once tried to explain it to me. Should one ever succeed in interrupting the cycle of history, one could influence not only the future but the past as well.

. . . .

And then I no longer saw my mother, but Elsie von Oehrli. She'd been my nanny, part of an age-old lineage of noblewomen from the Bernese Oberland. She had grayish white hair tied at the back in a bun, and little diamond studs in her earlobes, and crow's-feet around her eyes, and pretty freckles on her face, and she was to me the first beautiful woman who wasn't my mother: German, clear, and cold.

Elsie von Oehrli had lived down the road, at the bend leading down to the Palace Hotel in Gstaad. She had sung to me when my parents were out of town, when I stayed at her chalet and was allowed to sleep in her bed with her and turn the dial on her brown radio to Minsk and Beromünster and RIAS Berlin. And when there were no more nighttime programs, after two o'clock in the morning, in Elsie's arms I listened to the infinite series of numbers declaimed monotonously on the long-wave station. *Fünnef, sieben, acht, eins, fünnef, zwei, zwei, fünnef, neun, fünnef*: mystical, eerie series of numbers. They were coded messages sent to us at night to Switzerland from the Soviet Zone, and I felt an indeterminate fear of these voices on the radio.

Elsie had said I needn't be afraid, ever, and she sang to me *Roti Rösli im Garte / Meierisli im Wald / Wenn dä Wind chunt cho blase / So verwelket sie bald*, and she clutched my hand in the night and held me as I slept. Her curtains were of embroidered linen. The floor in her bedroom was splintery wood, and in her little garden white roses blossomed along the wooden fence. And she herself smelled as clean and pure

as the freshly washed white sheets on the line, dried by the warm *foehn* wind blowing down the Glacier des Diablerets and through the valley to us.

At this I fell asleep and did not dream for a long time, and as soon as I awoke the next morning I remembered the paper bag and the sweater inside it I had purchased the previous evening on Bahnhofstrasse. I got up, went to the bathroom, and cleaned my teeth. Then I sat on the edge of the bed, removed the sweater from the bag, and buried my face in it. It smelled earthy, like hay and damp wool, like dog and sawdust and dry leaves. And the way it smelled and felt was such that I slipped on the sweater over bare skin and hugged myself before the hotel-room mirror, as I had always done long ago, in front of the mirrors of my childhood.

II.

I had always lived in dreams, among the ghosts of language. Never have I understood why, after leaving Switzerland at eleven to attend Canadian boarding school, I always needed to shift around the globe afterward, my belongings carried with me in plastic bags and hard-shell suitcases or else stashed away somewhere in various storage units. CDs that could no longer be listened to because there were no more CD players. Records that could no longer be played because there were no more turntables. Books consumed by termites and dampness, and clothing that had become unfashionable and moldy.

Why out of some disturbed need peculiar to me I had to live in Bangkok and Florence and Buenos Aires, in California and Sri Lanka and Kenya and India and Kyoto for years at a time, why I had to rent and buy homes and apartments abroad, why I was raising a child who remembered being able to understand Swahili, being able to understand Italian, being able to understand Hindi, being able to understand French, being able to understand Swiss German, being able to understand Spanish, and being able to understand Argen-

tine Castilian, that soft, limp Spanish with the *shsh* sounds. Why, I did not know.

A child who took enjoyment not only in speaking Italian with a Russian accent, speaking Saxon with an Indian accent, speaking French with a Scottish accent, but also in the scarcely perceptible tonal nuances of language, of High German with a Basel accent, of Glaswegian with a Punjabi accent, of Texan with a Tuscan accent, as though in such acoustic outgrowths, in such minimal shifts among linguistic molecules, something might be detected, gleaned by listening, which would then divide sounds according to truth and fabrication, which would classify them as original and copy.

It was always language itself, the liberation and simultaneous domination of the spastic glottis, that singular enigma which lay in the proper sequence of syllables. And it was always, then, the German. It had always been the German language. It had always been the scorched earth, the sufferings of ill-treated earth itself, war and the burning old city and the vegetable fields made infertile outside it. It had always been the ghetto purged with the flamethrower. It had always been the tailored, pale gray uniforms, the attractive blond officers with their ice-cube-filled gullets, whispering, smiling. It had always been the girl's dark brown hair pinned on the left by that barrette, a curtain before her face brushed aside gently by her hand; it had always been the candle extinguished in Amsterdam.

. . . .

I lived in the past, the last twenty-five, thirty-five years, which likewise felt as though they hadn't just transpired but were eternally present. The past was always much more real and elastic and present than the now. I lived in films. And I lived in cinemas, I slept in cinemas. And the cinemas were shut down or relocated to shopping malls in municipal hinterlands, which people had begun to call *Agglos*. Where cinemas had once been, boutiques now moved in, selling coats and purses and shoes no one needed or deemed beautiful except for my mother, pieces from Loro Piana, for instance, or checkered, quilted blazers from Ferragamo or low-heeled shoes from Tod's.

This unopened stuff, the sweaters and cardigans and blankets and pleated slacks my mother bought in these boutiques, had wandered into the armoires of her apartment, stacked and stowed away and archived, where they sat, never looked at again, next to dozens of Hermès handbags and the hundreds of Ferragamo shoes that were never worn. The furs, sable and silver fox and the like, that had not been stolen by the housekeeper were divided among five storage units my mother maintained in Zurich because it was no longer appropriate to wear furs, but neither could they be thrown out, just as nothing at all could ever really be thrown out, because everything does have a history, you know.

So even those never unwrapped, compulsively bought articles of clothing were a part of history, a part of her obses-

sion following her experiences of the war and the postwar years. It was as if history had manifested its own fetishes, which then vanished within the dimness of my mother's armoire. They had become enchanted objects whose meaning had been lost forever.

What might my mother have seen, as a small child, in those final war years? Had she seen deserters being strung up from lampposts with cardboard signs around their necks? Had she seen body parts hanging from the bombed-out buildings, their façades open like dollhouses? Had she seen missing walls, had she peeked into these oversized dollhouse parlors, had she seen those crushed limbs, beset by flies and maggots, severed by the force of the exploding bombs, had she seen liquefied bodies and human organs spattered about, torrents of refugees moving westward, mown down by machine gun fire from low-flying fighter planes, barns burning, wheat fields burning, churches burning—what had she been forced to see with her own eyes in the mangled wasteland of her childhood?

And why did my father always have to buy houses in places where he hoped for a connection to a society that would never otherwise have welcomed him? He had now been dead a decade, my father. The flat on Upper Brook Street in London's Mayfair district. The chalet of Aga Khan in Gstaad. The villa in Cap Ferrat, situated on the bluff between Somerset Maugham's home and the king of Belgium's estate. The

house in Kampen on Sylt. The house in Sea Island, Georgia. And finally the château in Morges on Lake Geneva, where he had died.

I was fond of recalling this house, this somewhat meek version of the Rothschilds' Château de Pregny. I still see the faded baroque of the van Dyck in the entrance hall, which in the time between two of my visits had been removed from the paneling, likely cut out, rolled up, and sent off to Sotheby's. There was always a very direct link between art and money—never the slightest doubt that they belonged together and were as one.

In my mind's eye I saw the sofas upholstered with golden silk in the grand salon and, perched on the edge of one of them, my father in his pale gray English flannel suit, narrow shoes on his slender feet. I saw his cunning, icy bright eyes. His gaze traveled out far over the park, past Lake Geneva to Evian and on to the French Alps, orange-red and yielding in the dusk. I saw the furnishings of his dressing room, lined up to the ceiling in fawn and orange leathers by Hermès, with hundreds of shallow teak drawers, one for each bespoke dress shirt from Harvie and Hudson. Then the pair of early expressionist paintings by Lyonel Feininger, the one titled *Jesuits*, the other *The Newspaper Readers*, hanging above the desk in the study paneled in mahogany and teak. The collection of hundreds of diaphanous Chinese teacups he'd amassed over decades, like Chatwin's Kaspar Utz, who suffered from that incurable porcelain sickness. But why all this?

I knew from the moment I guessed what it was all worth that not only would I never be able to live like that, but that my childhood and youth were permeated by arrogance and hyperbole and fraud and degradation, by dead money.

It was my father's fear of provinciality, of his own humble origins, that emanated from him even after his death. His father had been a taxi driver, in Hamburg, with everything that entails. The nightly bar crawl the little boy had to go along for, his father's dull, inebriated, violent blows, the post-Wilhelmine mercilessness of the lower classes. That was a place he never wanted to go back to, whatever the cost.

And so after the war he minced into the milieu of Axel Springer. He met the right people while wearing the right suits, though at first they were still sewn from the rough, scratchy fabric of the blackout blankets. He made quite an impression with his elegant demeanor and his nefariousness. For Springer, who'd received a license to print newspapers from the British, he procured whole truck convoys full of paper rolls on the black market. He was on the rise, ever upward, until he became the powerful publisher's right hand.

He had tried living in England, tried working himself in at the very top in bespoke suits from Davies and Son, the same company on Savile Row that tailored Axel Springer's clothing. He wore custom-made shoes from John Lobb with gently elevated heels because his slightness embarrassed him; he was a short, slender man. He socialized in the right London clubs, he lived exclusively in the districts of Mayfair

and Belgravia, he loved England, but they had not let him in. Although he learned that during luncheon at Simpson's in the Strand one must slip a few coins into the white-aproned breast pocket of the carver who rolled the silver roast beef cart over to the table, the stink of the German working class still clung to my father's bespoke English suits, as did the affectations of a parvenu.

There was so much he didn't understand, my father. The issue of reverse snobbery, for example, and of Belgravia Cockney, *the final vulgarity of the English upper class*. And then the tailored shirts whose collars had to be tattered and full of holes. They had to be foxed, just about to fall apart in fact. Nor did he understand how to wear suede ankle boots, known as chukkas, which had to be perfectly unsightly: scuffed and stained as though the wearer had tramped through multiple puddles the day before and then forgotten to clean them. My father lacked self-irony, he wasn't pukka, he had simply not been the right man, like Barry Lyndon. It wasn't about money or influence or anything; no, it just wasn't enough to come from Hamburg and to want to be an Englishman.

He had secretly fathered a son with an Englishwoman in the English countryside, in Suffolk or Somerset or somewhere else. Sometimes he would return home to Gstaad after one or two months away and tell stories about the modest English farm where he'd been: the sheep in the enclosure, the apple trees and the dovecote, the plain food and plain

goodness of the country people. I recall thinking as a child that we lived in the countryside here in Gstaad though, too. Our neighbors were all farmers as well. Their cows laid their heads on the fence outside my bedroom window and woke me every morning with their bells. I even had to drink their gross fresh milk for breakfast, still warm. It was every bit as much a country life as in England, I thought at the time, but of course I never said a word—I never said anything against my father. Our relationship consisted of a total affirmation of his feudalistic being. It was never possible to be of a different mind. At no time had this been possible. You fell in line, agreed with him, and received money for it.

And when he died, my stepmother, his last wife, took the Learjet from Geneva to the memorial service in Hamburg, on her lap the long coveted thirty-five-thousand-euro Birkin handbag that my father had always forbidden her to own. Inside, inside this Hermès purse, lay his ashes, in a plastic bag, ashes she later hurled from a tugboat off Hamburg-Finkenwerder into the river Elbe: both the plastic bag and the ashes into the filthy Elbe.

I can see it now, the swaying barge, the jaundiced two-hundred-euro bill hastily and bashfully presented so that the drunk captain would turn a blind eye, the mute, absolutely petrified family on the quarterdeck, the milky Hamburg sky, the plastic bag sinking slowly in the boat's wake, the squawking, diving, horrid seagulls.

My mother of course had not been invited to the memorial

service, which concluded with a family dinner at Hamburg's Hotel Vier Jahreszeiten. We had been seated in a private back room, in neckties and in silence, an awkward silence expressly desired by my stepmother, and disturbed only by the bevy of liveried waiters who announced and described the gimmicky roundelay of courses in advance. It was abysmally, depressingly bourgeois, these loudly and proudly proclaimed lobster tails on pea essence, these Chateaubriands, these basil sorbets.

After the meal I'd stepped out in front of the nocturnally illuminated hotel to smoke a cigarette. No guests had been invited; Ralph Giordano learned of my father's death from the newspapers. And when I had crumpled up the slips of paper with the Yeats poem and the eulogy I hadn't read aloud and tossed them into a trash can, my father's Hamburg attorney had suddenly appeared behind me and put an amicable arm around my shoulder, assuring me that he was always there for me if I needed him. Really, always. And then he had pinched me on the upper flesh of my shoulder, in the Hanseatic manner. I should have yelled at him had I not been so cowardly.

What had my father even done during the war? He'd been born back in 1921, making him prime soldier stock. On the internet it says he was with an infantry regiment and was wounded. That information about him can't have been right, though. He'd never mentioned anything of the sort.

Wounded by whom? And more to the point, where? He'd always said he was supposed to be sent to the Eastern Front, which prompted his best friend, staff surgeon Günter Kelch, to plunge him into the ice-cold Elbe to help him contract pneumonia, and then inject his arm with typhoid pathogens, so that, deathly ill and highly infectious, he would not be shipped east. He was a Social Democrat his whole life long, he'd always claimed, he hated the Nazis, and after the war he had in fact been in the United States, with the American Field Service. Well, whatever the case, my father's smallish lies were nothing next to the established truths of my mother's family.

Anyway, his friend, staff surgeon Günter Kelch, had been homosexual, had loved Zarah Leander more than anything, and was present throughout my entire childhood. My father had always said Günter—whom we were supposed to call Güntimäusi, Günter Mouse—had saved his life in the war by injecting him with typhoid, and that he must now take care of him; that was his sacred duty. My father paid Günter Kelch an allowance, as he was unable to hold a job of any kind due to his advanced alcoholism. He was always being kicked out of everywhere, and my father clothed him, mostly in Axel Springer's bespoke suits, purloined for him in Kampen on Sylt, since both men, Axel and Güntimäusi, had the same elegant build: tall and slender and chiseled.

So Güntimäusi, for whom my father bankrolled a little flat not far from Rothenbaumchaussee in Hamburg, loved danc-

ing for me and my mother in women's clothing. We knew all the songs of Marlene Dietrich, of Zarah Leander, by heart, but the song about the Fiji Islands *Ich lass' mir meinen Körper schwarz bepinseln* was Güntimäusi's favorite, as were *Yes, Sir* and *Lili Marleen* and *Ich weiß, es wird einmal ein Wunder geschehen* and of course *Waldemar*.

My father had had an affair with Inge Feltrinelli, whose husband Giangiacomo, an Italian publisher with ever-deepening connections to militant leftist extremism, was killed at the beginning of the seventies in a dynamite attack.

Axel Springer's chalet near Gstaad was set on fire, as was his second estate, on the island of Sylt, the Klenderhof. Incidentally, our chalet in Gstaad also burned down, after my father had sold it to Mick and Muck Flick. Our houses had always burned down, and I always wondered what that was supposed to mean. Perhaps my mother knew.

As a small child I would often stand in fear before a painting that hung in our chalet above the wooden staircase to the second floor. It was by some Dutchman, with a very small burning farm in Flanders visible in the background. I was unable to remember anything more, maybe snow, probably crows circling in a pallid overcast winter sky as well, people dressed in black coming from the left and walking into the image. Today I have the sense that it must have been Pieter Bruegel's *Hunters in the Snow* hanging on our wall, which I saw once more decades later in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

In any event, fire had always been inside me: the house fire, the glowing remains of the chalets, and the Marie-José primary school in Gstaad I had set ablaze, the Polaroids presented to me as a seven-year-old in juvenile court in Thun to prove what I had done. The photos had shown a scorched chalkboard eraser, roof timbering gutted by fire, scattered matches charred black along half their length, their tips curled onto themselves like tiny, shrunken heads. There had been a half-empty green bottle of lighter fluid, the beige paper of its label frayed, then insulating material torn from the rafters, shredded in a corner of the attic, stacked, and ignited. Photos I still see in my dreams to this day, like discarded, inadequate rejects from Andrei Tarkovsky's Polaroid collection. Almost half a century ago, radiating European world.

III.

As I unpacked the sweater, the pamphlet had slid from the bag onto the carpet. I picked it up and leafed through it while getting dressed. I was still at the hotel in Zurich. *Join us at the vegetarian Dirk Hamer Commune*, the awkwardly titled brochure read, showing photos of blond Swiss families cultivating their fields, making pottery together, and picking apples, all in desaturated colors.

A phone number was listed; you were to call if you wished to come by, you needn't bring anything except the desire to work together fairly according to your ability. First and foremost, they operated equitably. You might also do nothing at all for a start and then maybe, once you felt like it, you might help shear sheep whose wool would then be gently processed into sweaters at the commune. Instead of throwing the brochure into the waste basket, I folded it and slipped it into my jacket pocket.

Then I went downstairs to the breakfast area, ate a croissant and drank three cups of black coffee, read the local section of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, and walked over the cobblestones in the morning sun to the nearby florist to buy a few champagne-colored roses. Today I only asked for nine-