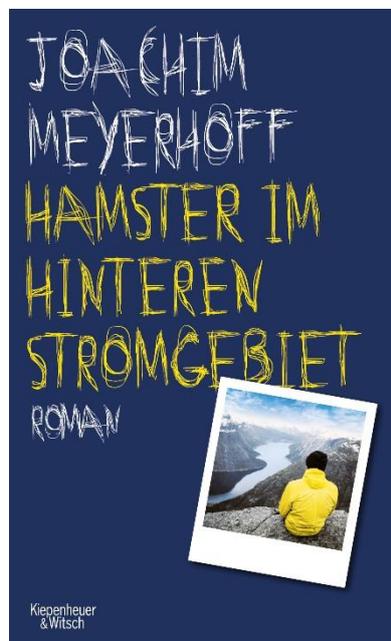


HAMSTERS IN THE BACKWATER

by **Joachim Meyerhoff**

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Four months and a few days after my fifty-first birthday, I had to go to the hospital. An emergency. This fact still fills me with astonishment and I'm constantly – three, four times a day – frightened anew, I become angry that the thing that happened, happened to me, and I hadn't just dreamt it up or read it somewhere. I would gladly keep the diagnosis a secret. Not so much from others, more from myself. It has something brutal about it and I shy away from naming the incident by its name, because the exact description sounds like a drawn sword making short work of things, and the images it conjures up are awful. Of course I knew that the thread of life could break at any moment. Nevertheless, I want to tell you what it's like when the taken-for-grantedness of existence is lost from one instant to the next. You were just this, and now you're supposed to be that. And quite incidentally, writing is good exercise for my left hand, the fingers of which are still shaky. They only vaguely remember the positions of the letters on the keyboard and are trying their best not to fly past them. Thus, the course is set. Writing literature with the right, practising with the left.

The blonde bomb halves itself
[pp. 9–19]

While working on some homework about bipolarity with my daughter, who'd turned eighteen a few weeks previously, I suddenly felt nauseous. I gave a quiet groan, more contemplative than concerned, and screwed up my eyes. "You ok, dad?" "I feel a bit funny. I'm sure it'll pass." I had to avert my gaze from the computer, as my feeling unwell seemed to be supplied directly from the unpleasant light intensity of the screen. I looked up and within the next few seconds the room disintegrated around me. On the walls of the kitchen particles began to flicker, wriggling single-cell organisms made of light split and multiplied and scuttled around like microorganisms under a microscope. The surfaces became fuzzy and soft waves sloshed through the brickwork. Two large-format photos of my daughters were set into motion, their faces floated up and away beneath a milky sheet of ice like in a horror film. The ceiling slackened, sagged and billowed against me. I perceived the curvature of my eyes. So I wouldn't fall off my chair, I lay the palms of my hands on the tabletop. My left leg began to tingle gently – my shin became a road for ants – then more strongly, losing what had previously been its unambiguous position in space.

With a prickling discharge all the power in my left arm was abruptly wiped out. Though I tried to press my palms harder against the wood, one of my hands turned over. I watched this with terror, as it actually looked like my left hand was now dying, as if it had taken a shot and would succumb to a grave wound like a soldier on the battlefield. I would never be able to use this hand again, of that I was sure. My head was buzzing, shrilly and unpleasantly, and a gleaming light fell into my thoughts, whereby they flickered like mirages. Disappearing to the left into this wave was half my face. The sensation in my upper and lower lips was separated almost surgically straight down the middle. To the right my old mouth, to the left no longer a mouth, instead a slurring hum beneath and on the skin of the sweep of my lips. “Are you really OK, dad?”, my daughter asked and I quietly answered: “I’m not feeling well.” I absurdly found it a little embarrassing to interrupt our work with something so extreme. “I need an ambulance.” “What’s the matter with you?” “I think I’m having a stroke. I have to go to the hospital right now.” This was an expression I’d apparently internalised. Every second counted. Strokes and urgency were inseparable terms. *Time is mind!* This slogan had been displayed on posters for months on end around Vienna. I hadn’t sat at my daughters’ kitchen table for a long time as I’d been separated from their mother for many years and this relationship was still shaped by cruel rejections and tentative approaches, through to amicable affection. We’d once more just left behind a phase of complete radio silence and were close to one another again. The hurt I’d inflicted on her had been so deep that I knew very well that everything could explode again at any time, even though we’d already been separated a long eleven years. But her entitlement to volcanic eruptions persisted. Of course, I was at odds with the arbitrariness of these eruptions, but they were part of us. I liked that we were joined by the children and that something held us together that wasn’t subjugated to the whims of affection. And, nevertheless, eleven years was a long time. My eleven-year-old daughter came out of

her room, careening in panic to see me in such a desolate state, and ran around me, gulping down tears. She has a beautiful and incredibly large face for her age and any and all feelings are excessively shown in her features. Already minutes before she starts crying, I can see the anguish looming. I was getting worse by the second. The mother of my daughters came into the kitchen, forced herself to stay calm and tried to reassure me, asked me to drink something, to lie down. But even if I had wanted to, I couldn't move. She made a call. It took all my efforts to keep half my body on the chair and not to panic about the annihilated side. I was worried that I would have to be sick. "When will the ambulance get here?" "Soon! They'll be here soon, dad. Mum just called them." Already in those first few moments, the gaze of my eldest daughter calmed me in an almost magical way. Her large, beautiful eyes beamed at me. She wears contact lenses, and even if she doesn't have a squint, you can see that her sight defect is enormous with over five dioptries. I of course also recognised fear in her eyes, but she looked at me so openly and strongly, that my despair didn't escalate. "Everything's going to be fine, dad. My lovely, dearest dad, everything's going to be ok." I nodded. This tiny incline of the head felt as though I would tip headfirst in a swing ship over the apex. And this was followed by the room doing a somersault with me as the pivot. I'd found the edge of the table with my right hand and clamped onto it; I planted my right foot onto the kitchen floor as if doing an emergency stop against the disorientation tugging wildly at me. My left foot sometimes plodded this way, sometimes that way, stepping around without a driver. A disturbing sight beyond my influence. It looked like an animated film in which individual extremities lead their own lives and, for example, after a vehement change of course from the upper body, the legs tear themselves away, run off and have to be retrieved by the torso. My left hand lay around as if amputated and no longer belonged to me. "When will the ambulance get here?" "It's on its way." The mother of my children lay her hand on my shoulder, which was

comforting and irritating at the same time. It had been a long time since it had lay there. “I don’t feel well.” I can still speak at least, I thought to myself. In order to assure myself that my memory wasn’t currently capsizing and sinking into the deep sea forever, I did a self-initiated test and searched for some song lyrics. Absurdly, I got snagged on a Schlager I hadn’t thought about for decades, and which the attack had now seemed to have activated. I sang in my head: *If you think, you think, you only think, a girl can’t do that. Look into my eyes and then look at my face.* It went well. The sequence of the words was correct. Wasn’t it? Again. *If you think, you think, you only think, you think.* “Juliane Werding”, I whispered, recalling the name of the singer. Everyone looked at me with concern. My young daughter asked me what I’d said, and I repeated it. “Juliane Werding!” The words remained hanging in the air exotically. I thought it through more quickly. And then again. It worked. And yet my certainly over the correctness of the lines already fizzled out with the final syllable. Was thinking now like swimming? Would I drown if I stopped remembering for a moment? Was the catastrophe in my brain perhaps rectifiable with a “Best of Onslaught”? What, I considered, do I have to think about now in order to be able to think in the future? Or was this already the kind of mad thinking that would accompany me from now on? Come on, I prompted myself, think of something that you haven’t thought about at all for decades. Brains are filled with fossils too. If you can find a discarded memory from yonks ago then you can be certain that the most impenetrable nook of your archive isn’t damaged. I heard and smelled my small daughter breathing behind my back. She doesn’t like brushing her teeth and loves salami. My head wanted to be left in peace and yet I forced myself to think, to think myself through the muddle of fear and frenzy. My daughters and their mother moved closer to me. Each with a hand in the air to reassure me or braced to support me in an emergency, like when you have to lead drunk people, who don’t like being touched, out of a bar after closing. All three of them sat down,

but stood straight back up, extremely fitfully, in my mind anyway, and walked back and forth across the kitchen. Their bodies left behind tail-like streaks in the air, pale vapour trails, fed by the colours of their clothing. “How long’s it going to take?” I didn’t get a response, or I didn’t hear one. In my left inner ear a creaking shunted back and forth. Or had I only thought the question and not said it at all? I concentrated, stuck my brain in the sharpener. I had to revive myself through memories, give myself a brain massage. Just accept anything that flashes up, challenge myself, and make it precise! Something small and cheerful, so that time doesn’t strike you dead. I’m seven and in the remedial class for children with dyslexia. We’re playing the game Teapot. I pick *Smith*, someone who makes shoes for horses, and our chain-smoking Chancellor. Everyone guesses, an endless back and forth, no one gets it. What a great feeling. “Well,” I say, and reveal my secret. “The blacksmith and Helmut Smith. “He’s called Schmidt,” my teacher points out, irritated. “That is not a Teapot!” She writes both words on the board. Schmidt and Smith. One directly below the other, but I couldn’t tell the difference.

Even decades later my disappointment reliably plopped out. Playing Teapot with dyslexics! What cruelty. At least, at least, I thought, I can think. And decided: it’s better to be half mobile and able to think than sporty but running round with my memory amputated. “When will this ambulance finally get here?” The mother of my children stubbed out her cigarette, the smoke from which she had considerably blown round the side of the building while leaning far out of the window, while once more phoning “the rescue”, the substantially more auspicious name they give the ambulance service in Austria. Yet my rescue left me waiting, wasn’t nearing. *Mother of my children* is a dishonest and ultimately derogatory expression. The woman with whom I once lived, with whom I spent ten years, with whom I have two daughters, had been brutally cut away and bundled into the mother pigeonhole without a trace. But *ex* works even less. In

that respect the guillotine is always rushing downwards and the ex gets executed, then not even the mother remains. My young daughter came over to me and stroked my back. I found it a little extraordinary how her touch slid across a precise line between my shoulder blades into nothingness. In the middle of the world something could become invisible and then visible again. My back could do magic and make a child's hand disappear. My tongue felt raw and swollen. Like an animal's tongue, I thought to myself, like an ancient tortoise perhaps. The most varied animal tongues penetrated my mind, licked me through my thoughts. Our dog had black flecks on the pink of its tongue. Didn't the Romans actually eat nightingale tongues? As a child I had stuck my hand in the still toothless mouth of a little calf. It suckled wildly and it was impossible for me to pull my hand back out between its raw gums and pumping tongue. I began to cry. The little calf rolled its big eyes greedily, slobbering and sucking fitfully. My mother came over, tugged on my arm and tried to bend open the mouth. Finally, she gripped the seemingly completely starving animal by its nostrils, pulled around on its snout and it opened its jaws. Tinged blue and drenched in drool, I drew my hand out of its gullet. I cried the whole way home and held up my dripping hand, carrying it through the town like a disgusting banner.

Why was I thinking of banal stories from my childhood of all things? Wasn't there anything more appropriate for a brain catastrophe? Again and again my young daughter ran to the window to keep lookout for the rescue. She was wearing a chequered dress with a tie, her hair tied up in a tight bun. And on top of that, her glasses! She looked like a magician's assistant in turmoil. One of her two upper incisors is behind the row of teeth, getting pushed back further and further by the others, and should have been corrected with braces a long time ago. One of the many topics I'd lost my right to an opinion on in the separation. Suddenly she shouted: "It's here!". I held the hand of my eldest daughter tightly and clung to her gaze, which always

reminds me a little of the eyes of my middle brother, who hasn't been alive for so many years. I've actually become far more than double as old as he was in the meantime, since he died in a motor accident at the age of twenty-one. I've been able to outlive him by thirty-five years. I've outshot him biographically by thirty-five years. I've tried desperately to stop him fading away for thirty-five years. Even today I still haven't got over his loss and have frozen the shock of his brutal death within me. He had bad eyes just like my daughter, and after umpteen adventurous frames he got contact lenses. His massive short-sightedness had reawakened in the face of my daughter. I felt, on the one hand, sorry for her, but on the other hand I was often moved by this connection in their gaze. I heard voices in the stairwell. The dog, locked away in the storeroom, had a yelping fit. The high frequency barking made a very specific region in my head hurt, one that I'd never before perceived as separate.

Two paramedics came crashing into the kitchen. Schlepping in a kind of carrying chair I'd never seen before. Their professional pragmatism seemed stilted to me from the very first moment. They'd of course learned it, this friendly dispassion, but I sensed a certain tentativeness from one of them. He hadn't, I was sure, been doing the job long. A light was shone in my pupils. My condition had steadily worsened in the last few minutes and the motor incapacitation was progressing. I was admittedly still clear in the head and could speak, but it was as if the whole left side was smothered by a burden and threatened to pull me from my chair through its uncontrollable limpness. The gravitation had something evil about it and it greedily pulled around at the weakened half. I grabbed at my face with my right hand, massaged the skin and tried to feel whether the corner of my mouth was drooping, whether I had already been disfigured into the typical appearance of a hemiplegic. Yet I couldn't detect any kind of distortion. "Sir, can you move your left arm?" I shook my head and was once more overrun by the hefty sloshing motion of the room. I became

dizzy. Dizzy like I'd never been before. The corners of the room swung open and closed, snapping at me. The whole geometry of the room was in the process of dissolution and putting me through the mangle. Objects and walls gave up their fixed form, frayed, sprawled in and over one another, melted, liquified and smashed over me, swallowed me. So, that's that, I thought, now I'm going to throw up and keel over. But then the room calmed itself, won back its shape and the half of me I still felt was hunched over the table like he was before. At certain moments it had been as if two different kinds of attraction had been acting on me. One force had made everything physical sag downwards, my organs felt as if they'd simply been emptied out of a bucket onto the floor tiles, the other force however had sucked all the images and thoughts upwards. The fingers on my left hand, the whole of the left arm, had lost their form and were fiercely ablaze. The paramedics opened their cases and arranged their implements on the table. The older one was stout, wheezing and was without a doubt the boss, the I've-seen-it-all-before guy, the younger one on the other hand was presumably someone doing their civilian service, or, as they call them in Austria, a submissive-sounding *civilian server*. He had a tattoo on his forearm, a triangle that depicted a slice of pizza including a piece of salami and the outline of a mushroom. Even in my grave condition I wondered at the shoddy self-mutilation. Who willingly tattoos a piece of pizza into their skin? I recalled that my eldest daughter once tried to explain this exact trend to me. It wasn't brightly coloured dragons or Asian script that were the rage anymore, but stick and poke designs done yourself or by friends. People sit in the park, she enthused, drink beer, pass round a spliff and need nothing more than a needle and the ink cartridge from a biro. "Someone from my year," she reported, "tattooed an ice-cream on themselves." "Great." "And one of my friends has a pretzel." "A pretzel? You can't be serious? When I was your age a lot of people tattooed the yin and yang sign. And now it's pretzels?" "You don't understand, dad. It's more about the doing than

the having.” “But the doing lasts an evening, the having, the rest of your life.” “It just doesn’t matter that much.”

“Can you feel that, sir?” The less sure of the paramedics stroked my arm. I had seen his hand make the motion, but hadn’t felt it. “No.” “And this?” He lifted up my jumper and poked me in the chest. “I can feel the pressure, but not the touch.” “Sir, can you please try to move your left hand and place it on top of your head?” I looked at my deceased fingers. I didn’t know what neural pathway I could have sent a signal down. “Can’t unfortunately.” Together they lifted me up and manoeuvred me into the absurd-seeming stretcher. One carries dodderly earls up winding staircases in these kinds of things, I thought to myself, in order to dispose of them out a window and leave them slumped in a castle moat. I looked at my eldest daughter and pleaded: “Can you come with me? Please.” I thought I was peculiarly loud, and while I was being strapped in, I called out to her mother: “Please, can she come with me?” “Oh course she can go with you!” “I’ll come with you, dad. Of course I’ll come.” “And please, call Sophie.” “Of course I will, Josse.” Josse was the name the mother of my daughters had held onto in all those years since the separation. A familiarity that had made it across all of the trenches between us, all the way into the present. She looked at me: “It’s going to be Ok, Josse! I’m sure it will. We’re with you.”

[...]

Doctor, my pillow's burning
[pp.92–104]

The night became longer and longer. A lightless catacomb, into which I hobbled deeper and deeper without orientation. Fear just wouldn't leave me in peace, it was bothersome, and because my sense of my body was thrown off kilter, even the night seemed askew. The darkness around me was tilted against the space it occupied, it didn't fit properly in the room and made me dizzy. Like someone had been given a box of darkness as a gift and had stuffed it back into the box incorrectly. Or was the blackness actually only in my head? I'd always found it remarkable how gloomy it is inside one. The brain always looks so pleasantly white in illustrations, so bright, but each thought is actually conceived in lightless gloom. I rang for the nurse. "Excuse me, but I have no idea what time it is." "Half six." "Ah, thanks." "Everything else Ok?" "Yes, the best." On this occasion I tried to understand if that meant half to or half past six? I couldn't grasp it. But it did seem possible that the night had come to an end. I heard steps in the corridor that wanted to head into the day. There were also, in the intensive care unit around me, increasing amounts of rolling over and sighing. Also a few quiet farts. The organs were evidently coming into motion and

were glad it was morning. At which point the door flew open and the neon lights on the ceiling flickered on. The curtains were pulled aside. For the first time I saw the size of the room and my fellow patients. There were six of us. I was surprised: men and women mixed together. At a certain level of seriousness, gender was clearly of secondary importance. A lady came in pushing her metal trolley. “Breakfast!” All the mobile extremities of the patients jumped. One minute we had been brooding under the weight of the night, united in a nightmarish community of fate, and next the granite slab had been brutally torn away from our thoughts. Like light-shy worms in the glare we stretched in our beds, rubbed our eyes, tangled ourselves in our tubes, attempted to sit up and slumped back down, momentarily forgetting why we’re even here, why arms and legs were turned the wrong way. One after the other we were asked what we’d like. The nurses unfortunately weren’t wearing white gowns. Oh, how I liked these gowns, they had been familiar to me since time immemorial in the psychiatric hospital I’d grown up in. Their clothes comprised nothing more than blue trousers and a short-sleeved blue shirt. They looked disappointingly pragmatic and were deprived of any medical nostalgia. In this outfit, you could feed, wash and swing by pathology. Their morning spiel was of a sparse beauty: “Brown bread, white bread, black bread, bread roll, bread plait?” She asked a man whose bedcover had a pronounced bulge, as if he had hidden a beach ball under it. He had cheerful red cheeks. “Two rolls and a plait, please, if that’s alright.” There are men who never completely lose their baby face. “Cheese, liver sausage, chicken sausage or jam?” “Two liver sausage and one jam, please.” “Tea or coffee?” “Be a dear and make me a coffee.” He was markedly polite and conducted himself as if he were in a coffee house, offsetting her flatly intonated brusqueness through stilted gallantry. In the tempo of a circus number, the nurse grabbed the items from the trolley and poured the coffee. Next, she spoke to a patient whose appearance was pitiful. She lay on one side, and from her eyes,

which looked jammed into her swollen, pale skin, any joy for living had been wiped away. Had I ever seen such dead eyes? “Brown bread, white bread, black bread, bread roll, bread plait?” The patient didn’t react. “Don’t you want breakfast? Tea, coffee?” Even when it was only a presumption, I thought I understood how she was feeling. If you hit the switch and decide to ignore the world, it’s hard to come back from it. Whoever has seen through the senselessness of existence is unlikely to be convinced by the opposite. Brown bread, white bread, black bread, bread plait. If you’re already standing at the railing on the bridge, this is only another counting-out game towards nihilism. Or had the medication made her sluggish? I only saw part of her face as it was cut up by straggly hair. Our waitress became, without any inner sympathy, around double as loud and shouted out the baked goods. No reaction. But then the patient spoke and the word bloomed before her lips like a soap bubble, before bursting: “Ring cake.” “Don’t have that.” The nurse wandered over to me and slammed me with the selection. “I’d just like a roll with jam and a tea please.” She once again grabbed the ingredients from the trolley and arranged them on a plate. It reminded me of particular YouTube videos that I liked to watch with my young daughter, in which people do something especially quickly. For instance, a Japanese man wearing a facemask who carves up a huge tuna fish and dices up the imposing animal into mouth size morsels in only three minutes. He just throws the gills, head and bones behind him in a tiled room. Or a workman who manoeuvres a wheelbarrow loaded as high as a man with rubbish over a zillion tiny planks straight through mud to a container as if he were being chased by the devil. He outfoxes the wobbling path the width of a palm and on the verge of sinking through his unreal speed. Any cautious person wouldn’t have had a chance. In our favourite clip a man in Australia shears sheep. In less than a minute the animals hop out of their voluminous fleece and scamper off, embarrassed by their nakedness.

The nurse had in the meantime moved over to a man who I thought was in his thirties and I had heard talking on the telephone in the night. “Brown bread, white bread, black bread, bread roll, bread plait.” “I’ll have, er... may I please have... God... the... er... the.” And then quietly to himself: “Shit... why’s nothing working up there?” And then louder again: “Yes, the, the, the, shit, damn it.” “Plait?” He declined indignantly, seeming upset that she had considered the plait for him. And I began to play along in my head. “Brown bread?” “No, no... may I... shit.” “Black bread?” “Yes!” he barked in relief. “Cheese, liver sausage, chicken sausage or jam?” “I’ll take... um... um... wait...” He looked as if he couldn’t decide, and was indeed already back in the middle of his terminology blockade. “Um... I’ll have... hm... what do I fancy? I’ll have... um...” “Are you able to stand?” “Yes.” “Come over here. I’ll show you what I’ve got. Careful with your tube.” I hadn’t expected so much empathy from her. Great, I thought, one minute a camp leader, now Florence Nightingale. The man unplugged his ECG and pulled his intravenous gallows to the breakfast trolley. “That there.” He got his liver sausage. She held up both pots. “Tea or coffee.” He pointed at the coffee. He went back towards the bed, as if stunned, didn’t turn his head but his whole body and reverse parked onto his mattress. During his small question-and-answer torture the neat and proper gentleman had slurped and munched through his large order with pleasure and had visibly enjoyed his neighbour’s word finding shame. His own joie de vivre refuelled at the misfortune of others. What was wrong with him wasn’t clear to me, and I thought that perhaps he was only faking because he enjoyed the breakfast here so much or thought the nurse was hot. Both of the other patients in the intensive care unit couldn’t be spoken to. Another man and a woman. They lay motionlessly on their backs. The man was wearing sunglasses. Had he had them on the whole night? The lenses, as was the fashion in the eighties, were completely mirrored in the iridescent colours of petrol on the surface of puddles. In his earlobe a gold, albeit upside

down cross. The place where Jesus puts his feet was pointing up. His thick, grey thatch of hair was trimmed to a flat top. His mouth was open, he hadn't packed many teeth for his stay. The woman at the window had her head tilted to the side so I wasn't able to see her face, it seemed strange to me that she wasn't offered anything. Her hair was remarkably carefully styled. I didn't give another thought to the guy in the sunglasses. Anyone could see that he was completely unconscious. But she only seemed to be briefly resting, cocooned in a light sleep.

That my empathy for the suffering of my fellow patients had its limits, surprised, no, pained me. My compassion seemed to have been likewise damaged by the stroke, and even if I absolutely didn't like it one bit, I couldn't deny a certain hardening towards the others. But perhaps it was also just fear that in their beds lay depressing varieties of my own unknown future. Because I didn't know the names of my fellow patients, I named them by their diagnoses. This, too, sounded more heartless than intended. My father had often spoken about his patients in this manner at the lunch table: the schizophrenic in A on the upper floor, the autistic in D on the ground floor, the anorexic in G on the middle floor.

I had been so derailed by the breakfast ambush that I had completely forgotten to pay attention to my body. How was I actually doing in the light of day? The intensity of the buzzing in my nerves had noticeably decreased in my leg and in half of my backside and had yielded to a growing feeling of numbness. I rubbed my feet against one other and barely felt the difference. My left arm was also no longer caught in the crisscross of high voltage sparks like the previous evening. I massaged it with my right hand. It felt unfamiliar, dismissive, as if it didn't want anything to do with me. With my right hand I gripped my wrist and squeezed. The relation of the exerted pressure and the pressure sensitivity didn't match. A lot less came back than I sent in. I wrinkled my skin, twisted it in different places. Same result. I saw on my arm the welts and tiny bruises in the form of

reddened patterns, yet I didn't feel them. I sat up and tried to lift my left arm. Nothing. I strengthened the efforts of my will and it flew as if shocked into the air and banged against the medical trapeze overhead. I flinched, threw myself back against the pillow out of shock from my own arm. Like a bad fisherman I had overreacted and wrenched a tiny fish with all my might out of the lake. The pillow beneath my head was the most uncomfortable that I'd ever encountered. Later I learned from my physiotherapist that all the patients hated the pillows. I ought to please file a complaint, maybe team up with other patients. Well, it's not like I have anything better to do! Organise a demo, pass around a petition and march around the hospital grounds linking arms with banners bearing slogans and staccato cries: "There's one reason things are tough! Our pillows are far too rough!" To blame for the uncomfortable pillows was the anti-flammability, I was told. They were exchanged after a fire. A bedridden patient had smoked and then shouted: "Doctor, my pillow's on fire!" I had to laugh, for this is of course the worst thing that can happen to a pillow: for it to no longer be flammable. The Neurology Department goes down in flames, but the pillows lie white and fluffy like fireproof geese in the ashes. That's progress in the right place. Had I really not slept for a single moment? I had, during the endless night, thought about Norway a lot, that I did know, and also at some point the time Sophie, our son and I had been there again after the hiking trip with my brother. We took the ferry from Kiel to Oslo. In the night the sea had been very choppy. Sophie liked the way the waves shifted this huge ship and made it groan deeply. She was often brave when I was most cowardly. We had a large porthole in our cabin, high up above the breaking waves running over the outside wall of the ship. The constant ups and downs had quickly rocked our little son to sleep. Sophie sat in front of the porthole naked in the darkness after we'd slept together, completely immersed in the view of the waves, which only stood out against the dark sky through their crowns of spray. Later on we lay close to one another, yet I

couldn't relax, as I was unable to reinterpret the swaying as congenial. Along with the metallic banging on the ship's side there was also an unnerving vibration that trembled through the metal. I lay there and thought of the sinking of the *Estonia*. In a matter of minutes it had flooded in the Baltic Sea, as the storm had curved up and ripped off the huge cargo hatch and the deluge of water had plunged unchecked into the hold. Had the guests also first noticed this vibration at the time? Was it a harbinger of doom? And was what was currently electrocuting the left half of my body possibly only advance notice of something bigger? Was this simply the crackling of the transistors before the valves explode? I hated my brain for the fact that it never stopped at the barrier, beyond which really terrible things could be seen, turned around and went home. No, it always had to duck down, crawl under the tape and advance into the centre of the horrific scenario. To keep at a safe distance from these toxic images wasn't my thing. In the belly of the Baltic Sea ferry, I thought, in the rusted wreck of the *Estonia*, behind the cabin doors pressed shut by the mass of water, were there still bones roving around? Soaked pyjamas, filled with skeletons? Saturated cuddly toys, black with algae? Had every cabin become a flooded coffin?

Before the dreadful images from the previous night could newly unfold in all their glory, I preferred to occupy myself with my breakfast. There were new rules to the game. How does one split a bread roll into two halves when only one hand is able to participate? I took the roll, turned and clumsily kneaded it. I drilled a finger inside it, completely covered the bed in crumbs, and then shoved my whole hand inside it. A fantastic bread roll glove! I broke it in half by clamping the baked good between the mattress and the bedframe and pushing my hand completely through it. I lay both bedraggled halves back onto the plate, opened the butter with my teeth and squished it into the roll. Same with the cherry jam. Using the knife I tried to somehow spread the whole lot, but instead just pushed the halves

around on the tray. Welcome to the world of the one-armed, I thought, and took a bite. Delicious, like it had been in the couchette car. When I pushed the chewed-up pulp into the left cheek pouch, it disappeared into the numbness. While pushing it back, I bit my tongue. I was torn between the fascination about the neurological deficiency and the fear it inspired within me. Another nurse came in and spoke animatedly in Hungarian with the small fat guy. I've rarely seen a more sly little fellow. He rubbed his backside back and forth on the mattress out of sheer horniness, mimed embraces, beckoned with his fingers and kneaded the air in front of the nurse's breasts. She, however, didn't find it as racy as I did. She giggled and put up with the Hungarian compliments. When she left the room, he threw me a lewd look, clucked his tongue three times and pursed his lips for minutes on end, as if they were a blood-pumping organ that needed time to swell up again. I drank from my fruit tea. I actually didn't want to be anyone who drinks fruit tea, I thought. Fruit tea is a gloomy drink. And whoever drinks gloomy drinks, would themselves be gloomy. Furthermore, my tongue seemed to have swelled up as if it were burned, the papillae were nubby, and my left eye squinted unprompted. This in turn was misinterpreted by the podgy charmer, who took it as my agreement that the nurse was a prime specimen of her trade. He waved at me and I nodded. After the nurse had collected up our trays, she closed the curtains and dimmed the neon lights. My blood pressure was taken. The Pippi Longstocking song played again. Maybe the thrombus had given me perfect pitch. It happened all the time, brain injuries or impairments leading to higher functions. Someone gets a baseball to the head and from then on, they can see in the dark like a cat or a Saxon falls down the stairs and from then on, she can only speak Swiss German. Would I now discern famous sinfonias from everyday sounds? A whiff of the morning ventured carefully into the room, as was befitting of an intensive unit. Early morning on quiet soles. Maybe I'd soon be able to get some sleep. As a

test I closed my eyes briefly a few times. Apparently, the demons seemed too exhausted to further mistreat me, and remained in their hiding places. At last. Then I heard someone enter the room. My curtain was pushed a little to the side and swiftly closed again. I heard a woman's voice whisper: "Oh, this is where you're hiding." And the man right beside me replied just as quietly. "There you are, at last." "I just couldn't make it yesterday in the end. I'm so sorry." "Come on, sit down." "Wait, I'll go get a chair." "Just sit here." I heard him pat the mattress. "No, no. I'll fetch a chair." "Why?" "You can't do that. Sitting on the edge of a sick person's bed." "I've never heard that." She left the room and came back, I watched the leg of the chair, which stroked along the curtain like a fingertip. "So. Mum and dad are coming today. Then I'll have more time. "Well the, well bravo, well good." "You should be happy, they want to see you of course. Your parents are coming tomorrow." "But what happened. I... when I... er." Up to this point he had spoken without any irregularity. "When I there... well there... suddenly I woke in the night. I did, right?" "I'll tell you when it's a bit quieter." "It's quiet here. I... come on... tell... me." His whisper became more and more erratic from sentence to sentence and the more agitated he became the more hacked up his speech. "What have I got?... You know it, right? What... why... shit... why's it not working upstairs... what is it?" And then she decided to tell him the truth. "You had a brain haemorrhage." I had no choice but to listen. I'd never understood how listening away would work. Going away, of course. Looking away, okay. But listening away? Not being able to close your own ears like eyes, not being able to fold the muscle over the opening to the ear, was plain evolutionary failure. He seemed too shocked to speak, and I was struck by a memory that was totally inappropriate for the situation: I once sunk onto a hotel bed in excitement to follow a tennis match at Wimbledon on TV and, lost in thought, began to roll something I'd found under the bed between my fingers and then gnawed on it. When the player won her set, I relaxed but then realised that I'd eaten half an

earplug. And it wasn't mine. I scraped the wax crumbs from my tongue and was repulsed for hours afterwards.

“I... had... what?” “You had a haemorrhage in your cerebrum.” “What... why though. That can't just... What does it mean... I.” “Please calm down. Getting worked up right now is really bad. The doctors said it could all be fine. You have a swelling, a haematoma that's pressing on the vessels. But it's so deep inside that they're unable to operate. We just have to wait.” “But I. Talk like this... well... really. But how?” “You know, it just happens. They have to find out why. It could have been a lot worse.” Now he really got upset. Her consolations made him angry. “I... really... can't... are you... crazy... I... didn't... even... do anything.” He started to cry, I heard her get up from her chair and hug him. “Everything's going to be OK. You just have to be patient. I think you're already talking much better than yesterday.” He was suddenly as meek as a lamb. “Yeah?... I just can't answer questions somehow... it's there, you know... it's there... I see the word, but I can't say it... but everything's there.” “You see, that's really good.” “But... work.” Thereupon he said something I wished I hadn't heard. “... me and work... how then?... How's that going to work?!” He cried more intensely and I cleared my throat to remind him that he wasn't alone. “I can't like this... it won't like this.” “But it'll get better.” He grunted scornfully. “Then I can... well... maybe when foreign investors come... stupidly stand there and grin. That's what they'll do, always put me to one side.” Now I felt bitter too. Maybe I'd never be able to act in the theatre like I used to ever again. I had always given it my all in order to shine on stage. It was only when I made myself shine that I was visible. Maybe my power was now broken. It was hard enough anyway at fifty to be able act the way I thought I had to act. Then I heard my bed neighbour say “Then I'll just kill myself. I will.” “Stop it. Don't talk nonsense.” “I really will... I'll do it... if I... don't. Without work... I'll do it.” And then he sobbed uninhibitedly while he apparently tossed his head from side to side. In doing so, it sounded as if someone was

messing around with the volume button on a remote control. Then I heard someone else crying. But it wasn't his girlfriend or wife, as she was speaking quietly and urgently at him. "You need to rest. And you have me. You've been very lucky, under the circumstances." Then he directed a ludicrous about-face towards the sad parquet. In a suggestive tone he invited her to sit by him again. And this time he had more success. He called her Little One. They whispered, giggled, and into this love rustling someone else was now clearly crying. I guessed the apathetic girl. Maybe the story behind the curtain had brought her to tears. What kind of radio drama had I found myself in? I had to go to the toilet. Was I actually the only person in this intensive care unit that had to pee? Intensively had to pee? Or had they all had catheters inserted, through which their silent urine flowed? I didn't want to ring the bell and just wanted to be away from this bed, away from this couple, away from the snoring sounds of the bespectacled freak, away from faceless yammering. With my right arm I energetically pushed myself up and stood, but in my wild getaway spirit I had completely forgotten to hang up the ECG, which pulled me back down onto the edge of the bed. I slumped and lay my head on the fireproof pillow. I was surrounded by sobbing, snoring and stuttering. I had arrived at the end of something. My self-image crumbled stupendously. I had so quickly slipped from indestructibility into ruin, from light-heartedness into heavy-heartedness.

Hibernating in your own bum

[pp.105–114]

An incident was flying around me. Only diffusely at first, but then more and more clearly, finally settling beside me. Sophie, my son and I went to a restaurant in Oslo. The liveliness of the neighbourhood we were walking around had made us happy. I had given Sophie a jumper as a present which looked incredibly good on her. It was knitted with chunky wool, a wild jumble of purple, brown and red tones. The colours suited her hair, her eyes and her lips to an almost magical degree. It was completely unimaginable that someone else could have worn this jumper. The thickness of the wool, too, led to a motley curvaceousness I found arousing. The Nordic light was shining, I hadn't seen the world so three-dimensionally for a very long time. Our son's hair had been turned Emil-of-Lönneberga-blonde. And if I could imagine looking at us three with strangers' eyes, I could have taken us to be a Norwegian family. We were glad to get a place at the restaurant quickly seeing as it was jam-packed and our son, when he got hungry, could fall into acute cases of lunacy. These needed to be cushioned in a timely fashion. We ordered our meal and waited. After about ten minutes a waiter called for quiet and loudly gave an excited announcement in Norwegian. Some guests laughed, others were less

amused and disgruntledly packed up their things in order to spend their too-short lunch hour in another restaurant. Tourists became identifiable as we were looking cluelessly from one table to another. The waiter repeated what he'd said in English and let us know that the cook had apparently left because he had had too much work to do. "I am sorry. We don't know what to do. But he just left." In my hospital bed on the edge of Vienna the incident considerably amused me. I chuckled at how well I could understand and how much I could empathise with the fact that someone's thread of patience could suddenly break. The cook had probably given it all he had, stirred, buttered, fried, flipped, and the orders had piled up on the service hatch. And then a misplaced strawberry, a piece of broccoli sliding into the sauce on the plate had been all it took, or a complaint – "The fish has too many bones!" – and he had torn off his apron and simply left. At our request our son got given a little basket of bread, which, to his amazement, he was allowed to take with him.

A line from Thomas Bernhard plopped into my head: "One must have the strength to cancel something. To break off something that has become habitual." The piece is called: *The Ignoramus and the Madman*. It, too, is about brains. I had played the role of the madman. I've carried many of his sentences with me ever since. "The question is an everyday one: how do I get – with a ruse, an everyday, new ruse – through the day?" So much rushes through the old pumpkin, as my older brother still calls my head, and nothing fits, but everything belongs together.

I saw Sophie in her jumper in front of me, the way we left the restaurant laughing and were completely united, harmonised with our joy. And I saw myself, how I formed a brain out of two kilos of minced beef on stage and dissected it with a knife. The thoughts overlapped one another, rolled out their carpets in long trains, and I finally slept. I got scared again briefly by the Pippi Longstocking song from the blood pressure machine, but sleep, as deadly and uncomplicated as a

projectile, finally shot me down and provided peace. The next thing I saw was a tonne of doctors standing around my bed and gawping at me like an animal in a zoo. In a combination of empathy, haughtiness and curiosity. Hurray, the primate’s waking up! The neurologist from the previous night wasn’t among them. One of them introduced themselves as the senior consultant for the stroke unit and asked me whether it would be alright if the medical students were present during the visit. I nodded before I could shake my head. “How are you?” I didn’t know exactly; I’d not yet listened to my inner voice after waking up. “Better, I think.” An older doctor threw back my covers and asked me to rub my right heel over my left shin. It went well. “And now the left over the right please.” That didn’t go well. My foot slipped off the bone, staggering like a drunkard over a fallen tree trunk. “And now stretch out your arm and touch your nose with your finger. First with your good hand please.” That’s how quickly your body can become full of Goodies and Baddies. My father had done this test with me before, when I visited his examination room on the grounds of the psychiatric hospital as a child. This “Touch your nose with your finger” seemed to be the classic mother of all neurological tests. In the next few days, it took on a virtually symbolic worth for me, because I was endlessly asked to touch my own nose. It was like being in a workshop with the title *Overcome Your Egoism*. Every doctor, every physio or occupational therapist wanted me to touch my nose with my index finger. The difficulty level was always increased with the same command: “And now with your eyes closed.” It seemed to me as if I had been condemned to reveal, over and over again, the imbecile that I clearly was. Coming in for landing from the right I knew where was best in the room to find the peak of my Prussian conk. From the left, on the other hand, the nose hid from the finger wobbling ever closer to it. Which is what happened on this first morning under the eyes of the medical students. With the right finger there was a wonderful precision landing on the nose runway. Yet my left hand plummeted like a pilotless

Cessna and smashed into my forehead. On the second attempt I forcefully gouged my finger just beneath my eye into my cheek. The whole thing was a depressing Laurel and Hardy number and without a doubt it must have occurred that the test subjects had given themselves a bloody nose or poked themselves in the eye. The medical students goggled and the consultant smiled, pleased that I had shown them my symptoms of failure in such a textbook way. “Well, that’s much better than before the lysis therapy” praised the consultant, who was remarkably young. He shone a light in my pupils and I missed the doctor from the previously evening. She had dazzled me more thoughtfully. With her I didn’t have the feeling that I had to put my calamity on display for all to see. One of the doctors held up his index finger and asked me to put my finger tip against his. Quick as a flash he changed its position and I zoomed around with my right hand. It was as if I was typing in a three-dimensional secret code into the air. I enjoyed that. Then once more the disillusionment with the left finger. As if a maniac were trying to wipe his hallucinations out of the air. An uncoordinated arm-and-hand twiddling. My neck muscles cramped and I gave up. Without knowing what I wanted to say, I called out: “I had a couple of questions.” It was an attempt to change over from the bodily catastrophe into the verbal and to end the lesson about the living object. “Yes, of course, ask away.” It became clear to me that, just as I’d listened to the man with the brain haemorrhage that morning, all the patients were now listening to me. My voice sounded cool and impersonal, as if I were asking on behalf of someone else. “Are you able to say yet what the cause might have been?” “That’s exactly what we’re trying to establish. You’re young. You’re not overweight. We’re now waiting for the blood levels. Had you ever had a problem with high bloody pressure before? “Yes, of course. But nothing serious,” “The question will be...” he was looking at me, but was indirectly teaching his students, “...whether it was a blood clot that had washed up in your cerebellum from somewhere in your body, or whether the breach was

made direct in your vessel.” “Why would that happen?” “This, too, has many different causes. A weakness in the vessel wall. Agglutination. Possibly the vessel collapsed without a clot. That can happen too.” “And that’s now come open again through the lyse therapy?” “At least no further tissue has died.” “But you’re sure that tissue has died in my brain?” “That’s what I’m assuming. For now. It’s the weekend, nothing’s going to happen around here.” General laughter ensued. That’s the standard joke, I thought, that welds this occupational group together. “We’ll do another NMRI on Monday, we’ll see more than on the CT.” “One more question.” “Of course, please ask. It’s highly interesting for my young colleagues.” This was clearly intended to be a prompt for his cohorts, as the students’ faces were doing very well at only be outwardly present, while they had inwardly drifted off. I was aware that I was hamming it up a little and presenting myself as a patient with expertise. “It wasn’t an ischemic attack?” “No, it wasn’t a TIA. Your symptoms point to an acute ischemic cerebellum stroke.” “Would a cerebral one have been worse?” Strange how sick people look for reassurance within the relations of things. “It depends. Experience shows that those with coordination problems have a better prognosis than those with memory loss or loss of tissue in the language centre.” That he said this so brutally, even though the Brain Haemorrhage was dozing a metre away behind the curtain was unpleasant to me. “Any other questions?” “When will the doctor that was here yesterday be back?” “This evening. Any further questions?” I shook my head and the white caravan moved on to the next bed. “How are you feeling?” The bloodless girl didn’t answer. “Have you been taking your medication?” The questions once more fell into the well of her aversion to information requests. Then they moved on. They spoke in hushed tones over the unconscious woman by the window. “Here we have an aneurysm with a massive bleed in the whole of the Arteria carotis interna. The artificial coma was started around eight hours after the fixpoint.” They talked shop about life and death and subsequently left

the ward. I seemed to have slept through the quizzing of the other patients. The visiting party hadn't completely closed my curtains during their streaming out, so I could see the fat guy with the chubby cheeks. He waved at me. I had no idea what he wanted. He smirked and waved. I raised my hand and greeted him back. He called out "Super!" "What's super?" "It was super!" "What?" He gave me a double thumbs up, just like footballers do nowadays when they thank the spectators after they mess up a cross. "Really super!" "Yeah, what then, huh?" He touched his finger on his nose, mimicking the test. Was it being serious? Was he taking the piss out of me? But his expression seemed turgid with out and out friendliness. My existence as an actor had arrived at ground zero. The arena had well and truly shrunk. Touch your own nose and then the Piggy shouts: "Super!" An actor, a spectator. That's how it was and that's how it would be for the foreseeable future, I realised. I turned away and tried to caress my cerebrum a little bit with a script. It was a short passage from *Cathy of Heilbronn*, actually only a single sentence, in which the overheating Count von Strahl attempts to propose to the silent Cathy. I'd known the part off by heart for thirty years. Perhaps one of the greatest sentences that I've ever known: *The stag, tormented by the midday heat, churns the ground with pointed antlers, he does not long to throw itself from the rocks into the forest river, the raging one, as I do, now that you are mine, provoked, as I am, by your young charms.* I thought the words to myself like a mantra, over and over, soundlessly moving my lips along with it. I whispered, however, the spray of "the raging one", as it barbed the flow of the sentence and made it more agile. I was waiting for Sophie. She had promised to come this morning and bring me some fruit. The visiting times on the ward were restricted. My eldest daughter had also promised to visit me. Two rendezvous in one day. What more could I want? Hopefully Sophie would bring me a copy of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. I had to read the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* every day. Just like my grandparents did for over

fifty years. They even had the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* sent to Lanzarote every year. It was important to me that I didn't recognise the faces of the editors and journalists. That was precisely what was so freeing, that the names that had become familiar to me over the years had remained faceless. I revered Kurt Kister, admired Reinhard J. Brembeck. A *Seite Drei* feature by Kister could brighten up my entire day. An ode to opera by Brembeck makes me reach for a marker pen to highlight whole passages. I always want to know everything about authors. I also love the trashy stuff and can clap my hands with joy if, for instance, I can look at Houellebecq in his wedding photo or Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre standing on a table again. That became more and more his trademark, that he never sat anymore but rather did gymnastics over chairs and tables. YouTube videos of Foster Wallace and everything, and I mean everything featuring Christopher Hitchens. But journalists have to remain invisible. It's unimaginable to me that Kurt Kister has kids. No fantasy could be attached to Kurt Kister's name, and this is why his brilliant texts are independent. No biographical dressing, like the kind I'd tipped over myself! I'm envious of him because of it.

No one went to the toilet for the whole of the morning. Now it was suddenly peak season. And because I was lying right next to the door to the bathroom, all the patients that could get up went past my bed. First the Nosferatu girl shuffled, like she was in a haunted castle, to the toilet. She pulled the door closed behind her and even the lock sounded hopeless. I didn't hear a sound from inside. Then some steps were coming closer, and as I looked to the side, I saw the freak with the sunglasses. Arisen from the dead. The right-hand side of his mouth hung down and was full of foamy spit. The left side of his forehead over his glasses was rumpled, the right side was smooth. He stalked around with a stick and pulled down the handle, rattling at the closed door. He swayed and sat down next to me on my mattress, through which, due to his rapid descent, his nightshirt blew up to the left and right and he landed on his naked buttocks. I didn't know what I should say, and

said nothing. Time and again he hit his stick against the toilet door. Minutes later I heard the toilet flush. Then the Hungarian bowling ball came over to shake the door handle, and likewise lingered around my bed in only his slitted nightshirt. “What’s she doing in there?” he asked me. “No idea.” “How long has she been in there already?” The sunglasses man got involved: “S’mee next, eh?” Why were they all asking me? There was the sound of water running behind the door. The guy with the iridescent mirrored glasses turned his face towards me. He just held his furrowed, frozen iguana face in my direction and it looked like he was lying in wait, would snap at any second and bite me. “What you in ‘ere for?” The question came so unexpectedly that I just answered without embellishing my words. “Stroke.” “M- t-,” he said, or rather, he just went “m- t-” That’s something special, I thought, that a language exists that could be replaced word-for-word with animal noises. Could that be found anywhere else in the world? What’s miaow in Chinese? “Me three. S’okay though, way I lived. I’m a cat, got se’en lives. Still got four left!” The gentleman pressed his bum against the wall and rubbed it back and forth, squealing. His little legs and arms were so plump, that his joints looked like they’d been strangulated with rubber bands. What a puffy, cheerful little puppet he was! The freak whacked his stick against the door. I smelled his breath. It wasn’t long ago that he’d bathed in firewater and had a smoke while he was at it. The door was unlocked and the girl came out. Her nightshirt sopping wet over her breasts. She squeezed between my bed and the Hungarian’s belly and stopped in front of the freak’s stick, which blocked the way like a barrier. Strangely small moment of meanness. He looked at her and slowly drew the barrier to the side, so that she could shuffle off. Even here among the broken, the weakest were shown what’s what. The toilet traffic jam was dispersing. The sunglasses guy disappeared into the bathroom, dragging the cable of his ECG like the tail of an electric Mephistopheles behind him. The Hungarian told me unprompted about his heart attack, his stents and

how it had knocked him for six while he was crossing Praterstern Square. They'd reanimated him for thirty minutes before his heart took pity on him and began beating again. While he was on the toilet, I heard gasps and farts. It sounded like walruses fighting and panting. When he came back out, an outrageous stench flowed out of the bathroom. The relieved guy walked by me singing throatily with a cheeky grin. I clearly had the worst place in the ward. I contemplated calling the nurse and asking to be pushed next to the window and for the lady in the artificial coma to be moved next to the toilet. I discovered brown streaks on the wall. Where the hell did they come from? Were they already there? Had the Hungarian, with his agile arse cheeks, smeared skid marks on the wall right under my nose? It stank through the keyhole. Or were they hallucinations triggered by the stink? I tried to find a tolerable position on the fireproof pillow. What was I doing here? I wasn't an alky, a druggie, a fatty, a saddy or an oldie. I was a wiry, a skinny, a fitty and an astonishingly-young-at-heart-y!

[END OF SAMPLE]