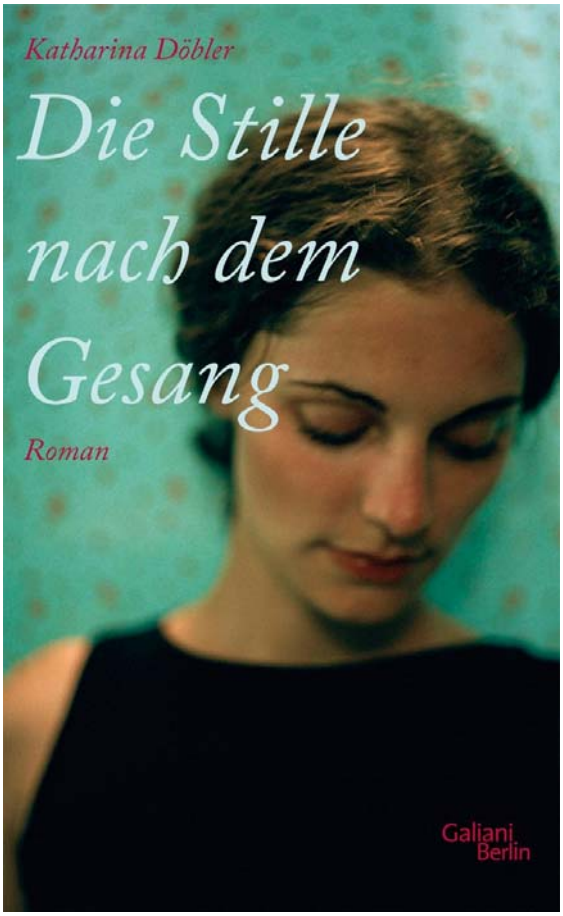
Sample translation

Katharina Döbler: Die Stille nach dem Gesang

("The Silence After the Song")
Novel
Translated by Katy Derbyshire



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[pp. 226-233]

Chapter 9

1993, 19 October

Falk and the Family

The garden gate was slightly ajar. Usually, he had to ring for Felipe to open up for him, but Isolde was probably here already and had left it open for him. Unlike him, she had keys to the house. His father would turn in his grave if he knew the gate was open, even if only for a matter of minutes. And for him, no less. The old man had been a devotee of modern security mechanisms; locks were his great passion.

On his tenth birthday Falk, like all the Margraf children, had been given his own key. And he'd had to surrender it shortly before he finished his degree. Of course it wasn't the same key by then; his father updated his locking devices every two years.

That had been the last time he spoke to his father alone. It was in the smoking room; the old man was in an icy rage, staring at his son from six feet away like an indignant cockerel, carefully maintaining physical distance. He hated having to look up to his son.

Shortly before that Falk had drawn up a revolutionary resolution, signed by many of the university students and professors. The reaction exceeded his own expectations; Margraf was a well-known name, the old man was a pillar of German industry, a patron of the arts and an owner of Wagner autographs.

'Expropriate Stradivari! Ban Wagner operas! says Margraf Junior, company heir and musical rowdy,' the gutter press wrote, though all Falk had written was that working-class violinists ought to have the opportunity to play a Stradivarius too, and other obvious points in a similar vein. And in an interview, the first of many interviews in his life, he had announced that *Porgy and Bess* was a more important opera than *Tristan und Isolde*.

After that he had wisely stayed away from Sunday dinner with his parents, which he almost always attended, often with Clara, but the old man had summoned him a few days later; not because he had read the stuff in the newspaper himself, that was beneath him, but because, as Mama put it, they had been 'inundated with telephone calls'.

And so they stood facing one another in the smoking room, his father with his accurate centre parting and his large ears protruding from his short hair, his cardigan with leather elbow-patches. He was so proud and old, yet ridiculous in his anger and helplessness.

Falk had alienated himself from the Margraf family, he said; from now on his 'chums' would no longer enter the house; he, Falk, could only come when expressly invited by his parents.

That, he said, was the case the coming Sunday; it was his mother's wish that he come, in the company of his fiancée if possible. It was clear the old man would have liked to throw his son out of the house, but Mama had not allowed it and had inserted one of the loopholes with which she had always diplomatically evaded her husband's disciplinary measures.

Then his father solemnly pronounced the words to which his entire tirade had been building: 'The key, please.' It sounded like, 'Your sword, please.' The entire thing was a symbolic scene – the old man did have a thing about keys. And about formalities, regardless of whether he was presiding over a meeting or disowning his son ever so slightly.

Falk was determined not to play along. Inside, he was trembling with rage but he kept face; if he had learned anything in his damned family, it was to master himself and three musical instruments to boot. Deliberately slow, he walked closely past his father, letting him feel the eight inches' height he had on him. At the window, he held his key ring up to the light.

'I have to find it first, hold on…' He gave a demonstrative shake of his key ring. 'Can't see anything in this cavern of a place,' he murmured, just loud enough for the old man to hear it. Simply calling his smoking room a cavern was enough to get his goat.

And Falk took his time.

He took each key in his hand separately: the one for his flat, the one for the practice room, the one for Clara's place; for his bike, for his VW Beetle – and for Teresa's room, the woman he was currently having a heated clandestine affair with, the beginning of his penchant for all things Spanish. All the bulky keys for old Berlin buildings weighed heavy in his hand. The heaviest were the forced locking keys with their two identical tips, which you had to push all the way through the lock, retrieving them on the other side after the door was locked or unlocked. It wasn't just the old man; in Falk's opinion the entire walled-in city had a severe case of claustrophilia.

The key to the Margrafs' house was instantly recognizable. It was the most modern, only a few weeks old. Falk removed it from the ring slowly, with much jingling and jangling.

His father reached out his hand. Anyone who didn't know the old man might have mistaken it for a gesture of reconciliation. But it was only the intention to accept his damn key with ceremony. He wanted a tribute to the man of the house, the old fool. Falk walked directly past him, once again letting him know at close quarters how much taller he was, and held up the key between two fingers.

'I'm just going to see Mama; I'll put the key in the dish by the front door.' That put paid to the old man's idiotic game. Not that it made it any less bitter to get the boot.

His satisfaction was knowing that the rest of the family was on his side: Mama and precocious little Isolde, who admired her big brother unreservedly, and above all Hanno, who was unreliable on every count, except in his permanent resistance to their father's decrees.
From then on, Falk was only a guest in his parents' home. He had everything he owned brought to his flat, living only on the income from his share of the family fortune that had been signed over to him on his twenty-first birthday. His father's monthly credits continued to arrive; he transferred them back on a regular basis. He was perfectly aware that was precisely what his father expected of him. But they never talked about it.
Altogether, communication between father and son never went beyond superficial conversation from that point on. Even the family Christmas dinners with all four children did nothing to change that, nor the family pilgrimages to Bayreuth, nor the family solidarity on display at Veit's wedding, nor the family pride in Isolde's success. Falk's father never attended one of his concerts, not even the premiere of the *Nocturnes*.
He was too sick, claimed Mama, but Falk knew better. It was true, of course, that old man Margraf had gout and had suffered two strokes; he certainly wasn't healthy by that point. Yet he still took the dog for a walk every day, and just a year before his death he was driven to the office twice a week to spend a few hours getting on the nerves of his oldest son Veit, who had long since taken over. And that when the company had long since been sold and Veit did nothing all day but manoeuvre the family fortune around the global economy, investments and holdings that only he could understand.
Still, the old customs were held high in the house of Margraf. When Father came home from his alleged work at one o'clock it was lunchtime, tea was served at half past four, dinner at eight. That was the way it had always been, as long as Falk could remember. Even on the day Gerda died, tea was on the table at half past four. After Father's death the housekeeper served a restorative soup punctually that evening. And Hanno's disappearance at some point before the Christmas of 1977 didn't even leave a trace. Father insisted on having the Christmas card with the invitation to the family dinner sent to the last address they had for Hanno, as if his absence were nothing more than his usual carelessness.
Falk closed the garden gate behind him forcefully. Once again, a slight discomfort overcame him, reminding him of his rich liverwurst breakfast that morning.
Or perhaps it was down to all the talk with Bernhard about his band Eckstein, and the admission he preferred to keep to himself: that he hadn't made the slightest progress on his opera since his previous visit to Bernhard three months ago. Or in fact for the past three years. Madrid was no good for his work.

Alex would no doubt have been glad to hear that, but Berlin hadn't been good either. There was always something that held him back from doing what he actually meant to. And Alex was waiting for him, and he didn't know what she really expected from him, why she had left. Whether she really still wanted a child, from him, who had never seen himself as a father. Whether she'd come with him again, wherever he ended up going. He'd have liked to sort out everything at once, like back when he left Eckstein and everything to do with it. He made a decision to discard everything that held him back. Except that he didn't know what that was. Everything. He was so sick of it. He found all this petty business so repulsive.

The garden was uninviting in the fast-fading light, with its tall dark fir trees and the lawn reminiscent of a freshly vacuumed carpet. After several weeks in the brown and grey Indian summer of the South, the heavy dark green of the North seemed exaggeratedly rich to him, almost obscene. The years in this house, in the dark rooms under the projecting roof, caught hold of him in a stifling grip, as if he had to go straight inside to practice. Piano, like all his brothers and sisters – he was never good enough – then later flugelhorn as well. His real love of music came only with the drums, once he and Hanno had had their first secret drinking sessions.

Falk stood in the garden and watched the last slash of sunlight disappearing high up between the fir trees.

He had much preferred the house in Bayreuth, where he'd spent the first years of his life. With the two families of refugees who had lived on the lower floor for a few years, it had been almost fun, by Margraf standards; there were hordes of children and they ran wild. His big sister Gerda was still healthy and Veit not the slightest bit melancholy.

It was only after the end of the Berlin blockade, after the glorious airlift, that their father decided to move back to Berlin – to defy the Russians. But the company headquarters remained down south, in the safety of Bavaria.

Behind the window of the smoking room, overshadowed by the projecting roof, Falk now noticed a silhouette, someone pacing back and forth. For one second, time concertinaed and he saw the old man standing there again, heard the political and disciplinary tirades that he used to repeat almost verbatim on a weekly basis: they should have marched on Moscow with the Americans straight away in '45, it was a terrible mistake that they hadn't, it couldn't be made up for now, but the Prussian bridgehead at least had to be upheld so that Europe wasn't crushed under Stalin's boot – or later Khrushchev's boot. And: America was behind them and the Margraf villa was in the American sector, thank goodness. And: Veit and Falk and Hans were his sons and their lineage gave them certain obligations and so on, they shouldn't act

like soft spoilt brats, they had to work for their own position in the world, with all due severity towards themselves, and then they could be sure of his paternal support.
Hanno and he used to call them his Nuremberg rallies. At his father’s funeral fifteen years ago, he’d been positive that Hanno would turn up again. But Hanno had only written a letter afterwards, one single letter, and then never got in touch again.