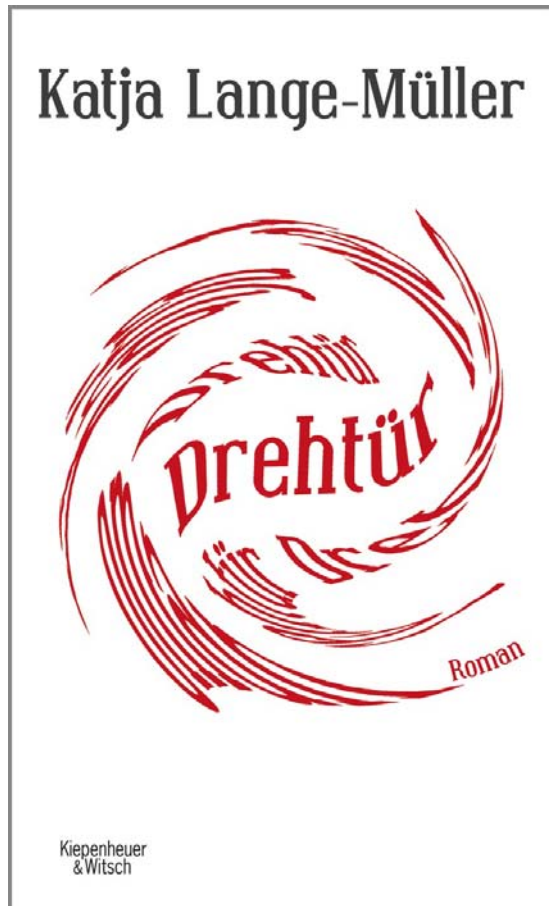


Sample Translation (pp. 7-29)

REVOLVING DOOR

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"It seems to me that a human being with the very best of intentions can do immeasurable harm, if he is immodest enough to wish to profit those whose spirit and will are concealed from him."

- Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche -

Blitzgewitter - lightning storm, Asta reflects. That's a word I haven't thought about in a long while, but now there it is, quick as a flash, *blitzartig*. *Blitz* and *artig*, kind of like "well-behaved lightning." Associations fizzed. Bullshit. Now then: when you think of a *Blitzgewitter*, a lightning storm, you imagine a short, sharp storm starting from nowhere and stopping as suddenly. Now that word, *aufhören*, to stop, niggles at Asta, interrupting her attempt to conjure up the particular attributes of a *Blitzgewitter*. *Aufhören*, she considers, could mean something quite different, too; or am I thinking of *aufhorchen*, ah, this mother tongue of mine that I haven't forgotten exactly, but have hardly used in the last twenty, no, twenty-two years, while living - where exactly? *In der Fremde* - abroad. Why "in *der Fremde*" - singular, oh, surely it's rather *in all den Fremden* - in all foreign parts. Mother tongue, *Muttersprache*, that compound noun itself unleashes an avalanche of

associations. The first noun - mother - was a far-away concept until that moment and now it's uncomfortably near. Main noun - *Hauptwort* - but "Haupt" can also mean "head", she muses. My head has a mind that is hell-bent on capturing words, German words. Or perhaps it is rather that all these German words were already imprisoned somewhere in my stubborn head, erstwhile partners-in-crime, taciturn old-timers, resigned long ago to their fate; but now returning to the country I hail from, they are stirring once more. À propos mother tongues, how had mother actually spoken, and what did she say? Nothing comes to her mind or to her ear, nothing at all. All that she does remember is why her mother, who passed away in 1980, had called her Asta. Apparently her family - no, not *her* family, for she had neither husband nor children, mother's family, then, she can't bring herself to even think *my mother* - had owned a friendly and rather lovely looking German shepherd who bore a passing

resemblance to the Danish actress Asta Nielsen, and thus was named after her. At least the word for word, *Wort*, stands alone, Asta thinks, it's free from any double-meanings, and a lightning storm is a *Blitzgewitter* because it starts quick as a flash and stops abruptly, not actually on account of the lightning that accompanies it. Storms without lightning, do they exist? And lightning follows on from thunder; *Donnergrollen*, rumbles of thunder, *Donnerschläge*, thunder claps. No storm without lightning, no lightning without thunder. Otherwise a storm, even a *Blitzgewitter*, wouldn't be a storm after all, simply a downpour. And what is the gender of rain again? *Der Regen*? *Das Regen* - no, that's something else. As in: "Sich regen bringt Segen" - "Hard work brings its own rewards". Where did that proverb suddenly come from? One of mother's? Possibly - it's daft enough. *Platzregen*, *Regenschauer* - cloudburst, shower of rain, curious vocabulary...

And Asta keeps her eyes closed and rolls her eyeballs back in her skull until they hurt and, as if on a cinema screen, she sees snow-like crystalline letters of the alphabet swirling around and joining up, drawn together into legible chains of varying lengths that fall almost as one on her hot, dry tongue and dissolve before she can spit out a single link of the chain. Chain-link - *Kettenglied* - Asta thinks, another of these dubious word creations.

The bad weather was a lighting storm, the full shebang with lightning, thunder and rain, and it was already over when the old nurse, Asta Arnold, landed in Munich after a twenty-three hour journey, broken up by two changes, and only the last few miles had been turbulent; the voice that has been with her for the past three weeks or so, *in her* sometimes, knows all this. The voice knows what is happening, and Asta's very thoughts are unimaginable without it. The voice decides; it decides what Asta will be reminded of, sometimes with painful precision, sometimes through the veil of longing. The voice directs Asta's gaze, opens her ears, keeps her mouth tightly stoppered. It's up to Asta to defend herself as best she can! For what it, the voice, is feeding from, parasitic like the mistletoe on a tree, and here in turn the voice is really quite defenceless, is Asta's life - for the time being, not for much longer; and when it's over, it will be over for them both.

Asta muses - and is silent. Whom, she wonders, would I talk to? I don't know anyone here anymore, here on the soil of my *fatherland*, not mine at all, it belongs to me as little as that mother tongue does; I'm standing on it, that's all.

Yes, there she stands, at the eastern end of Floor 03 of the Franz Josef Strauß Airport beside a revolving door that is hidden by the counter of a rental car company and thus hardly used, led almost blindly to it by her nicotine craving. Poking out of the top of Asta's shoulder bag, a stained pig-skin monstrosity, is a duty free bag, and out of that in turn pokes a carton of Camel cigarettes. Her suitcase, she was told at the Iberia counter, has been lost in transit during one of the changeovers, either in San Salvador or Madrid. This was perfectly normal. It would get there, maybe tomorrow or the day after, next week at the latest.

Asta is clutching the first pack of the ten-pack Camel carton in her right hand, just opened, twenty in each, and a box of Nicaraguan matches, while in her left is a lit cigarette; she draws on it, deeply, like one who hasn't been allowed to do so for an eternity, and she tries to unravel the riddle: What is more correct? I am standing *in front of* the door, or I am standing *behind* the door. *Vor, hinter, richtiger...* the words are elusive, each one a gas bubble that rises in turn from the swampy depths of the past, and gradually they inhabit the firmament at the top of my skull, dark as night; up they go, translucent, but as clearly defined as balloons, as unhurried as cotton wool clouds. I can observe each word for a long time, interpret it, sometimes even understand it. - *Richtiger*. More correct. Not every adjective in German has a comparative form; even this adage from distant schooldays pops up again on Asta's horizon. What is certainly correct is that she is outside, between the

revolving door and a chrome cigarette stand, hip height, full of brownish water and bloated cigarette butts. Not a pretty sight, but that doesn't bother her. She is finding it tricky to orientate herself; the late afternoon sun dazzles her. And what she can see, when not looking into the painfully harsh light, but rather to the side, straight ahead, or downwards, hardly differentiates itself from what she saw in Managua Airport shortly before take-off as she smoked two or three final cigarettes: flagstones, concrete columns, luggage carts, glass frontage. But here, Asta thinks, there are also lots of puddles, which the sun is drinking up as if through an incredibly long straw, drinking it up with all its rays, thirsty as a Bedouin's camel; the puddles are diminishing at an increasing rate.

She lights the next cigarette and walks on a few steps. Looking through a high window, which backs onto the store room and changing room of the Chinese restaurant that she had passed on

her way to the revolving door, she notices a young Asian man wearing jeans and a light-coloured, rather grubby, chef's tunic with black knotted buttons, done up right to the chin; he's lying in an uncomfortable position, but is fast asleep on the four chairs placed in a row. His flat, pale face is perfectly still; only the slightly protruding hemispheres of his eyelids, and the corner of his mouth, which was slightly open, twitch occasionally. He's probably having an amusing dream, Asta thinks, and she feels drawn to him, for the very reason that she feels safe in front of the blue-toned pane of glass, out of reach of the man sleeping beyond it. It is not only his dream, she considers, that keeps him at a distance from me and the place we both, somehow or other, find ourselves in ...

On to the image of the cook, there in the storeroom of the Chinese restaurant at the airport, she superimposes another. The guy back

then, Asta thinks, he was Asian, too, and, if my conclusions were correct, he, too, was a cook. When I met him, in the seventies of the century just past, I had recently completed my nursing diploma and had signed my contract with the Leipzig Clinic. I was on the point of leaving my tiny digs in the city where I'd been born, Berlin. I never referred to it as my hometown, nor as the capital city. My move to Leipzig-Plagwitz depended now simply on the room becoming free in the old people's home for gastronomes from Saxony, a place that was called *Day's End*, it truly was; an erstwhile head waiter at the Interhotel Astoria, its previous occupant, was breathing his last at home with his daughter Elke, a nurse I knew from college.

It was night of the 20th to the 21st of July 1967 and for a night in the height of the summer it was unusually dark. The reason I know

this so precisely is because we had been celebrating Carmen's birthday, as we did every year. I had sloped off early, yes discourteously early - with nothing in my stomach apart from alcohol, for Carmen had cooked her signature hotpot *à la silly goose* - a less than delectable mishmash of rice, pieces of turkey, peas and raisins.

Carmen, the daughter of a policeman, delicate, the most beautiful among us, with whom I had almost completely lost contact since I ran away, out into the world, and I had almost entirely forgotten about her; until one evening much, much later in Ulan Bator I came across a Berlin page on the internet with a death announcement detailing that a Carmen Meyer, the date of birth more or less matched that of my Carmen, "departed from us on March 15th, 2000 after a long and serious illness." - Carmen, what could she have died of? Cancer? Stroke? Heart attack? She would have been my age now...

She had a wonderful head of red hair, fine, porcelain skin and eyes the colour of green glass - her mother must have been a fool, or perhaps Carmen had been completely bald as a baby, for her appearance was at complete odds with that sultry name - and this detail at least allowed my pangs of envy to be laced with derision.

It was because we had quarrelled over something insignificant (I've no idea now what it was) that I had left Carmen's place so early, but I was already quite drunk and in a dramatic frame of mind, escaping into the balmy, starless night determined to experience something, possibly to take someone home to bed. My intoxicated state clung on; it was too muggy outside. Insects crowded round the garish yellow bulbs of the street lamps, which I also felt magically drawn to and which would have been dangerous for me, too, if, well, if I had been small - and had wings. Could fly, be a

moth, as I had dreamed of being often as a girl and still did as a young woman. The air was sticky, as were the corkscrew curls that I had so laboriously created at home and later in Carmen's kitchen - she didn't have a bathroom, none of us did - I had covered them in such a thick fog of hairspray from the West, so extravagantly, that they were as immovable as concrete sculptures; I could have shaken my head for minutes on end and not a single hair would have prised itself free. The scent of a storm was in the air, but it didn't hit this part of Berlin, the north-east of the city. It moved on further; goodness knows where.

I had walked all the way home and had just reached that bleak, diplomatic quarter of Mitte that we called the *Totenwinkel* - *Dead-End Close* - because it was deserted in the evenings and had a ghostly stillness at the weekends - dead, indeed. I was crossing Otto-Nuschke-Straße - Glinkasträße leads off to the left - when I saw him. Or did I hear him first? A pitiful

whining, which I presumed was coming from an animal, a dog perhaps...

The human being, the man, of Asian origin whom I could make out in spite of the poor lighting, was crouching in the entrance of a building. I stopped, whispered a few vague words, I can't remember what now; however, they or perhaps rather my smoky voice, elicited a sound from his throat that was at once both high and low-pitched.

And now I can hear that sob, if that is what it was, again; it must have embedded itself in my ear and waited ever since for my memory to press that particular button.

The sound - again, curious that in German there is not a noun for the softness of that kind of sound - the sound, then, conveyed and conveys still the sense that the man, however tightly he pressed his lips together, could not hold it back a second longer, so godforsaken, so alone in the world was its timbre.

"Do you need help," I asked him; but he simply continued to sob. I crouched down next to him, touched his shoulder and, as a reflex perhaps, he turned to face me. His eyelids, generously full anyway, were so swollen that he had trouble opening them; when he did succeed, however, the pupils of his eyes glittered in an almost unearthly way from the slanting, minimally opened gaze. While I, in close proximity to his nose, whispered at him, he presumably registered the sour wine on my breath, and he gradually allowed his hands, cupped around his mouth like the semi-veil of an oriental woman, to lower and, as if to explain his predicament, he placed the index finger of his right hand upon his left cheek, which was terribly swollen. From the lower eyelid to the chin, and even in the warm yellow streetlamp light his skin was ashen, there was an almighty swelling. That's it, I realised, toothache!

Isn't it always remarkable that a grown adult with all their capabilities can be reduced to just that, a tiny, red thread, the rebellious nerve of a tooth?!

He tried to dodge me, banged the back of his head against the front door behind him, twisted away to the side - but he could not evade my touch. I pressed my left hand to his temple, which was burning although the rest of him was pale as a corpse, and I grabbed his arm, I've no idea why. Sure, I was still drunk, frustrated no doubt, and, apart from his fat cheek, he looked exotic enough and pretty handsome in fact, slim, young, needy. But he was also stubborn; he resisted me, and definitely didn't want to be helped to his feet. So I moved in even closer, cradled his face in my hands, forced him to look at me. Perhaps there was something in the determination of my action, a kind of compassion that touched him, spoke to his yearning to be comforted. And for his mother?

For then his tears started to flow again in earnest. But the sounds that now accompanied the tear, were deeper, as if coming from the region of the heart, although no less pathetic. I wiped his eyes with the hem of my flowery, ankle-length cotton dress; I very nearly wiped away the snot from his nose, too, bubbling thin and gleaming.

That's absolutely normal when someone is crying with such abandon.

I kept talking at him, and he didn't understand a word, although he at least seemed to realise that my intentions were good. Or was it simply my touch that broke his resistance and calmed him in a way?

Wanting to communicate with him somehow at least, I mimed toothache, frowning, patting my cheek, opening my lips, pointing at my tongue, closing my mouth, swallowing and sighing as if the tablet was already starting to take effect. And indeed, he got to his feet and allowed himself to be lead, or pulled along, let's be

honest, like a wrongdoer who is aware of the hopelessness of his situation and yields to it. I dragged him along by the hand, his slender and firm and cold, along the street, into the hallway, and up the stairs. We had just reached the door to my apartment and I was rummaging in my cloth-bag for my keys, when he made his first attempt at escape, running back to the third floor but turning around when he heard the key turning in the lock.

We went into my one room, and he sat down in the armchair, a huge, cushioned affair that I had bought for ten *Alu-Chips*, as we called the East German coins, from a boozier in the neighbourhood who was always in need of small change. I took a bottle of Doppelkorn liquor from the freezer compartment of my fridge, found a strip of *Titretta-Analgin* painkillers in the cabinet by my bed and dropped it in front of him on the table between the two schnapps glasses, already there as if they had been waiting for us. He unscrewed the cap of

the bottle, poured a measure just for himself, drank, nodded, filled his glass again, drank up, holding the bottle in his other hand; until I gently took it from him, poured us both a shot, and before I joined him in a drink, I clinked my glass against his.

"Cheers," I said, and he, reaching for the bottle again, said the only word he uttered that night: "Gombee."

He responded to my bewildered expression with a brief, lopsided smile. As far as I can recall, he didn't smile again.

Now it's true that our encounter was of the sort that could be called brief; but to me it seems longer now and intense, for I experience it with a kind of *déjà-vu* that stretches every detail to an unreal degree.

We sat there and drank, he more than me. And again I tried to converse with him. But Russian, the only other language I was conversant in at that time apart from German, was not one he understood, nor did he get the

three or four snatches of English everyone knows. What choice did I have? I resorted to the simplest approach, clapped my chest and said: "Asta", then pointed at him, with a questioning expression, raised my shoulders and held up my arms.

He understood what I was asking, I was convinced then, and I still am.

His eyes grew wide, he stared straight ahead fearfully, shook his head, made a flicking gesture with his hand. It was clear that he did not want to reveal his name and was just as reluctant to reveal where he had run away from, afflicted with toothache as he was.

I demonstrated what my job was, by pretending to wrap a bandage around my foot, acting out taking blood and injecting myself. At the end of my charade I drew a cross in the air. And yet even as I was making the shape of the cross, I was full of doubt. Perhaps, I thought, he won't take me for the nurse I am, believing

instead that I am a pious Christian, a Samaritan intent on converting him.

Even though he didn't crack a smile, it was clear that my second little silent movie had amused him. Or animated him? For now he took a turn in miming various activities, chopping up invisible vegetables, stirring an imaginary pan, tossing something equally imaginary into the air and catching it again.

Fired with enthusiasm I dashed into the kitchen and returned with a pot, a plate - and, unfortunately, a big, sharp knife. There was a flicker of pure fear in his eyes; I've no idea whether it was fear of me, of me with the knife, or fear of having divulged his profession.

After that it was all over, all but the communal liquor drinking. Any lust I'd had was gone. Sure, I thought about bed, but not about how I could get him there. His fear, his toothache which the alcohol certainly seemed to have taken the edge off, but also his

overwhelming and omnipresent sadness and determined restraint bored me; I was bone-weary, my eyes were heavy.

Had I really considered sex with this fleeting acquaintance? Or is this something I persuaded myself of later, wanting to create an image, making myself small or building myself up, of myself as being what we used to think of as a saucy minx? Could it be that now, almost fifty years later, I find it embarrassing that even then I suffered from *compassion*, strange though it sounds, and had simply wanted to help and, well, if it had happened, a transient moment's happiness, a quickie, a few kisses, or a grateful and admiring look at least?! Is my memory of the young Asta, the young me, that is, a self-spun legend with equal measures of self-loathing and self-love?

I left him sitting there with my, or by now far more his, liquor, and sank down on the bed just as I was in my flowery dress, curled up and fell asleep.

When I woke up from the din of the bins being emptied as they were in the mornings, the ceiling light was still on. But he was gone - and the Doppelkorn bottle was, too. I padded into the kitchen, then out into the hallway and saw that the apartment door was shut, then it was back to my room to check whether anything was missing beyond him and the bottle. But discovering nothing amiss for the time being, I got out of my clothes and lay back down.

Hours later, it must have been around midday, I heard an insistent knocking at the door. Luckily I had showered already, was wearing a dressing gown and had just brewed some coffee; that is the only reason I opened up. Or was I thinking it possible that my patient, having left with nothing other than the bottle of liquor, had left something behind after all?

It was not him at my door, however, nor another single Asian man, no, there were six of them. And they were wearing grey-green

uniforms. One of them handed me a bunch of white roses.

"Frau Arnold," said the one furthest to the left in immaculate German, he was the one with the bouquet, "We thank you very much! You looked after our sick comrade in an exemplary fashion and your beautiful, socialist brotherland has a close connection to ours. However, it can be perilous to be out at night all alone in your glorious capital city, so close to the Anti-Fascist Protective Wall. Therefore please allow us in the name of our mighty leader Kim Il-Sung and the whole of the Korean Democratic Republic to present you with these modest flowers."

He read these sentences, which I seem to know off by heart, especially the *modest flowers*, from a piece of paper. I said nothing in reply, apart from "bye", took the bouquet and, after the gentlemen had given a curt bow, I shut the apartment door quickly behind me, bolted it

even as they went downstairs and the sound of their steps in the stairwell faded away.

I sat down on the stuffed armchair where my nocturnal guest had perched, and reached for the pack of Club cigarettes that was next to the empty strip of painkillers, and struck a match with trembling fingers; its flame scorched the cigarette which I forgot to take a drag of until it had burned down so far that it almost singed my fingertips.

A Korean, that was who he was; and a North Korean to boot! I could have worked that out seeing as the consulate of that strange state was not far from my building in Glinkastraße, if, that is, I had been in a position to work anything out. What or who else could he possibly have been?! A Chinese man, Japanese, Mongolian, Vietnamese, Thai? Why had I considered everything except Korean? There was a dark hue to his skin, and yet a pale aspect, too, his face did not have that same roundness common to many Mongolians, Chinese and Japanese

people, his nose was large and curved, bold, his hair bristly and thick, but dark brown, not blue-black. Perhaps faded by kitchen vapours? In general he seemed more Indian, that is to say South, Central or North American; I could easily have taken him to be Mexican, Bolivian, or even a Sioux.

And how, I wondered, had it come to pass that his compatriots had so swiftly been there, standing on my doormat. They knew my name, my address ... Had we been under surveillance or had he initially been followed, this party comrade and diplomatic cook made somehow crazy by his toothache, who had probably tried to find relief in schnapps even before we met - at his work-station between the baskets of vegetables and woks, or in his little attic room under the eaves of the consulate - beneath a poster of the dictator around whom workers cheerfully swarm, men clothed in grey-green and women in block-colour apparel and laughing young Pioneers? Or had he, in the full knowledge that

his absence, beyond any doubt forbidden, had been noticed, handed himself in and confessed up front where, why, how long and with whom he had been? Will they content themselves with meting out some strict disciplinary punishment, or is he already on his way back to his homeland, far-off and far from nice, where twenty or thirty years in the gulag await? Or life-long exile? Or something even worse?

And me? Will the Ministry of State Security get a tip-off from them? Will I be able to talk my way out of it if I get a summons? I'll cobble together something about solidarity, that I am a nurse who is always on duty for whomsoever needs me.

But nothing happened, nothing at all; I didn't receive a visit from our officials - nor from the non-official officials, and as for the diplomatic gentlemen next-door, the affair was over and dealt with apparently as far as I was concerned.

Because it was clear to me that I had played a not inconsiderable part in the future fate of the young cook at the consulate, under the protection of darkness, I crept round the Residency of the North Koreans two or three more times; it was an uninviting concrete block completed a few years earlier, but I never saw anyone other than the military guard beside his sentry's box.

That is when I told myself that a life, perhaps mine in particular, has stories that are open-ended, and that if this proved more than I could bear, it would be up to me to make sense of sequels and come up with endings.

[END OF SAMPLE]