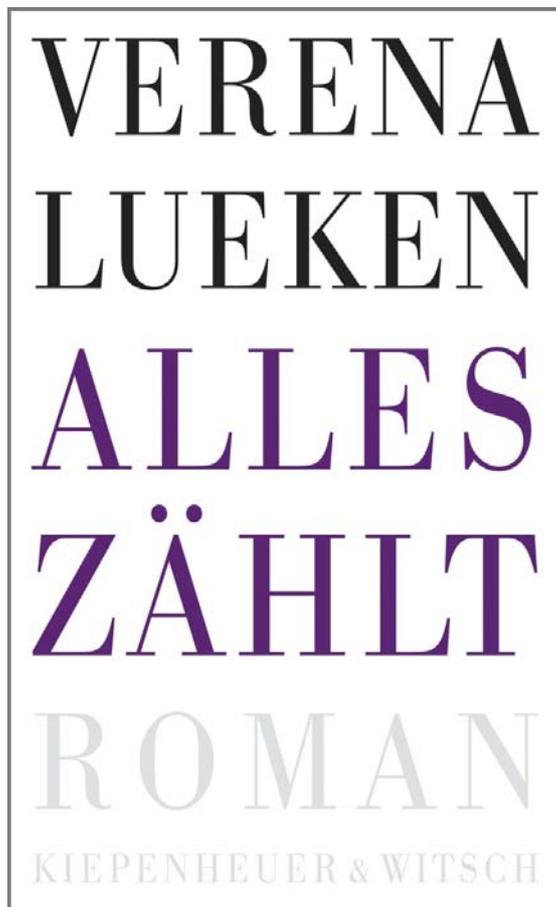


Sample Translation (pp. 7-12 and pp. 26-46)

Everything Counts by Verena Lueken

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New York in summer. Stinging light, roaring heat, a wretched time to die. She read these lines in a novel by James Salter, whose books she'd been getting into these last weeks, then looked around, thinking to herself he was right. She hadn't picked up on Salter in earlier years, when she'd started taking an interest in the other contemporary American authors, and she hadn't felt his absence. Now "All That Is" had just been released, the first novel he'd written in a long time, received with the right amount of commotion in all the right circles. It was the first of his books that she'd read, and it filled her with an indescribable warmth for the main character, amusement regarding the allusions to the New York literary scene of past decades, and deep admiration for all the liberties Salter took in his writing. It was also the first book she'd bought in New York, right after she arrived one early week of summer, and not long after that, she picked up an entire stack of his novels, just like she always did when an author intrigued her after the first book. Before she knew that she was sick again.

"Light Years", one of Salter's earlier novels, made her impatient. She put the book aside and read a few chapters from "The Story of America" by Jill Lepore instead. It started with the lines: "In 1938, if you had a dollar and seventy-two cents, you could buy a copy of 'The Rise of American Democracy', a seven-hundred-page hardcover about the size of a biggish Bible, or a Boy Scout Handbook. While a Bible's worth is hard to measure, the scout guide, at fifty cents, was an awfully good bargain and an excellent book to have on hand if you were shipwrecked on a desert island, not least because it included a chapter on How to Make Fire without matches."

She'd already been in bed for several days with a high fever and chest pain, and a suspicious lump had been detected on her lung during the course of the required examinations. A new cancer, probably. She'd got past two many years ago. She expected neither comfort nor guidance from the Bible, as she also thought its worth was hard to measure. But did Boy Scouts know how to make it through a third time? As she followed Lepore's astute reflections on the history of American democracy, she briefly contemplated buying the reprint of the first edition of the 1911 Boy Scout handbook, available online for a mere fifteen dollars. The cover showed a boy waving his scout cap, with two puffy clouds wafting over tall fir trees and a house in the background. It looked as though all danger had been dispelled. Everything would be okay. But instead of seeking advice from the scout handbook, which was sure to

contain a chapter on first aid and saving lives, and also because she found it difficult to put a half-read book aside, she returned to Salter's gritty depiction of a slowly withering marriage in "Light Years". It was there, of all places, that she read the sentence which told her where she stood. Not on a lonely island with no matches at hand, but right in the middle of New York and with this prospect: "Death in the summer, in a haggard city from which everyone wanted to flee, death without meaning, without air."

Ever since she'd read that sentence, she had been thinking about death. She kept repeating it under her breath, structured like the verse of a song. Sometimes, while walking to the subway through the scorching heat, she would whistle it, for no one but herself to hear: Death in the summer / in a haggard city / from which everyone / wanted to flee, death / without meaning / without air. She thought of this sentence when she went back to the apartment, which would heat up like a furnace because she, in order not to unduly tax the energy bill of her friends who were letting her stay there, turned off the air conditioning whenever she went out, even though it was against her friends' explicit instructions. The apartment was exposed to the sun up on the twelfth floor, where the windows could only be opened by a crack because of New York regulations. They couldn't be opened any further, she had thought, but in the evenings she saw wide-open windows on other floors while she was down on the street. The child safety lock. But she couldn't figure out how to release it. No air. When it got even hotter, she gave in to the artificial cooling system. James Salter, she had read in some of the interviews promoting his new book, had a house in Bridgehampton where he could escape the heat, taking a walk by the sea, she imagined, or napping behind closed curtains. Death in the summer, in a haggard city. Did he even remember writing this sentence? Almost forty years ago now? Would he recognize it in her humming, be amused by the primitive sound sequence she'd forced it into? Even she couldn't help but laugh when she noticed what she was doing; it reminded her of how, back when she was a teenager and a very young woman, she'd used to hum pop songs which had sounded to her ears like they referred to her and her alone. Daddy, Daddy, it was just like you said / Now that the living outnumber the dead. Speak my language.

When she'd heard that for the first time, with the typical Laurie Anderson echo – Speak my language – Speak my language – Speak my language –, she realized how much she wished that her father had left her a sentence to remember. As he lay dying, she had persisted in trying to get out of him this one sentence that she'd never forget, or a squeeze of the hand or some other gesture of affection, she had laid down in bed with the dying man, who had become so very small, she had hummed and stroked his shoulder, but he didn't react, and the next day he was dead. Decades later, however, after his widow had also died, she found a clear plastic pocket in the desk of their apartment, containing three documents – her degree certificate, the synopsis of an academic work with which she'd won her scholarship, and a business card from a job she'd left a long time ago. She was unable to make sense of this small collection, had no idea why he had kept these things but not her letters, the pictures she had painted for him, the sheet music she had annotated when he had started learning to play the clarinet. Her father had left her nothing apart from a great emptiness in the space just below her heart, and a longing which would not be stilled in this lifetime.

She thought about how, over the course of her life, she'd heard, read and forgotten millions upon millions of sentences which could perhaps have been useful now, and how some of them lingered in her memory, unsorted, and then unexpectedly came back to mind. What made her think her fingernails could open locks the rain rained on? A sentence by Toni Morrison. How long would she remember the sentences of James Salter, an author who she would follow through his books for just a few weeks and to whom she might never return? Would she, at some point, forget how this one sentence, talking about death in the summer in this worn city, had suddenly pushed its way into her life and given expression to a feeling she didn't even properly feel yet?

Death in the summer. Only much later, once she was back in Germany, did she realize that death, to which she was no longer anywhere near as close as she had been, occupied a space within her, and that her earlier life was fading away. Going back there was completely unimaginable. She had no longing for death. But ever since a day she no longer clearly remembered, in the hospital bed in the New York apartment of her generous friends, where she spent the weeks following the operation, she'd had the feeling that she should have died. Like all the others. "No consolation please for feelin' funky / I got to get my head above my knees / but it makes me mad and mad

makes me sad / and then I start to freeze." Lou Reed, who had survived so many deaths, died in his New York apartment during the fall which followed that summer. Amidst the beauty of nature, as Laurie Anderson had written in her obituary of her husband. New York in the last few weeks before winter can be a wonderful place to die, she thought. But by fall she was no longer there.

[...]

The tumor was small, apparently, and unlikely to have spread. Cut into the old scar over her ribs, reach into the mediastinum, and the thing would be out.

"But the healing process will take a while," said the surgeon, a woman who had operated on her thirteen years ago and who now greeted her with the words, "A visit from the past!", not sounding very cheerful.

That was how this tumor felt. Like a visitor from a time long gone. And yet it was totally fresh and so small that no one would have noticed it if it had been smaller by just a fraction of a centimeter. The surgeon, a small, wiry woman with no charisma, an iron handshake and great authority, didn't see any problems she couldn't solve. Even so, this luminary in the field of thoracic surgery said, "It will be a major, but at least not a massive operation."

She tried to establish what the difference was.

"The tissue has been burned by the previous radiotherapy treatments," the doctor continued, without changing the pitch of her voice, or reacting to her patient's clueless expression, "... toasted, all gummed up, and we have to get through it. It will be hard work for us. And it's going to take a long time to heal later on. So that'll be hard for you."

Of course, she thought. Small tumor, major operation. And she did what had to be done. She knew the drill, she thought to herself. Endless telephone conversations with the insurance company, who were supposed to pay for this major, but not massive, operation. And with the hospital's finance department, which had been set up especially for foreign patients with no American insurance policy and didn't trust foreign insurance policies – to the point that they didn't even allow appointments to be booked before the money for said appointment was on the table, no matter if it was a measly lab test or a lung cancer operation. If the money wasn't there, they sent you

home. It was the same for American patients without health insurance, except that another department dealt with them. Only uninsured natives paid the same prices she paid. Those who had nothing at all. The health insurance plans negotiated cheaper, much cheaper rates. She knew that from an article by a regional doctor that had recently appeared in the "New York Times", passionately advocating the introduction of statutory insurance for everyone by painting a drastic picture of the inhumanity and inefficiency of the current system. And naming the price. Figures of astronomical proportion that she, too, would soon be confronted with. This was in the weeks before ObamaCare was adopted, and the cost of the health care system was conversation topic number one; in the media, among friends, and now for her as well.

A reliable confirmation of cover from a foreign insurer with an American partner agency would also be acceptable, she discovered, but the finance department didn't believe her insurance policy to be reliable, despite its American partner agency. Later, they somehow came to an agreement, the insurer and the hospital, and she was free from the responsibility of having to pay. Before that, though, she was on the phone for weeks, making calls to friendly or indifferent bureaucrats. She raised the limit on her credit cards. She moved money around from here to there. She asked S. in Germany and an old American friend if they could lend her larger sums if it came down to it, and both said yes. She informed her boss that she'd be absent for a while and explained why. She got the hospital bed for the time after. She felt how much good it did her to take control at least, until the moment someone interfered, either from the German side or, mostly, from the American. She later switched to sending the hospital enquiries by email, but as she tried to reconstruct the course of the negotiations, she realized that the messages from the clinic were automatically erased after a short time. What she found in her inbox were messages like "You have received a confidential message," and when she clicked on the corresponding link, it said System error. Message expired or deleted. Then she suddenly lost all access and found herself back in a state of numb helplessness, one which descended on her again and again from that point on.

On other days, she wondered if this hospital, which was as world famous as its doctors and for cancer patients only, mainly treated sheikhs, whose servants never called, emailed or transferred funds, but instead went to the finance people in person

and tipped large stacks of dollar bills out of expensive suitcases onto the table. The clinic wanted one hundred and eighteen thousand dollars on account between the first consultation with the surgeon, which itself had already cost three thousand in advance, and the operation. In the television series "Breaking Bad," which everyone was currently talking about because the last season was about to start, Walter White had needed to cough up two hundred thousand dollars for the same operation. In Albuquerque! She was in the most famous cancer hospital in the world, in New York, and was getting the whole thing for over eighty thousand dollars less.

But she didn't yet know that then. She'd avoided watching "Breaking Bad", because for her it seemed to hit too close to home. A teacher with lung cancer, who, following his diagnosis, starts cooking crystal meth and becomes a drug lord. That was the last thing she needed. Or rather, it was for as long as she thought she'd left all of that behind her. After the third operation, where the small, wiry woman with the iron hands had twisted open her rib cage to pluck out another tumor, she'd been left maimed, maltreated and without the faintest clue what to do next, and had watched all five seasons back to back. She wondered why Walter White always coughed so much with his lung cancer. Probably to remind the viewers of how sick he was, even though he appeared to be healthy enough to first wipe out the entire Mexican drug cartel and then his own boss in a halfway plausible manner. She never coughed. Not just like that.

She later wondered if the time had come for her to do something completely outrageous as well. She didn't contemplate getting into the drug trade. More a radical change of scenery, or starting a double life to get the most out of what was left of it, albeit laying her cards on the table for all involved; she wouldn't be able to cope otherwise. Her mother had led a double life for years, and a handful of people, including her mother, had paid a high price for it, despite all the cards having been more or less laid out on the table.

The memory of that made her put off the thought for the time being. Sailing around the world, which her brother B. had suggested more in jest than anything, didn't appeal to her. Kite surfing, the dream of a girlfriend who was very sick, did. But that wasn't a new life, just a sport and pastime. James Salter again, she thought. It was a long time, forty-five years or so, since Salter had captivated his readers with a rather

erotic novel about an American in la belle France, perplexing them with descriptions of sex that required the use of lubricants. This was when, for the first time, he had been almost satisfied with his writing. She'd only just read "A Sport and a Pastime". The book was part of the small stack she had bought in New York at the beginning of summer, and as she read it, she thought of the Nouvelle Vague and the Truffaut quote that cinema is the art of doing beautiful things with beautiful women. That was how it was for Salter with writing, she thought. He wrote in order to do beautiful things with beautiful women. She liked that. But that summer, all these quotes seemed like messages from the ancient world to her.

Death without air. In the days before the operation, when she wasn't feeling despondent, she was confident. She knew by now that cancer wasn't a malignant growth of cells, as she and half the world and the field of medical sciences had believed until now, but instead a sickness involving abnormal relationships between the cancer cell and the other cells around it, and she felt that this new view of things provided her a certain degree of relaxation. S. had come over from Germany, even though he had never wanted to set foot in New York again. September 11th, which he had experienced up close and personal, was still part of him, even twelve years later. On that terrible day, where people had jumped from the hundredth floor, falling on the ground right in front of him, S. had lost something which could never be found again. He no longer trusted that things would work out okay. Apart from her cancer; he'd always been sure it would never come back. She believed that this was the last certainty he still held within him.

He didn't tell her how great the shock had been when he'd heard that he'd been wrong. He didn't talk about these things, and it was pointless to press him over it. For a while he tried to believe that maybe it was some fleck of spit on the CT scan, a lump of mucus which, after closer inspection under the microscope, would reveal itself to be harmless. She wasn't sure how long he held on to the conviction that the pathological examination of her tumor might reveal something harmless, and she didn't ask. She knew that he himself didn't really believe it; just occasionally, when he couldn't deal with the situation.

He'd never wanted to be here again, and yet here he was. The financing issues were dealt with. The hospital bed for her return from the clinic was ready, the sheets freshly

ironed. She had cut her nails, washed her hair, she looked presentable. The heat wave was supposed to reach its peak during the next few days, with just one more week of temperatures around 40 degrees and up to 90 percent air humidity, exactly during the time she was supposed to be in hospital. Ain't I lucky, she thought.

She knew she could die during the operation. She had made precautionary arrangements. Personal directive, power of attorney, a will. But she had only thought of her funeral in the very broadest of terms. She hadn't imagined who would come, what would be said, and if there would be singing or not. She wasn't part of any church. She didn't want to be embalmed and have makeup put on, and an open casket with a procession of people filing past to have one last look was out of the question, that much she did know. Whoever wanted to see her would have to do so within the first twenty-four hours after she died. Her imagination didn't stretch beyond that. Most people's imaginations probably didn't stretch further than twenty-four hours beyond their death, she thought. Not to eternity. Some months after her mother had died, she had been overcome by the resolute conviction that she had now been dead long enough. Her mother could come back now, and they could talk on the phone every day again and do all the other things they always used to do. Always, for as long as she could remember. Always, no longer – she was unable to get her head around that. Her existence and the non-existence of her mother, these seemed to be entirely irreconcilable states in her life and the world in general.

But her inability to imagine her own burial had other reasons. She suspected it had something to do with the fact that her generation, having distanced itself from the church, had no new customs to turn to in case of an emergency. Not for entering into society, nor for departing from the world. Everyone jumbled their way through. With music by the Beatles in the cemetery chapel, with amateurish farewell speeches, with uncertain dress codes. Black? Or everyone as they pleased? In Haneke's film "Love", Jean-Louis Trintignant comes back exasperated from one such funeral of decayed customs and tells his on-screen wife Emanuelle Riva about it, with an expression of complete disconcertment on his face. Trintignant was old enough to be her father, as was Haneke, so the problem was older than she. Why did no one talk about it? By the end of "Love", Trintignant and his wife are also dead, but the film is over by then, and again no one has taken care of the funeral.

Clearly there's a great cluelessness when it comes to such questions. Maybe the mind has enough to contend with when imagining that a person is no longer there, but the things surrounding him or her are. The things they touched. The cup they took their last sip from. The blanket draped over their legs. A person disappears, but things don't go with them. A ritual of letting go, that was something she could have held onto now. But she didn't know any such ritual, nor did she know where she could look for one.

Anyway, she had requested in her will that she be cremated. And now that her mother was dead, she had a grave. It was the double grave her mother had bought when H. died, her husband, her great love. He wasn't her father. Her mother and H., after many years of back and forth and turmoil, had finally found a life together. For the sake of H.'s heart, they had moved to a healthier climate, further south and at a slightly higher altitude. The moving boxes hadn't yet been unpacked when he collapsed. On a carpeted floor, which he was trying to single-handedly tear out of his old apartment. That was between Christmas and New Year. He'd just gone back one last time, driving 500 km north to the lowlands, and that was where it had happened.

She remembered how, many years ago, her parents were still living in the same house at the time, H. had been laying on the floor of the hall one day when she came home from school. A thin thread of blood had run from his mouth, and her mother had stood next to him, pale as a corpse, until the ambulance came. H. shouldn't even have been in the hall back then, her father had banned him from setting foot in the house, she remembered that, but not how her father had reacted to the incident, which had showed him how little her mother respected his word. Had he been able to feel sympathy for the man that his wife was leading a second life with, who was laying beyond the doorstep of his house having a heart attack? Where had her father been, anyway, and when had he found out about it?

She had been ten or eleven years old at the time, the walls in the hall had been of unrendered brick and very high, and the sun, coming in through a skylight, had been shining brightly. Things had gone up and down for a while longer, until her parents separated once and for all two years later. Her father had also remarried a long time ago.

She had asked herself later how much she liked H. She believed that she'd liked him very much back then. The first time she went to Rome with him and her mother, he'd taken her to the university and showed her a fountain in the shape of an open book, which she had really liked, just like the many animal-themed fountains he then led her to. He was an archaeologist, but never pontificated, even though he was a high school teacher. Instead, he walked around the corner with her and let her find for herself the lion's head, which sat enthroned on a wall edge, water running out of its flews. He told her about Helena, the mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine, and how as an old woman in Jerusalem she had found the three crucifixes of Golgotha Hill. The one that Jesus had died on was revealed to her, she a devout Christian, as she placed it on the body of a dead man, who woke up and walked away. "And the devils clamored," said H, she could still hear him saying that. Clamored.

Later, as she walked through Rome by herself or with S., she could no longer find the paths which H. had walked with her. Every time she went around a corner, certain that the fountain with the lion's head or the effervescent book was right in front of her, she found herself standing before a different fountain or none at all, and realized she was lost.

After H. was long dead, she thought that maybe the main reason she'd liked him was to be close to her mother. He used to seek her advice whenever her mother closed herself off to him. She clearly remembered how much he'd suffered on those occasions, and how she'd promise to put in a good word for him, or at least tell him what was happening at home while her mother wasn't talking to him. At the time she hadn't even reached puberty, and she now believed that she hadn't liked him all that much in those moments of sensitivity. Much later, when her mother was already dead, her godmother, who was her mother's closest friend and almost a hundred years old by then, told her that H. would also ask her for advice during these times of unbearable despair for him, sometimes several times a day, always starting while she was having breakfast with her family. Apparently her son even stopped answering the phone. It's H. anyway, he would mumble, and she'd sensed a hint of contempt in his voice, her son who was seventeen at the time.

But her godmother understood him. She understood almost everything that people did out of love or despair. Her godmother and mother's friendship had been a wonderful

one, and they had included her in it when she was little, a kind of shared daughter between friends. They could laugh together for longer and with more joy than she had ever seen in anyone else since. They had met each other during the war. They and their young sons had found shelter with the families of a doctor and farmer in Großdorf, and her godmother had admired her mother for how capable she was at organizing life there, especially when it came to food and holidays, despite all the things they didn't have.

"She was ahead of me in everything," she'd said more than half a century later, after her mother had died, "and now in death too." The godmother, knowing early on that she'd lose her eyesight before everything else, began to learn poems off by heart. Particularly Celan and Rilke. She would chew away on individual words and verses for weeks on end until she had completely grasped their meaning. Or at least to the point that the poet allowed. She was of sound mind until the end. And with the last poem she learned, it was one of the elegies, she sensed a place full of unknown sentiments and thoughts opening up once more. "Nowhere, beloved, will be world but within. And the outside shrinks to less and less." It was a place to which she only gained access once death was already standing on her doorstep, staring at her ever more frequently. She had told her this to emphasize that, despite everything, there was something that only age could give.

His undying devotion made him suffer a great deal, the godmother had recounted, while her mother stayed completely unruffled in such crises. H. would have loved to carry her off with him, something which would certainly have conformed to the romantic images of unconditional love which even her mother had fallen for again and again. But her mother didn't want to spend the rest of her life being the woman who had left her children behind, and she also assumed that H. would, in the end, not have loved the woman who left her children behind in the way that she wanted him to and felt he did, and for which she had, at least temporarily, left her children behind again and again. This, she figured, was why her mother had endured this state of turmoil for so long. Only much later did she realize that she had never given any thought to where her mother could have left her children. With her father? That, where she was concerned at least, would have been completely out of the question.

These memories still left her confused even decades later. But whenever she wondered what it might be like to have a second life somewhere else, and began to make plans, she couldn't help but think of H., who had suffered so much, and of her mother, whose time had been running out, something that she didn't know and couldn't have known back then.

The days or weeks of refusing H. had been the days or weeks in which her mother had clearly believed her marriage could still be saved, in which she had thought that maybe she could ultimately find fulfillment in seeing her children grow up and herself appearing in society, as it were, radiant at the side of her breathtakingly handsome husband, who loved her when she was radiant.

But her mother was bored by society. And for as long as she could remember, she was plagued by terrible migraines with aura, violent vomiting and all the rest. They beleaguered her mother until she was over eighty years old. Then the attacks simply stopped, and one day she said on the telephone, "Do you realize, darling, that I haven't had a migraine in months?"

And she tried to remember the last attack, and it dawned on her that it had been during another season of the year, and she took a deep breath and said, "Finally."

Before that, however, the attacks had come every two weeks, often assailing her mother after some event or arrival or departure which she couldn't miss under any circumstances, and which would make her worry about the possibility of an attack and push herself to such an extent that she was struck especially hard afterwards. She had cared for her mother so often that, from time to time, she would be out of sympathy. And she felt like a prisoner of these migraines, imprisoned like her mother herself was. By the age of four, she'd already learnt to carefully take the boiled mirabelle plums from a shelf in the cellar, extract the stones and, without spilling anything, pour the round fruits and sticky juice into a small glass bowl, which she would then place onto a crystal saucer, put a little silver spoon next to it and balance everything as she carried it to her mother's room. She always needed something refreshing to feel alive again once the worst was over. Extracting the stones was important, one time she hadn't done that and her mother had punished her by not eating a single bite from the little bowl. She had just turned around in silence, carrying the little beige sick bucket into the bathroom and filling it with fresh water.

But that only happened once. Those had always been miserable hours, in which her mother suffered so much that the doctor often needed to be called, and the mirabelles were the first glimmer of hope.

But her mother was still just a shadow of the woman her father liked to be seen with. He was a businessman, and nothing he did was of even the slightest interest to her mother. She wasn't a good wife to him, she said later after he was long dead, and it sounded strange coming from her, as if she'd ever wanted to be a good wife to anyone, or had been concerned by or ever concerned herself with what that could mean. She'd only been truly radiant when she felt like it. When she did, she was irresistible.

She remembered the days and nights before H. actually died better than many of the other days and nights of her life. For her, it was also the time shortly before her final exams at school. H. had regained consciousness in the hospital, and her mother knew, even though he spoke to her and looked at her and reached for her hand, that he would die this time. Seven years had passed since the last heart attack. She had asked her to stay with her, in the empty apartment in which H. had collapsed. They were in luck, the heating hadn't yet been turned off, and there was still electricity as well. They camped out on two old deckchairs with plastic covers, beneath thick down blankets which she had brought from her room in the city, where she had been living alone for some time now. There was still a coffee machine in the apartment which had been left there for the builders. And a telephone. Her mother, or the two of them, would be at the clinic during the day. At night they would stare at the telephone. It was long before the cell phone era.

She thought H. would make it. How could he die, now finally alone with her mother, having finally attained the life he had wanted for so long? And for her mother, who was in her late fifties with nearly grown-up children, there was no other life but the relaxed one she finally had with H., the long trips they took together, their never-ending conversations, the way they were immersed in each other, their romantic couple posing, their love for classical Greece, for Rome during the ancient as well as the pre-Baroque and Baroque eras, for the beauty of art, and for the people in the places where the art was. When they talked about these travels, it sometimes sounded as though art was so important to them mainly because these people lived with it – the

farmers in western Turkey who brought little Hellene busts made of clay from their fields, which now stood impaled on Perspex glass cubes on a ledge in her apartment, and above them a patina-coated Kairos plaster cast from Athens, which had looked down over her mother and watched over her sleep for as long as she could remember, and which was also looking down at her in the moment when she died. The Syrian guards of Palmyra, who swept around each of the columns, the Jordanian hotel manager with polished manners out in some oasis who served them grilled ox eyes, the art student who made a copy of her mother's favourite Caravaggio in the Villa Borghese, David with Goliath's head in his hand, which she loved because there was no trace of triumph in his gaze; the fisherman and the cook on the beach in Crete, where they had gone to unwind after an excursion to the wall paintings of the dancers and bulls of Knossos and the holy labyrinths, at some point in the mid-60s when she was just starting high school – they were all part of the cast of this unusual love story and included in the intense emotions between the two of them, which might have included the rest of the world as well if they'd had more time to roam around in it. A new life lay before them, before H. and her mother. Finally without guilt. Finally without ambivalence. But one night the telephone rang, and H. was dead.

The cemetery where her mother then bought a double grave was in the middle of the forest, with high trees all around the grave, two of which have since been cut down. Her mother's parents also lay buried in this forest cemetery, as well as several generations of other families from the small place where she'd spent her childhood, who were friends with each other or at least acquaintances, or enemies. She had known this forest forever, even back when she was eight years old she would ride her bicycle past the cemetery to a quarry which was being excavated nearby, together with her brother and friends. They would go swimming there, in the late afternoons once the workers had left. They had also hunted for Easter eggs in the forest and celebrated birthdays there.

On her tenth birthday, she, her brother B., her mother and H., and a group of children had made their way to the quarry with a cart full of lemonade bottles and homemade cakes, and by that time the quarry was already a semi-legal bathing lake. A few other mothers had come along too, and they didn't let on if they found it strange that her mother was leading the small contingent not with her husband, the father of the

birthday girl, but with the person who was obviously her lover. All the children knew how to swim by then, and as the picnic was being set out above, they hurtled down the steep sand dunes and went right into the water. All except Felix. His mother hadn't even packed a pair of trunks for him because he couldn't swim. She clearly remembered the scream that his mother had let out when Felix suddenly took off his shorts, threw them away over his shoulder and pelted down the dunes in his underpants at breakneck speed, plunged into the water, started paddling, snorted, and signaled to H., who had run after Felix and jumped into the water to try and save him, that he'd just learned how to swim. That was how it happened. A highly gifted child, he'd rarely displayed such self-belief later on. He studied something demanding, physics or sinology or both, but then took a plain desk job and worked from nine to five, selling something that nobody really needed.

As she got older, she developed an eye for porcini mushrooms and picked mulberries in this forest, and then many years later, whenever she came to see her mother, she went on long walks through the forest with her, always surprised by how much it had changed. She thought it would stay just as it had been in her childhood, so that she'd always know her way around.

But now, confused by the freshly cleared glades and newly beaten paths, she loses her way on the simplest of stretches. She can't even find the old quarry, the lake which has been a bird protection zone for decades now, a place where grey geese and herons breed and ornithologists lie in wait, she can't even find that place by herself anymore. And yet the forest is the only place from her childhood that she trusts. She never trusted all the others, nor those she ended up in later, and she never imagined them as places for the future, nor used them as such. Only New York, which she also left. And New York was the only place she came back to again and again. To see if she could stay. She hadn't expected the time would come when she'd have to stay. Temporarily at least. Like right now in Harlem. Provisionally, in every sense of the word.

Her mother must have moved house a good twenty times altogether for a number of different reasons, during the war, whenever the father was transferred, after divorces and deaths. And even later, after she'd moved out of one of those apartments even while she was still at school, her mother had gone to great efforts to make sure there

was a room for her in every new place. You will always have a place with me, said her mother, who had left her so many times. She had forgotten the address of some of those places. But she'd always be able to find the cemetery. There was a sign, and a tarmac path leading onwards from the underpass.

For a while she'd been afraid her mother might swiftly follow H. to the grave, and she believed that H. wouldn't even have hesitated if it had been the other way round.

Dying is an art, like everything else. Sylvia Plath. Back when she was twenty or so, in the years following H.'s death, Plath's poems had meant a lot to her. She didn't know if her mother had thought back then that dying was a way of avoiding grief –, and when she asked she didn't get an answer.

That's what she thought. But maybe the answer lay in the fact that, as her mother had told her, H. would surely not have understood how she could live on after his death, and yet he himself had made sure that she did. His love had kept her going in life. She felt carried by it, to the very end. Look, she said, almost ninety at the time, look how long it lasts. She wanted to leave her daughter with the same feeling: you'll see what I mean. She said that as though she'd hidden something for her. Her mother knew that she would barely be able to cope with her death. You should not die. Canetti's first commandment. No sentence was more meaningful where her mother was concerned. For more than fifty years he had collected his thoughts about death in his Book of the Dead. And had come to this conclusion: You should not die.

I will carry you, even when I am no more.

She had often thought of that following her mother's death. Constantly, in fact. Including the morning when she was getting ready to go to the clinic with S., where the surgeon with the iron hands, authority and no charisma would reach into her body once more and pull out another tumor. After she had succumbed to the anesthesia. After she had thought the last sentence. I will carry you, even when I am no more.

Her mother had lived another new life after H.'s death, by herself for thirty-six years. She had travelled. At the end of her life, she'd even gone back to Syria and spent a few weeks in Damascus and Palmyra. With a man. She'd read things. She'd thought, she thought without pause, even while she was watching sports on TV and the news,

over and over. She couldn't exist without the news. She interrupted whatever she was doing so she could listen when it started. It was a habit she'd maintained since the war, when she used to stay by the radio, listening to enemy broadcasts. Her mother sometimes thought it unbelievable to get old to the point that there was barely anyone around her who could remember these things. She had to know what was happening in the world in order to be prepared, right up to the very end.

She, on the other hand, wasn't like that. The evening before she went to the clinic to see the woman with the iron hands, she drank a beer and watched an episode of a mystery series on TV, in which an invisible dome descends on a small town in the American countryside, enclosing all its inhabitants, a turn of events which doesn't end well. She had no idea what else was happening in the world that evening.

[...]

END OF SAMPLE