DUMONT

LEON ENGLER
BOTANIK DES WAHNSINNS /
BOTANY OF MADNESS

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“Irresistible. A book that is at once grave and light,
tender and tough, satirical and earnest.”
Siri Hustvedt

(English sample of pp. 5-39)

“If you don't know the terms,

you also lose knowledge of things.”

Carl von Linné

“I can assure you that we have no terms.

We have the disease.”

Ingeborg Bachmann

1

In the end, there are seven boxes stacked in a dark storage compartment in Vienna. These boxes contain items my mother had sorted through: old bills, tax returns, and other junk. As I go through the boxes, I find one that is filled to the brim with unopened letters. They are from debt collectors, lawyers, enforcement orders, and notices of termination. The letters have long since lost their menace; the postmarks are from seven years ago. I sit down on the floor and open the first letter. The light flickers off, and when I raise my arm, it comes back on.

Among the letters from authorities and lawyers, I keep finding thank-you cards from Greenpeace and World Vision. My mother was unable to pay her rent, yet she continued to donate money for the construction of drinking water wells in Ethiopia and for the protection of the endangered hawksbill sea turtle. Until the very end, it was more important to her to help others than to seek help herself.

Three days before her apartment was to be evicted, she called me. When she spoke about it, her tone was unemotional, almost cheerful. It was as if the eviction wasn't happening to her, as if she were merely reading about it in a newspaper—though not even that. There was no trace of self-pity or compassion in her voice. She explained what would happen next as if she were sharing an old family recipe for Silesian poppy seed dumplings. In a way, losing the apartment

felt like an old family recipe. Nobody had suspected anything; after all, just a few years earlier, she had a considerable amount of money in the bank. Perhaps she was surprised herself. For an entire year, she had not opened any more letters. Each morning, she woke up in a panic, fearing for her life, and only made it through the day with alcohol. To make matters worse, she suffered from severe depression that left her incapacitated.

I was living in Vienna at the time. The day before the eviction, I traveled to Munich to see my mother. We went through her apartment together, and I felt detached, experiencing little to no emotion. Our conversations had dwindled, and there was an awkward silence that had always existed in our family. Life was not discussed; it was simply lived. I asked my mother if there were any items she wanted me to keep—old photo albums, jewelry belonging to her great-grandparents, children's drawings. She shook her head, indicating that all of it would be placed in storage. Now, as I sit in the warehouse, I find myself shaking my head in disbelief. A century of memories was incinerated in the heating plant.

On the day of the eviction, a man I didn't recognize sat in her kitchen. He was tall and old, with a droopy face reminiscent of certain breeds of dog. My mother now had a legal guardian, but she treated him as if he were a mover she had hired. "It's about time for a change," she said while preparing a coffee in a kitchen that would soon no longer be hers. I can still hear her laugh, a sound that has been etched in my memory. In stark contrast, her legal guardian, an experienced administrator of human misery, appeared serious and almost grim. What I also remember from that day is how awful her coffee tasted—like sand and burnt rubber—but I liked it anyway. My mother always preferred strong instant coffee. Today, when I accidentally add too much powder to my own cup and add water, I'm transported back to her kitchen for a brief moment.

Later, the marshal entered the apartment to look for items that could be sold to pay off my mother's debts: a piano she never played, an old desk she never sat at, and a sewing machine she never used. The money from these items would cover just about one month's rent. Then we began to work. In one room, we collected garbage; in the other, we sorted personal belongings. My mother explained this division to her legal guardian. A cleanout service was scheduled to dispose of the garbage and store the personal items. It wasn't particularly complicated—just a two-bedroom apartment. I don't know who mixed up the rooms: the guardian, the cleanout service, or my mother herself. Photos of my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, certificates, old love letters, and CVs all ended up being thrown into the waste incinerator.

In the evening, my mother and I went to an Italian restaurant in her building for pizza. She knew the owner well—there were handshakes, first names, small talk, and grappa on the house. When I asked for the bill, she requested the spare key she had kept in the restaurant's safe over the years. "I'm expecting a visitor," she said.

Later, I tried to reach the legal guardian, but his number no longer existed, and he could not be found at his listed address. It felt like he had vanished, like a ghost who had come to orchestrate

this mix-up. The cleanout service mentioned on the phone, “Something like this happens quite often.” Seven boxes of junk were stowed away, and now, years later, I find myself sitting in front of them. It is often said that working-class families have no history, no traditions, and no legends. Our family memories seemed to have vanished.

The faculty of memory cannot be separated from the imagination. They go hand in hand. To one degree or another, we all invent our personal pasts, writes Siri Hustvedt. And you have to become even more inventive when there is not much left to build on.

My mother has since checked herself into a clinic, just like her own mother did. There she went through withdrawal and was treated for depression. I suppose that was also quite common in my family.

2

Since I was already in Munich, I decided to meet my father. He didn't live there; instead, he resided in the countryside, in a small apartment on the fringes of the Alps. However, we usually met in Munich, which was easier for both of us. In fact, it was even easier not to meet at all.

Now, we were standing in front of each other on a Munich tram, line 18. It was one of the first warm days of the year, with summer dresses and T-shirts everywhere, but my father was still wearing an old coat.

I looked at him as closely as I could without him noticing and wondered if I would look like him one day. In a childhood photo I had of him, he already looked like an adult, with the melancholy of later years written on his young face. He had a large, pensive head sitting atop a child's body. Yet, when he stood before me as an adult, he looked like a child—an ancient child. How had he achieved this rejuvenation? He had a mild smile and eyes that seemed to see everything as if it were brand new. But he also looked like one of those children tormented by their peers.

On streetcar line 18, the sun shone, and summer dresses and T-shirts surrounded us, yet there he was, a stranger in a coat. He gazed out the window as Munich passed by: Sendlinger Tor, Müllerstraße, Fraunhoferstraße. My father had worn this innocent expression while staring out windows for as long as I could remember. I think this unrealistic demeanor was why my mother left him. He remained silent for a long time, and just when I was no longer expecting him to speak at all, he whispered something.

At first, I didn't catch what he said.

“What did you say?” I asked.

“I'm retiring now,” he repeated.

“Why?” I inquired.

“Why?” he echoed.

We were becoming more and more alike, but for him, it felt like a reproach. Why are you asking me that? He was only in his late fifties, which is why I asked. We didn’t say what we really wanted to say; we never did. However, we were never satisfied with what we did say instead. Our conversations remained on the surface, while the unspoken thoughts gathered beneath like dust under an old couch.

Yet, anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear knows that mere mortals cannot keep secrets. Those who remain silent with their lips often chatter with their fingertips.

My father’s body spoke for him: he pushed back his cuticles with his fingernails. His mouth smiled, while his eyes struggled to keep up. His belly joined in the conversation too. His irritable stomach made him a ventriloquist, as if it were expressing his true feelings. His back had a voice as well, and so did his depression. It, too, spoke volumes. Sometimes I didn't hear from him for months, even a whole year, and at times, I forgot he was still alive.

He struggled with bouts of melancholy, as if someone had given him a heavy dose of anesthetic. For weeks, he would lie in bed, neither eating nor drinking nor bathing. He called it a period of reflection; psychiatrists would label it severe chronic depression—just as it had been with his father. The fact that he had spent weeks in a clinic was mentioned only in passing.

In springtime Munich, my father had taken early retirement. We got off the tram and walked to Gärtnerplatz, where we sat down on a bench. My father gazed at the beautifully renovated facades of the houses, the water fountain, and the flowerbed. He knew the names of all the plants and trees but had never taught me. Still, I recognized some of them: hyacinths, ranunculus, cherry blossoms.

Suddenly, he told me he had stopped writing his biography. I was surprised; locksmiths didn’t typically write biographies. He explained that he had to give up this endeavor because, since my birth, he could hardly remember anything. He mentioned it casually, saying, “It’s supposed to rain tomorrow, and by the way: with your birth, my memory went out.” He had forgotten half a lifetime and all the lives before that. He had been adopted as a baby and therefore had no family history. He could only recall the first thirty years of his life, which he described as difficult years—a thirty-year war.

Medicine does not understand this form of amnesia. What lay behind his forgetfulness? Did he wish I had never been born? Did he feel threatened? This theme appears in mythology and collective memory: the birth of a son often signifies the end of the father's reign. Odysseus, King Laius, and Darth Vader would be compelling witnesses, if only their sons hadn’t killed them. My name never appeared in the notes he sent me later. The last entry mentioned a horse. I was born shortly after that, but it was no longer documented.

Father and son sat on a bench, yet the son had grown older than his father. It wasn't about the skin or the body; it was something else. Before them lay a flower bed of cruel beauty, amidst a city of harsh elegance. The father spoke absentmindedly, uttering a sentence that shocked the son. The shock was unintentional, stemming from his naivety—that was the most frightening part.

My family had disintegrated. It hurt me. No, that's not quite right. If I'm being precise and honest, I must admit: I felt nothing. It didn't matter to me. They could have died, and I would have accepted it like a change in the weather. I don't know why, but that's how it was. Now, I sit in the storage compartment, surrounded by boxes and letters, sifting through the remnants of a story that cannot be told.

3

The first person I think is a bit mad is my German literature teacher. She wears ties that she has cut with scissors so they won't get caught in her soup. Despite her unique style, she never actually eats soup; instead, she prefers kebabs, which she claims contain all the nutrients and vitamins a person needs to survive. She also reads Nietzsche and asserts that his writings provide all the thoughts a person needs to survive. Interestingly, she mentions that there is an underground tunnel connecting our school to Istanbul. One time, after being mugged in a dark alley in Istanbul, the thieves asked her if she was alone. She replied, "Only the devil travels alone." She is special—maybe even whimsical. She is my favorite teacher. Because of her, we don't say, "You're not quite right in the head" anymore. Instead, we say, "Your tie is cut off." Yet, I don't truly believe she's mad.

My grandmother doesn't wear cut-off ties; instead, she wears incontinence pads. She can no longer eat kebabs because her teeth can't handle them, so she only eats soup. She doesn't believe in Nietzsche but in God. She is now a frail woman who appears to be traveling alone. In reality, she isn't traveling; her room is directly above mine. However, she exists in a world of her own. She possesses a rare talent: she sees and hears things that no one else can. Occasionally, she disappears, as if there were a hidden tunnel from our house to the psychiatric ward. I'm afraid of her, worried that her madness might somehow rub off on me when she comes into the bathroom, lost in her thoughts, and begins to pee.

In biology class, we are learning about genetics. The offspring of flies are flies, and the offspring of pumpkins are pumpkins. So what will my grandmother's offspring be?

- Alcohol addiction: About fifty percent is influenced by genetics. - Drug addiction: This often occurs in families. - Depression: The risk is about three times higher if first-degree relatives

have suffered from it. - Bipolar disorder: About eighty percent is determined by genetic factors, making it one of the most hereditary psychiatric illnesses. - Schizophrenia: The risk of developing this disease rises exponentially with the degree of genetic relatedness. - Psychopathy: About fifty percent of the variation in psychopathic traits can be attributed to genetic factors.

The outlook isn't great. My grandmother is not the first in my family to end up in a psychiatric hospital; my father's biological father also spent much of his life there. I keep asking myself: when will it be my turn? As soon as I graduate from school, I flee from Munich, from this house with its troubled history, to avoid going insane myself.

I move to New York, taking only a suitcase and my DNA with me. I spend weeks searching for an apartment. It's not uncommon for the landlords to seem a bit eccentric themselves. In Union Square, I meet an unsuccessful actor who first shows me old TV series he appeared in, crying as he does so. Then he shows me my prospective room: a five-square-meter space in a hallway, separated by old wooden cabinets, containing just a cot. In West Village, I meet an older man who offers me a room with a view of all of Manhattan at a dirt-cheap price. However, the apartment is filled with porcelain dolls—hundreds, even thousands—that seem to stare into my soul with their dark, shimmering eyes. Eventually, I find an apartment in Brooklyn with three seemingly normal roommates. Here, for every porcelain doll from the previous apartment, there's a cockroach. The first thing my new roommate says while frying a piece of meat in his underwear is, "If you do drugs, share them." We share everything else too; once again, I don't have my own room—just a small area separated by a curtain.

Seeking normalcy, I look for the most conventional job I can find: an office job. I buy two cheap suits, one black and one gray, along with two ties that I don't cut off. Every day, I wake up at seven in the morning and prepare for my day. Behind my curtain, I put on one of the suits and tie it around my neck. Then I take the L train, trying to imagine what thoughts are crossing the minds of the other passengers. I attempt to align my movements with those of the crowd. In the evening, I walk fifty blocks through Manhattan, keeping on my feet until the sun dips below the skyscrapers.

Every night, my roommate brings home a different woman. I lie alone in my bed, eavesdropping. Lack of sleep can lead to hallucinations; lack of love can too. On top of that, I'm running low on money. Poverty is also said to contribute to mental illness. My lifestyle is far from healthy. I lie awake, listening to the moans from the other room. She is losing her mind; he is losing his mind; I am losing my mind. We share everything.

In Old High German, the word is "firrucken." In Middle High German, it becomes "verrücken." It means to move to a different, incorrect place, to upset someone, or to cut someone's tie.

New York upsets me. One night, a cockroach sits on my chest, and we look at each other for a long time. I think: Maybe I'm in the wrong place. With my last few dollars, I fly to Paris. I find my apartment on the bulletin board at the supermarket. It's no bigger than a shoebox. I can only stand on the balcony with one leg, but I have a view of a beautiful church. In the Goutte d'Or,

the Gold Quarter, there is always someone on the street. Here, too, I hang around between the markets, small bars, and shops that only sell coriander and mint, stacking them up to the ceiling. There are small monastery gardens in the middle of the big city. But the ceiling of my apartment is lowering. Am I imagining it? I measure it with a folding rule. The already tiny apartment is getting smaller and smaller. *You get nervous in the city. The city makes me nervous.* I want to stack herbs to lift the ceiling. A company pulls up sprouts. I flee before the ceiling really falls on my head.

I'm moving to Vienna—supposedly the city with the highest quality of life. Those who live well may have less reason to lose their minds, I tell myself. But maybe there's more to this decision. My father and psychoanalysis were both born in Vienna. I don't know either of them. I'm enrolling in a degree program in theater studies, although I don't know why. The introductory lecture is given by a professor, wearing silver glasses and gray curls—a caricature of herself. "This is not a course of study," she says, "but a mistake. You won't be trained to be an actor or a director here. Not Coppola. Not Belmondo." Then she gives a long-winded lecture on the function of the mask in ancient theater.

After the lectures, I roam through the city and observe people. I can do this for hours, sitting, watching, marveling. I focus my eyes on the trivial. I have the feeling that something is hidden there, in the minor details that go unseen.

Other thoughts soon intrude: City dwellers have a forty percent higher risk of developing mental illnesses than rural residents. The risk of schizophrenia is three times higher. So I move to the outskirts of the city. It's quiet there but not to the point of driving me crazy—nothing like the quiet of islands and monasteries. Nature is also supposed to prevent mental illness, so I spend a lot of time in the Steinhofgründe, the Ottakringer forest, and the vineyards near Nußdorf.

I live in an old building, cheap and run-down, in a former suitcase factory. The kitchen is in the hallway, the shower is in the kitchen, and the toilet is in the hallway. Everything is in the wrong place. In winter, my urine could freeze, so I pee more often in the kitchen sink. I always wash my hands a little too long. I develop glimpses of magical thinking; I am no longer allowed to step on the cracks in the pavement and constantly knock on wood. Compulsion is frozen fear. But this little compulsion gives me back the illusion of control. But what do I want to control?

Actually, my life is just beginning, but I already live like a pensioner. On my floor, there is only one other apartment, four times the size of mine. A man lives there, four times my age, who talks to himself all day long. I never get to see him, but I can smell him because he smokes all day. The smoke seeps into my apartment, and I hear him. The walls are thin. Like wrongly addressed letters, his soliloquies end up with me. It doesn't bother me. I like his thoughts; they are more interesting than mine. I start writing them down and replacing my ideas with his. I get a small notebook.

Once, when I leave the apartment, I knock on my wooden door out of superstition. The neighbor misunderstands my knocking, opens the door, and invites me in. Above his door hangs a saying: *In the year of our Lord 2001, in the sixty-first year of my life, on the nineteenth day of May, my*

birthday, I have, tired of the city, the people, and the work, retired in full creative power into the lap of the learned muses, where I will spend the days that remain for me to live in peace and without worries.

His apartment looks like a mixture of a library, a museum, and a retirement home. I see piles of books stacked around a hospital bed, like castle walls. I think that this is also how he keeps something at arm's length. He stares at me with eyes like old train station clocks, talks and talks, and I listen and take notes. The neighbor only lives in his head. His body seems to be made only for opening books. Actually, he only needs hands, eyes, and a brain. If I look at one of his books a little too long, about two and a half seconds, he pushes it into my hand so that I read it.

From then on, I visit him regularly. I envy him his thoughts and his toilet, which is inside his apartment. As if that would help me escape my fate, I start with psychology. Soon I have read everything I can find at my neighbor's: Freud to Kristeva, Skinner to Linehan, Watzlawick to Satir. In the days when people still believed in magic, they would have said: A defense spell. In the days when people still believed in psychoanalysis: a defense mechanism.

"Why are you so interested in this?" he asks me, and I respond with anything but the truth. "You'd be better off reading novels," he says, partly because he keeps catching me reading Freud. "Writers can express these ideas better. Freud just borrowed from everyone." Then he tells me about his favorite tree: a hybrid of orange and lemon. This tree is in the orangery. Literature represents the lemons, while psychology represents the oranges. Both come from the same family and belong to the same branch, but the lemon is botanically older. Philosophy, if you will, is the soil in which both grow. The neighbor often talks about trees, fruits, and plants, even though he doesn't have a balcony.

He hands me books by Dostoyevsky, Bachmann, and Hustvedt. I realize it's a trap; writers are a high-risk group. I want nothing to do with them. More than anyone else, they often suffer from mental illness and alcoholism, and many take their own lives. I return the books unread.

To save on heating costs and avoid loneliness, I spend the winter in a coffeehouse. There are good and bad coffeehouses, but the one I frequent is a dusty, smelly, shabby establishment with fifty-year-old curtains, an even older carpet, and abandoned pool tables. During the day, other pensioners come in, looking through stained glasses, spreading a newspaper in front of them without reading it, and eating their lunch with a fork. At some point, they move from coffee to beer or white wine spritzers. In short, it's a good coffeehouse.

I order a melange and drink it as slowly as possible. The waiters, whose unfriendliness is their pride and joy, seem glad that I'm not making their jobs harder. In the fall, I order coffee; in the spring, I pay and leave. This routine allows me to observe people. My neighbor repeatedly urges me to socialize, warning me not to become like him. I should never turn away from others or go against the grain, or I might end up with the odd idea of breeding golden turtles. Every now and then, I manage to persuade him to go outside with me. We go to his coffee house, where the waiter greets the neighbor as "Doctor" and shows him to his usual seat.

I feel I can confide in a doctor, so one day I share my fear of going mad. The neighbor simply laughs. Together, we draw a family tree and estimate the likelihood of different mental health issues that could affect me: schizophrenia? Addiction? Depression? Bipolar disorder? My family tree is riddled with nearly every affliction found in the textbooks of psychiatry. In whose footsteps should I follow? Which troubled line should I continue? My father's depression? My grandfather's schizophrenia? My grandmother's death wish? My mother's addiction?

4

My mother was a fabulous actress, but she performed not for others, but for herself. Her life began in 1979 in Munich, although she was born seventeen years earlier. For a long time, she didn't talk about those early years. In 1979, she was underage and pregnant. Her mother struggled with bipolar disorder and psychosis, while her father was terminally ill.

Despite his condition, my grandfather was a solid presence. He looked forward to the arrival of his grandchild and had already purchased a stroller and prepared a room. However, when the baby was born, he ended up in intensive care with heart problems. While he was a patient man, he did not wait with dying to see his grandson for the first time; the timing of arrival and departure felt synchronized, as if the child had replaced the grandfather.

My grandmother was unpredictable, like water, always in motion and constantly changing states—sometimes steam, sometimes ice. One day manic, the next almost lifeless. She and my mother lived together in a large house filled with remnants of my grandfather's life: his shoes, his files, and other signs of his previous vitality. In a troubling moment, my grandmother attempted to take the baby from my mother to adopt him herself. She falsely reported to the youth welfare office that her daughter was a drug addict and a member of a cult, perhaps early signs of the paranoia that would later consume her. The youth welfare office did not remove the child from my mother. Instead, they appointed a legal guardian to protect her from her mother. Eventually, my mother moved into a women's shelter with the newborn.

Around that time, she entered a telephone booth. The baby she carried against her chest was eerily quiet; my brother never cried, as if he wanted to spare my mother the distress. She inserted a handful of coins, dialed the number of the German Journalism School, and inquired about how to become a journalist, without having enough money to hear all the reasons why she wouldn't qualify. According to her father's will, my mother inherited nothing, which was not surprising because it was dated 1959—before she was born. As a result, her mother became the sole heir, and any later testament seems to have been lost, likely hidden away by my grandmother.

The child's father, named Garibald, had a stately name that felt almost aristocratic, but everyone called him Gary, which seemed more fitting. He had lost one eye in a bar fight and now had a small glass ball in its place. Although he staggered awkwardly due to his impaired spatial perception, he proposed to my mother on his knees. She laughed. Gary never truly found his way in life; he was an unhappy man who drank and smoked heavily, and like many of his siblings, he died young—likely around 43 or 44, from lung cancer. People said he had a good heart.

It was only much later that my mother began to share the stories of the seventeen years preceding those events. Her mother, my grandmother, could be strict, reminiscent of a tyrant, meticulously checking every exercise book. If my mother made a mistake in her homework or if her handwriting wasn't perfect, my grandmother would rip out the entire page, forcing her to start again. Thus unfolded the seemingly endless afternoons of her childhood. In time, my mother developed beautiful handwriting that appeared almost artificial—curved and bulbous letters. When I later tried to copy her signature to fool my teachers at school, I admired its beauty, unaware of the hardships she had endured.

If my mother didn't get an A, she would bury her exam papers for fear of my grandmother. On the way to school, she felt as if she were opening a cemetery of failures. Next to the train tracks, Ovid and Seneca decayed again, two millennia later.

Ever since my mother was a child, her own mother had spent most of her time crying in the darkened dining room. At night, she would close the windows, lower all the blinds, and lock the doors until not even a single photon could get in. She boarded up the house as if she feared a bomb attack.

My mother's first memory is from when she was perhaps three or four years old, a little girl with hair as blonde as spruce wood. She is sitting on my grandmother's lap in the dining room, which is always dark and eerie. Initially, her grandmother hugs her lovingly, but the embrace becomes increasingly suffocating. My grandmother holds her child tight, her arms like slings around her. Suddenly, my mother is seized with boundless rage—the rage of instinct, the rage of a tormented animal. In a burst of emotion, she bites her grandmother on the chest with all her strength. My grandmother responds by pushing the child away, screaming.

On my grandmother's right breast was a dark birthmark about the size of a hand. She had one light-skinned breast and one dark-skinned breast. This curious pairing is akin to Melanie Klein's metaphors of the *good breast* and the *bad breast*—the idea that a child experiences both positive and negative feelings toward their mother, including love and hate, pleasure and displeasure, devotion and rejection.

In my mother's case, the negative feelings predominated. Over and over again, my grandmother reproached her for the pain she had endured during my mother's birth. My mother felt she was indebted to her, as if her very existence was a burden stemming from that ordeal.

My grandmother constantly threatened to leave my mother if she didn't obey her. Sometimes, she really did leave the house for hours, intending to teach her a lesson. My mother, who was perhaps five or six years old at the time, would sit alone on the stone steps in front of the house, waiting for hours for her mother to return. She didn't just want to be a good daughter; she wanted to be the best. She believed she could make her mother stay by getting straight A's.

Only at Christmas was everything different. For one day, my mother could escape into a world of carefree joy. It became her favorite holiday. Even as a child, she saved every penny for this day. In December, she bought jewelry and gifts, transforming the whole house with decorations.

However, later on, my grandmother not only threatened her daughter with leaving the house but also with leaving the earth altogether, often proving these were not empty threats. She would disappear for days at a time into the hospital. It's no wonder my mother buried her bad grades. But she couldn't make her report card vanish completely; she received a D in Latin, a cardinal sin in her family. As a result, her parents sent her to a Catholic convent boarding school.

The boarding school felt less like a punishment and more like a liberation—it meant freedom from her mother. One summer, my mother stole the nuns' master key, allowing her to make her own decisions. Her mantra became: Help thyself, so that God won't have to help you.

Interestingly, it was not my grandmother's idea to send my mother to the convent; it was my grandfather's. The punishment for her bad grade served as a cover for his real intention: to protect his daughter from her mother's harmful influence. For years, my grandmother's mood had fluctuated between melancholy and mania.

My grandfather shielded my mother with a protective web of lies, crafting excuses for why her mother was in the hospital with increasingly frequent organ complaints: appendix, kidney, stomach issues. But eventually, he ran out of organs.

5

I've been considering dropping out of my mask studies to pursue psychology instead. My neighbor believes that's not a good idea. According to him, psychology only teaches dog training, statistics, and how to get pigeons to guide long-range missiles, but it doesn't truly delve into understanding people. You learn about people in everyday situations: on the metro, in bed, at the train station, and in pubs. And, of course, through literature—that is, fiction, not nonfiction. So, I decided to enroll in my own street studies and extended my walks around the city. I explored the districts, from Ungargassenland to Kagran, and soon I knew Vienna better than any other city.

I spend my nights in bars, where I at least pretend to read novels. Everyone in Vienna pretends to read, engaging in a sort of collective self-reflection. I sit in places like the Kleines Kaffee or the Einhorn, observing people as if I were a fly on the wall, scrutinizing their every move.

Every morning, I attend my neighbor's lectures through the wall. Each day, he presents a new subject: critical theory, French theory, physics, psychology, and pataphysics. He claims that Freud didn't seek to discover the unconscious mind, but the eel testicle. Freud cut open hundreds of eels but found nothing, so he turned his attention to the human soul, ultimately unsettling the world's sleep. Everything my neighbor says sounds slightly crazy and hard to believe, yet when I investigate his claims, they always turn out to be true.

On weekends, we visit the market, where he explains the structure of the human brain using walnuts as an example, discussing what neurology fails to understand about the soul. He talks about the mystery of consciousness while we search for ordinary vegetables: normal potatoes, normal artichokes, normal cauliflower. We never find them.

It is normal, he says, that the grass in the Burggarten does not grow underground, that the grapes from the Kahlenberg do not float away in the fall, that the pigeons at Stephansplatz fly instead of digging through the earth or steering missiles, and that the last fish in the Danube do not march through offices in suits. It is also normal for people not to look at each other, for them to long for love but often choose silence instead. Normality is the missionary position, the nuclear family, 1.3 children, terraced houses, middle-class cars, sobriety, beach vacations and monogamy – a tolerable state of despair that he calls happiness.

"What is a normal person?" he questions me. "Have you ever met one? In which district? Are people in the 1st district any less crazy than those in the 10th?"

I glance at his library. The dictionary states that 'normal' is the opposite of 'abnormal,'.

The word 'normal' originates from Latin, originally referring to a carpenter's angle. In mathematics, it describes right angles. Over time, it became associated with things and people statistically regarded as average. The term 'statistics' itself stems from agriculture, where it was once employed to grow vegetables more effectively.

From that point on, we started going to the weekly market every Saturday to buy the most unusual specimens of each vegetable variety. In his kitchen, we examine the strange vegetables, delighting in three-headed carrots, square potatoes, and eccentric fennel. We dice them, and I prepare an anomalous minestrone. I like the thought of my neighbor consuming these vitamins—perhaps it will encourage him to stick around a little longer.

I have grown fond of him; I'm infatuated with his intelligence. I even joked about wanting to take his brain out after he dies and keep it on my desk as a specimen. He warns me that this practice is frowned upon in Vienna.

The problem with liking someone is that you dread losing people. I come to realize this when my neighbor falls ill. It feels as though his time has run out. He's constantly hoarse from his monologues and smokes too much, as if he has more to say than time allows. He talks faster and faster.

He still has so many thoughts, he says, but then he withdraws. His tonsils are chronically inflamed. He smokes and talks himself out of good health, becoming increasingly taciturn and quiet. I want to tear down the wall between us because I can hardly hear him anymore. The neighbor no longer reads either. He has lived in books for too long, which he considers a mistake; he has avoided life so much. He wanted to learn, but now he has only forgotten how, and the most obvious things have become alien to him.

I go out among people again to keep myself from considering breeding reptiles—Rüdigerhof, Schopenhauer, Weingartner, Weidinger, Heumarkt, Prückl. It's solitude in the company of others. Drinking coffee. Staring at the world without understanding.

Every now and then, I drag my neighbor out of the house. He claims that every mental illness can ultimately be understood as a lack of love in the broadest sense as we sit in the Film Museum. He eats chips and pistachio ice cream, which he has smuggled. "Why take care of your health now?" he asks.

So, I look for something that could perhaps be called falling in love. The occasion is a woman who lives in the Servitenviertel. On my way to her place, I pass by Freud's apartment every time, seeing the crowds of visitors who come to see the famous couch.

She is studying scenography and works part-time in a carpenter's workshop. She stands at the circular saw all day. In the evening, she practices on an old keyboard, playing the most beautiful song in the world, but she doesn't get any better. Rarely has anything calmed me more. Every day, she makes the same playful mistakes, as if we and the universe were immortal. The pianist says I suffer from agateophobia, the fear of going crazy. Now fear has a name. Does that make it better? Maybe that's why people always want to name their conditions—because naming them takes away some of the horror?

Being in love also works well against fear. After we sleep together, I watch the Freud tourists from her bed. They can't find the couch because it's not in Vienna; it's in London. *The search for the lost object never ends*, I note on one of my written napkins. It also says: Freud invented the talking cure because he was a bad hypnotist. He came up with the couch because he didn't want to be stared at for eight hours a day. It was covered with the famous Smyrna carpet because the couch itself was ugly and gray. The method of free association, the heart of psychoanalysis, in which the patient pours out their uninhibited thoughts, may have also occurred to Freud while he was high on cocaine. Were Freud's ideas merely chance discoveries?

My neighbor says he is one-tenth Freudian. "Psychoanalysis," he says, "is sixty percent nonsense, thirty percent madness, and only ten percent genius." He is a flag in the wind, taking only the good bits from each theory.

What annoys our neighbor even more than the analysis are the bad jokes about it. Everyone seems to know of a psychoanalyst who couldn’t stop masturbating at dinner or one who falls asleep during sessions. It's always just Freud—Sigmund, not Anna. Does anyone ever talk about Anna Freud?

After six months, the piano player asks me what we actually are. She has this rare lightness, an almost suspicious kindness, and the ability to make life feel brighter than it might be. I like her scent of sawdust and coffee, her eyebrows as they move when she reads, and her loud laughter in quiet moments. I appreciate that she can't lie. I like her dog and the evenings we spend on her roof, the three of us together. With her, I see Vienna from above, and I gain a new perspective on everything. I like looking at her, and I like that she looks at me as if I were someone worth looking at.

I tell her that I’m not ready for a relationship. It sounds better than saying, “Something in me can't stand the good.”

My neighbor thinks it's a shame, but he understands me: “When you're in love, both people suffer,” he says. “*One suffers from love, and the other suffers from boredom*.”

6

My mother was there six times when her mother tried to take her own life. Later, when she was older, she visited my grandmother in hospitals. My grandmother blamed her daughter for her suicide attempts.

I don't know if my grandmother really wanted to die more than she wanted to live. Maybe she wanted both at the same time. Or neither. Looking back, I think it was an attempt to express something she couldn't express any other way.

To be dead, a mother doesn't necessarily have to die; it is enough for her to turn away and retreat into a chrysalis. My grandmother withdrew into the cocoon of her illness, her facial expressions frozen, her face empty, devoid of life in her eyes.

My mother never relied on others throughout her life. She preferred to live for two, valuing her independence above all else. What thrives in such early loneliness? It’s said that children of these mothers often develop their imagination and intellect early on, seeking explanations for

their experiences. However, they also come to the sad realization that they may never be enough.

While my grandmother grew increasingly bitter, my grandfather acted as a counterbalance. He was reliable and consistent, the only inconsistency being his receding hairline. He came from Upper Silesia and referred to it not as a receding hairline, but as a receding minister's corner that spread across his forehead. His face was sharply defined, with straight lines, corners, and edges, while my grandmother's face was indecisive, rough, and delicate at the same time, reminiscent of an old farmhouse cupboard.

On the ground floor of the house, there were tons of sweets that my grandfather sold. To pay off the house loan, he rented the basement to a dentist. He obviously had a sense of humor. He also had heart problems. He had a pacemaker inserted. The device contained copper, to which he was allergic. While my grandmother tried to do it on purpose, my grandfather died by accident.

When my grandmother wasn't in the psychiatric ward, she drank. She swallowed barbiturates as if they were candy. Twelve times in total, she tried to take her own life. Twelve times she proclaimed her belief that life wasn't worth living. Twelve apostolic appeals.

How did my grandmother become a woman who laid hands on herself? Born poor, my grandmother had come into money at times. She had the big house, made her daughter's will disappear and collected the life insurance that was issued to her. She donated part of her fortune to the church because, as is well known, the soul jumps out of purgatory. Paranoia consumed the rest: she bought surveillance equipment, security locks, and hired several detectives. But they found nothing.

In her delusion, she began ordering bulletproof glass for fifty thousand German Marks to protect her house from supposed enemies. My grandmother had neither fifty thousand German marks nor enemies. The order could be canceled, but the paranoia persisted.

Then the walls began to close in on her, her hallucinations would not let her go. The ego is not the master in it's own house. More and more often, my grandmother disappeared into the psychiatric ward. By this time, psychiatrists had given her just about every diagnosis in the books: recurrent depressive episodes since adolescence, bipolar disorder, paranoid schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, alcohol and medication dependence. It was a complicated mix of anxiety, paranoia, hallucinations, depression and mania.

There was no more radiance in my grandmother's eyes, only the dull gleam of tears. Her house was dark, a realm of shadows. For C. G. Jung, the shadow represents the darkness of character, the suppressed desires, the warded off fantasies, the unlived life. Jung developed this theory, inspired by his experiences with his own mother. He writes: *My mother was a very good mother to me. My mother had a great animal warmth, but an unconscious personality emerged in her that was unsuspectedly powerful. I was sure that she consisted of two people: one human, the other, by contrast, seemed uncanny to me.*

My mother had to navigate the dual nature of her relationship with her own mother, caught between the human and the uncanny. Yet my grandmother was also capable of showing an animalistic warmth. At times, she could be a very good mother to my mom. When she had the opportunity, my grandmother sold gingerbread hearts at the Auer Dult and Oktoberfest. She was rough, loud, beautiful, and wise. My mother loved her, at least one of her two distinct personalities. My grandmother was not a single entity; she was multifaceted.

As a child, my mother and her mother established a ritual. Before going to bed, once all the doors were locked and the shutters were closed, they would share a moment of darkness and say to each other:

“Good night, my very dearest wicked mother.”

“Good night, my very dearest wicked daughter.”

7

My neighbor and I take a trip to the vineyards. He calls it a "hangman’s meal." Since he can no longer walk, we take a cab. We sit on a bench among the grapevines, and he immediately takes out his cigarettes. The fresh air doesn’t agree with him. He wears a suit and expensive shoes, but the soles are coming off. I wonder why he doesn’t get them fixed now.

He gazes out at the trees and bushes and mentions that he has always found happiness in his misery. “Wine is the oldest form of self-medication known to man, and it has always been my medicine,” he says. “Unfortunately, it is not available by prescription.” He adds that even Freud recommended wine, despite being a control freak and a workaholic himself. Generally, he suggests that we should follow the advice of those whom Freud rejected; the rejected often provide a good starting point.

We drink until we feel bright, silly, and happy again. *Life is so sacred; perhaps healthy people don’t realize that*. The neighbor then reads to me from a book by Christine Lavant that he pulls from his jacket pocket. I glance at it for just a moment before he hands it to me.

“Let’s go for a walk and see which tree you might hang yourself from,” he says. The thought of contemplating his own death is one reason he feels compelled to stay alive.

His sore throat won’t go away, so I make him soup using the most crooked vegetables I can find. I ask him what he has learned in life, and he whispers, “To die.”

Out of solidarity, I also fall sick. Our floor turns into a makeshift field hospital, a leprosarium outside the city for two lepers. That’s how it all begins with the madmen—they are taken from cities to the outskirts.

For a long time, this is the primary way mentally ill individuals are treated in Europe: they are marginalized and displayed. In the Middle Ages, they are chased away from the cities or locked up in "fools' houses" and "mad boxes." These narrow wooden boxes, resembling animal cages, are set up at the city gates so that passersby can marvel at the prisoners.

In 18th-century Vienna, there is a tower with five floors and walls as thick as a fortress, dedicated to the care of the mentally ill. This building, known as the *Narrenturm* (Fool’s Tower), is one of the first insane asylums in the world. On the top floor, those suffering from severe mental illnesses are confined to straw sacks and chained to the walls. The locals nickname the building *Guglhupf*, after a cake baked in a distinctive ring-shaped Bundt pan, because of its cylindrical shape.

Adjacent to the tower is an old plague house that soon becomes a refuge for quieter patients, shielded from the gaze of the Viennese public by a wall. A botanical garden is also established there, providing a place of peace and relaxation. Over time, *Guglhupf* evolves into a spectacle, attracting what becomes known as lunatic asylum tourism. One observer remarks that *anyone who still possesses a sense of humanity must first lose it upon witnessing the sight*.

The Narrenturm is now a museum where visitors can marvel at preserved brains. My father is born just two hundred meters away, two hundred meters west of those preserved specimens. Now I understand why my neighbor wants to keep his.

My neighbor holds a theory: I'm not afraid of going insane; I'm afraid of not going insane, explaining that madness is seen as a rite of passage in his family. But there is no single gene responsible for fear or melancholy—rather, there’s a predisposition, but life can always intervene. In any case, he believes that one should fear not so much the madness itself but the treatment. They didn't always stick with wine.

He reads me a poem:

God forbid that madness should seize me.
No, I'd rather be old and poor and naked;
No, I'd rather have toil and sorrow.
Not because I, proud of my thinking,
Couldn't let go of him; I would—
I'd be ready for it.
However: when your mind abandons you,
You'll be, horrifically like the plague,
Staked down with chains.
They'll close the bolt behind you

And treat you through bars like an animal,
The madman who squats there.

I recently go to a neurologist for an MRI, but she dismisses my concerns as crazy without even performing the test. A psychiatrist in the 19th district labels me a hypochondriac, advising me not to worry about my mental health until I turn 60, as it is too early to make any conclusions before that age.

While I imagine that I am mentally ill, my neighbor is getting worse and worse. Then the Viennese Socrates downs his hemlock cup. Chloroquine and benzodiazepine. On the other side of the wall, I hear him dying. It goes quiet. The end of soliloquies, the end of secretly overheard wisdom. First thought of my own: I am not ready to think independently.

To this day, it bothers me that I think for myself while he no longer can. He always had the better thoughts in his mind. At least I write them down on slips of paper, napkins, invoices, packaging, and postcards. I always keep those notes close to me. The best question I can think to ask is: What would my neighbor have thought in my place? It's a robber's path to wisdom.

At his funeral, I read a selection of his thoughts—aphorisms collected at the end of his life. The neighbor always says you could shape a person from just three anecdotes. So I share three anecdotes, and he comes alive one last time. One anecdote: he isn’t a doctor; he just wants the best seat in the coffeehouse.

My neighbor leaves me a final note: "First read everything, then forget everything." Only now do I realize that his helplessness is perhaps the wisest thing about him. His favorite words are "maybe" and "perhaps."

The neighbor has no children. What remains of him? He leaves me his book collection. I rent a storage room on Lazarettgasse in Vienna and set up a library in it. Then I plant a tree for him on the Wilhelminenberg hill using orange and lemon pits, promising to hang myself from it when the branches can bear my weight. Southern fruits don’t grow here. Life goes on.

(English sample of pp. 55-79)

13

In the past, *ships of fools* were used to transport the mad from cities to the outskirts, where new facilities were created for them. Today, the ship has become a bus.

I get off at the bus stop named after the psychiatric ward. Along with a few others who also want to go there, I head towards the main building. Here, we do not say the name of the psychiatric ward; instead, we refer to it with reverence. In Munich, people fear Haar, while in Vienna, they fear Steinhof. These place names have become synonymous with horror. But isn't the horror just a cliché?

It is summer. The clinic grounds are unexpectedly beautiful, resembling a mix of a park and a village, with paths lined by maple and ash trees. I see doctors moving purposefully, and a man drags a wet sleeping bag behind him, leaving a trail like a slug. In the center, I pass a small church, and as the bells begin to ring, their sound mingles with the noise of traffic on the nearby highway. The few people I encounter offer me a brief greeting. There is even a small café where one can buy cheesecake, deodorant, and condoms. I pass an old building that once served as a laundry, then a file storage facility, and is now a museum dedicated to the cruelties of the Nazi era.

I continue on, passing greenhouses and beehives. I've been told that the clinic used to be self-sufficient. Patients grew and harvested their own vegetables, and the grounds were surrounded by pumpkin fields. The remarkable thing about pumpkins is that every part of the plant can be eaten: the peel, the flesh, and the seeds. For months, the patients were confined to a pumpkin diet: pumpkin soup, baked pumpkin, pumpkin pie—until some began to believe they were pumpkins themselves.

I arrive at the main building, an old brick structure from the mid-19th century. Although I am no longer in Vienna, the buildings remind me of the Wilhelminenberg and the Steinhofgründe. I recall memories of the sixty pavilions of the Vienna Psychiatric Clinic, thoughts of my grandfather, whom I never knew, and memories of my neighbor, whom I had the chance to know a bit. Sometimes, I wish I could live without memory, in pure presence.

At the admissions desk, I introduce myself as if I had been expected. I am asked to be patient, so I sit down and leaf through a magazine. Nurses and patients are smoking outside the door. Seven police officers arrive, escorting a tall man. The giant raises his arm to greet the lady at the desk, but then he notices his hands are bound with cable ties. She simply nods in acknowledgment.

Then the head psychologist enters. The first thing I notice is her unflinching gaze, which carries the weight of thirty years in the field of psychiatry. Her eyelids are only half-closed, and her mouth is narrow. “There’s no need to be afraid,” she says, her tone hardened. “Of course, that’s just a phrase. If I were in your shoes, I’d be terrified.”

She asks me a series of questions before guiding me to my ward for a brief introduction: dining room, lounges, group rooms, and an inner courtyard where patients can smoke and drink coffee.

The doctor in charge welcomes me. He wears a white coat and has even whiter teeth. The head psychologist towers over him, appearing almost ethereal in comparison. Perhaps it’s because her brain has been elevated to nearly two meters for so long. The doctor, on the other hand, presents as down-to-earth, a doer and a realist—someone who discusses bodies and brains rather than souls.

The doctor explains the daily routine: breakfast from 7:30 to 8:30 a.m., lunch from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m., and dinner from 7:00 to 8:00 p.m. in the dining room. There are also morning rounds, therapy groups, and senior physician visits.

It's a strange sensation: feeling secure in a psychiatric hospital. But why not? Here, I can retrace my family history like a snail’s trail.

My family has a talent for madness. Thus far, everything seems as normal as it has always been. There is an above-average number of medical professionals among doctors ’children studying medicine; conversely, the children of patients often become subjects of medical treatment. Many terms exist to describe these patterns. In mythological terms, they can be seen as ancestral curses; in more clinical terms, they represent predispositions, emotional inheritances, delegations, and hereditary diseases.

In my neighbor’s library, in the orange section, I read that on average, one in two children of parents with mental illness will themselves develop mental health issues. After that, I devoured everything I could find on the subject. It didn’t help; rather, it only fueled my fear and brought me to this point. The difference now is that the doctor is not taking me to my room, but to my office.

Despite my neighbor's advice, I decided to study psychology again. I spent years learning about statistics, research methods, experimental designs, and data analysis. Now I can condition pigeons and calculate the average weight of a pumpkin harvest. Like most of my fellow students, I wanted to understand how the human mind works.

14

My father spent the first two years of his life in an orphanage. It was there that he learned to see, crawl, grasp, walk, and speak his first fifty words.

One August day, he was adopted by a teacher couple and moved from Vienna to a village at the foot of a small mountain in Lower Austria. His adoptive mother wanted to make up for everything that had happened to him. She invented stories for him, took him with her to get milk, and swung the jug in a circle without spilling a drop. She even made toys for him. Unfortunately, two years later, she died, and my father ended up back in the orphanage.

Half a century later, in a seminar on developmental psychology, his son watched footage of orphanages in Vienna from the 1950s. The pioneer of infant research, René Spitz, had worked there. As he viewed the black-and-white film, he wondered if his father could be seen among the children. He read the captions: “The physical and psychological relationships between mother and child create an emotional climate that makes the environment and life itself meaningful. They provide the stimulus for growth in every sense of the word and transform the infant into a human being. Without them, the spark that was kindled at birth will gradually go out, stunting even the child's physical growth.” The son wondered if that was why his father was so short.

My father was only allowed to return to his family when they found a new wife for his adoptive father. He was left with his third mother, whom he referred to as his governess. He grew up as a strict Catholic, with his days filled with prayer and gardening.

The large garden was the pride of his adoptive father, whose specialty was grafting trees. He would select a young, lignified branch with dormant buds, remove the leaves while leaving the petioles, and cut the branch lengthwise with a grafting knife, making a small counter-cut. He chose a suitable spot on the trunk to place the branch, cleaned and cut the area, aligned the cuts, and then tied the trunk and branch together with grafting tape and wax. After a few weeks, they would see if the grafting had been successful; a healthy, growing branch would indicate it had worked.

My father never truly fit into his new family. It wasn’t just that he was unhappy with his parents; his parents were also unhappy with him. They attributed his behavior to the genetic traits inherited from his biological parents. With this convenient explanation, as he later wrote in his notes, the two dutiful educators washed their reputations and souls clean. He wondered why his father had never managed to have a biological child of his own—a child who could have exonerated him and been a sibling at the same time. These questions shaped my father's childhood.

I knew his adoptive parents differently. His mother was often found standing at the bread slicer in her plastic flower dress before sunrise and rolling apricot dumplings by noon. His father

would pick blackberries, sprinkle sugar on the sour ones, and give them to me on long summer afternoons in Lower Austria. But disappointment lingered among father, mother, and son for the rest of their lives. My father was not the child they had envisioned when they chose him from the orphanage, but he did possess those big, wondering eyes.

Years later, when his adoptive father developed dementia, he misplaced his expectations onto my father. For the rest of his life, he mistakenly believed that my then-unemployed father was the director of the Vienna State Opera. In order to become that director, my father would have at least needed to finish school, but he had dropped out. “I’m not cut out for studying,” he later told me. Though he loved the mountains, he lived in a village in the lowlands. He wanted to be an electrician, but there were no electricians in Kaumberg. Instead, he tinkered with mopeds and radios in his spare time.

His mother took him to a machine fitter who was looking for helpers. "Do you also do anything with electricity here?" he asked. The boss pointed to a socket. Instead of going to school, my father spent his days producing small spare parts for machines he neither knew nor understood. Nonetheless, he was determined to earn his journeyman's certificate. “That’s something you can use to get out of Kaumberg,” he told himself. Little did he know that the machine-fitter trade would soon cease to be an officially recognized apprenticeship, with machines taking over the production of these parts.

At least he managed to escape: first to Vienna, then to Kiel, and even to Paris. But even Paris wasn’t far enough. “Actually, I would have liked to become a truck driver,” he later said, “to be on the road all the time.” He dreamed of a life on the road, in the driver’s cab. Another time, he mentioned wanting to be a psychologist, which would have been an inward journey instead of an outward one.

In the end, he found himself in Munich, working at a temporary employment agency. He wanted to live in a shared flat, but only students occupied those, not temporary workers with a Lower Austrian dialect. After some time, he managed to find his own apartment in a rundown building.

He continued to live in fear of hell and the devil, which kept him from leaving the church. Throughout his life, he had been taught the concept of original sin—first through Adam and Eve and then through his parents, a lunatic and a nanny.

Like many in the seventies, he was on a spiritual journey, trying out various sects that promised an alternative to Catholicism: Moonies, Scientology, Osho. However, even those options felt too strict for him, reminiscent of the dogmas he sought to escape. Eventually, he took the initiative to organize a reading group himself.

That's when my mother entered the picture—a promise, a lioness among people. She was his opposite: quick-tempered, determined, and pragmatic. He, on the other hand, was gentle, quiet, and dreamy. Perhaps those who grow up feeling that their character is wrong and insufficient are drawn to individuals whose nature is completely different.

Both of them worked nights. My father delivered newspapers, and when his shift ended, he would go to her at dawn. They must have lain together somewhere in Pasing, like the newspapers left on doormats. Together, they began exploring esoteric teachings, perhaps as a way to escape the constraints of reality. They started with glasses and eventually acquired a Ouija board. This flat board, inscribed with letters, numbers, and the words "Yes," "No," and "Goodbye," is also known as a witch board or soul writer, supposedly allowing contact with supernatural beings. I don't know what questions they asked.

Not long after, my mother, a determined and impatient woman, moved in with my father and my brother. In his apartment on Rosenheimer Straße, my mother dived into spiritualism, a popular practice in America at the time. So now, in the 1840s, two young people sat in front of each other by candlelight in Haidhausen, trying to summon spiritual beings through these practices, much like their role models in Saratoga Springs, USA. New Yorker Jane Roberts and her husband, painter Robert Butts, had written books known well beyond the deepest Allgäu, claiming they received messages from a being named Seth, after the Egyptian god of chaos. America was a place that knew how to sell desire—the pursuit of happiness, love, beauty, money, and gods—in short, the imaginary.

In the evenings, my mother would lie on her bed, experimenting with necromancy, possibly making contact with her unconscious. As if possessed, she would shake and speak in tongues, establishing a connection with a being that transmitted wisdom to her: Aaron. My father acted as a recorder of the paranormal, like Robert Butts, writing down every word. My brother, perhaps seven years old at the time, anxiously observed the scene through a slit in the door. It must have looked like an exorcism, but it was a ghost eviction instead.

Then, my parents received a letter: the building they lived in was scheduled for complete renovation. Soon after, the landlord turned off the electricity, and all the other tenants moved out. My parents stayed behind, lighting candles. The exorcisms now occurred at night. They had a dream of offering seminars and writing a book, just like the Americans.

During the day, they spent hours sleeping. In the morning, my brother, now around eight, got ready for school on his own, dressing and brushing his teeth. When he returned home at noon, my parents were still asleep. He would either make himself lunch or skip it altogether. My mother later commented, "For them, it was like a shared flat." My father had always wanted to live in one anyway.

Eventually, they gave up and decided to move away. They wanted to escape Munich, especially my grandmother's city, which still consumed the family's emotional energy due to her illness. My mother continued to care for her, but she didn't want to be blackmailed any longer. Despite her mother's threats of self-harm if she left, she chose to move.

She relocated with my father to an empty farmhouse in a lethargic village in the Ostallgäu. The building had chalk-white walls and fir-green shutters, situated by a small stream with a forest in the distance. The village was called Ödwang, a name that sounded like an Allgäu version of Eden and a pastoral paradise. There, they planted a garden and acquired pets: cats, rabbits, chickens, ducks, and a huge Bernese mountain dog.

My parents tried to be self-sufficient, no longer wanting to be dependent on anyone. They grounded themselves with gardening and channeled spirits. Like their American role models, they wrote a book. They named it after their own spirit: *Aaron*. In the Bible, Aaron is the sinner who is denied access to the Promised Land.

When my mother went to Munich to check on my grandmother, she found her lying motionless on the living room sofa, next to an empty box of pills. She took her to the hospital. My grandmother survived. I don't know if it was intentional or a coincidence. Did she know the pills were ineffective, so she didn't die from them, as planned, 12 times? Or did she really want to die and was simply found a few minutes too early?

How did my mother feel? Helpless? Angry? Nothing? Did she feel crushed or devoured by a mother who couldn't let go? My mother snapped. “Next time, just throw yourself off the Großhesselohe Bridge,” she said to her in the psychiatric ward. “At least then it will really be over.”

Since its construction in 1857, this bridge had become the most notorious place in Munich to end one's life. Hundreds of people threw themselves down the thirty-one meters into the Isar.

My grandmother never tried to take her own life again. Perhaps also because at the same time the pedestrian crossing of the Großhesseloher Bridge had been completely barred.

My parents got married. No party, no guests, just my brother and the animals. No wedding dress, no suit, just a simple farmer's costume. When I think of my mother, I think of her hair, yellow like wooden curls. I like that hair on her best, because it is young, maybe even immortal. When I think of my father, I think of his eyes, gray and big like the Danube, never looking at me, but always into the distance.

Her book sold, and even went into a second printing. People kept coming from the city to seek her advice. But they couldn't make a living from the fees and the seminars. My mother was pregnant again. My father started working as an unskilled laborer on the assembly line at a tractor factory. Even so, they couldn't pay the rent anymore. The date of my birth coincided with the date of the eviction.

15

My office is bleak and cold, with a vinyl floor and a dying plant left behind by my predecessor. Still, I like it. I've never had an office of my own before. Inside, there's a flip chart, two chairs, and a table topped with a tissue dispenser. The head psychologist hands me my name tag, the identifying mark that distinguishes patients from employees. It reads: psychologist.

"Have you ever been in a psychiatric hospital before?", asks the head psychologist.

"Yes, but only for visits."

"It's not that easy to start in the locked ward right away. But at least you've seen some of the really difficult cases."

She receives a call, answers with just three words, and then hangs up.

"If someone starts to dissociate, you can use these," she says, pulling a box from a cupboard. Inside are chili lollipops, massage balls that resemble small morning stars, and ammonia ampoules.

"And what do I do with that?"

"Just hold it under their nose."

"Can I try it?"

"Sure. But the smell sends a pain stimulus through the brain that can bring even the dead back to life. And ventilation is rather difficult in a locked ward."

"Then I'd rather not."

"Better not to use it with drug addicts. They use it to boil cocaine and heroin, which can bring back bad memories."

The head psychologist has to leave; her schedule is packed from morning to evening. However, she offers to have lunch with me later so that I can ask a few more questions. I open the office window and see her whizzing by on a folding bike along the small paths of the clinic grounds.

Outside the window stands an ancient walnut tree, its branches tied to the central trunk with ropes to prevent them from breaking. The sight reminds me of enforced restraint. I wonder if the tree has witnessed deaths here 80 years ago.

The protected ward is what most people imagine when they think of a psychiatric facility: beds with restraint straps, high-security doors that are constantly monitored, monotony, madness, and odors. Some patients need to be monitored by nursing staff day and night; the creativity with which they can harm themselves knows no bounds.

They suffer from severe mental disorders, facing risks of suicide and aggressive behavior. The decision to admit a patient is usually made by a doctor or through a court order under the Mental Health Act: *anyone who poses a significant danger to themselves, to others, or to the general welfare, due to a mental disorder—unless their ability to understand and control their behavior is not significantly impaired—can be admitted without or against their will.*

At first, I think this is a violation of human rights. I imagine the patients protesting outside the door. Instead, I see them laughing in the smoking courtyard.

I need a coffee. As I enter the nursing station and head toward the kettle, a nurse grabs me by the arm, pushes me out, and closes the door.

“I work here,” I say through the glass.

“I hear that every other day,” she replies.

I am not wearing my name tag, so she cannot tell whether I belong to the patients or the *pumpkins*. *How could I deny that these hands and this entire body are mine? Unless I were to compare myself to certain madmen whose minds are clouded by a persistent melancholy, leading them to insist they are kings—or even pumpkins,* as I read in my neighbor's library in René Descartes' works. I decide it's safer to bring my own coffee.

Later, the nurse apologizes, mentioning that she has even dismissed a head physician once for not wearing a coat. It's not easy to distinguish between those who heal and those who need healing.

It's not far-fetched: when I look at the patients sitting on the iron benches drinking coffee, I feel like one of them. A few more years, I think, and I'll be sitting there with you. Save me a seat and keep me a cigarette. But instead of sitting among the treated on the iron bench, I occupy an office chair. I have defected. I continue walking down the corridors. Food from last week still hangs from the ceiling. Next to the nursing station, someone has written in green marker on the wall: "Be nice to us."

A few hours later, the head psychologist and I have lunch in the cafeteria. The food is from an industrial kitchen, and there's no pumpkin in sight. Suddenly, our emergency call devices, attached to the plastic pot of a plastic plant, beep and vibrate. The entire room jumps up and sprints out. We follow. Once outside, the beeping stops abruptly, and everyone calmly returns to the cafeteria. “Most of the time, it's a false alarm, but sometimes it's not,” says the head psychologist.

“What exactly is my job here?” I ask.

“It depends,” she replies.

“Isn't there a standard procedure?”

“Yes, there is,” she says, looking thoughtfully at her plate. “But actually, you’d have to develop a unique therapy for each patient.”

A unique therapy for each patient? I think there are already over five hundred therapeutic methods in the world. After lunch, she shows me a massive shelf in the testing library filled with psychological diagnostic test procedures: semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, inventories for schizophrenia and trauma disorders, as well as tests for ADHD to zyclothymia.

“With these, you can find out what they’re suffering from,” she explains.

“And then?”

“Good question. There are manuals that describe every step. But people are very, very different.”

“So, I should invent a therapy?”

“There are two possibilities: either we adapt the patient to our theory, or we adapt our theory to the patient.”

She delivers such pompous sentences with casualness, almost as if she’s reading the cafeteria's lunch menu. She herself, who is also quite tall, adopts a similar technique to make herself seem smaller, existing with a certain nonchalance.

“So, you’re trying not to be too orthodox?”

“Exactly. We are scientists, not a cult. Any questions?”

“Actually, I still don’t know what to do.”

“Just see what the problem is. Then put out the fire. Otherwise, stick to the usual: admission, diagnostics, psychopathological findings, and so on.”

“Admission?”

“You set up their file.”

“And how do I do that?”

She lets out an annoyed breath. “What the hell do they teach you at university?”

I don’t mention what I could teach the pigeons based on psychiatric principles. She prints out a few pages and hands them to me. I read through the document: it includes the reason for admission, social history, family history, and psychopathological findings. It’s an admission form for patients.

“Just imagine you were coming here for treatment yourself—think about Mom, Dad, and so on,” she suggests.

I take a seat in the office, turn on an old computer, and begin creating my own file.

16

One day in May, outside the windows, cuckoo flowers and buttercups were blooming. The parents stood in a farmhouse while their child, wrapped in thin blankets, had closed their eyes. The mother, or perhaps the father, was taking a photo with an analog camera as they held the newborn in their arms. This photo would end up stuck in a black photo album for years, eventually to be lost.

They named me Noel, after Christmas, but the mayor wouldn't allow it. "It's not a real name," he insisted. So they reversed it. The village felt trapped in the 19th century—there were no streetlights, no traffic lights, and we had no telephone or car. The nearest phone booth was several kilometers away. My parents were isolated from the outside world, which allowed them to create their own.

Summers passed in lush green, and winters in snow. The farmhouse had no heating, just a wood stove, an antique circular saw, and the forest on the other side of the creek. Mornings were freezing; if the stove hadn’t been lit yet, you could see your breath in the kitchen. Evenings were spent warming up with hot water bottles, stones heated in the stove, and beer.

The day of the eviction was approaching. I was born in this crumbling house—a beautiful, temporary situation. The agreement was that either the house would collapse, or we would move out.

However, the mayor didn’t want to just throw us out. On the day of the eviction, he took a chair from the house and symbolically placed it on the street, declaring the eviction to be complete.

There was no social housing or emergency accommodation in the district. He took the same chair and put it back inside the house, calling it “emergency accommodation.”

Now we had a year’s grace. When the house began to threaten collapse for real, a social apartment in a neighboring town became available. There was no longer room for the animals, so they were slaughtered. I think it was my mother who took on that grim task; I can't imagine my father doing it.

The new apartment was cramped, with four of us living in forty-five square meters and no bathroom. We bathed once a week, taking turns in a metal tub filled with water heated on the wood stove. Because the toilet was outside our apartment, my father urinated in the kitchen sink. He was a hypochondriac, constantly complaining of ailments like an irritable stomach and back problems. My mother, however, never fell ill; that didn't align with her outlook on life.

Strange characters inhabited the new building. Opposite us lived old Peter, who wore even older corduroy trousers and drank excessively, making his head look like a split pomegranate, covered in vascular cracks and red spots. Below us resided the Feldtänzer family, who had such keen hearing that we hardly dared to move around our apartment always wearing felt slippers.

Although the apartment was not expensive, my father had to work overtime to afford it. Eventually, he reached his breaking point. The monotony of production line work wore him down, and whether from exhaustion or boredom, he quit. Money grew tight, and we fell into debt.

My mother also found a job, discovering her passion for work. She began as a cashier in a supermarket and was happy to be out of the house, no longer just a mother and medium. Instead of digging up gardens, caring for animals and children, and receiving messages from the dead, she now scanned barcodes.

At home, my father was waiting with two children and the weight of the world on his shoulders. Everything was never good enough for him; he always believed things could be better. This litany of hardship felt familiar to my mother. It echoed what she had heard in the convent and what her mother had recited to her.

She countered it with something of her own, began further training in which she learned to work with an innovative technology, the computer.

During her training, my mother lived in a shed on the outskirts of Munich, in a friend's garden. On weekends, she visited us. My brother and I stayed with my father. But my father went into shock. Perhaps he was paralyzed by the foreshadowing that my mother might leave him. He stopped making decisions, said less and less, withdrew into himself.

Once, my father and I picked up my mother from the train station. He swerved off the road in a double curve. Fall or winter, leaves or ice. The car rolled over, a shattered window landed in my face. My face, cut beyond recognition, now looked like the face of old Peter, like a splintered pomegranate.

The father is sitting in the driver's seat. The child is in the back seat. He doesn't know if the child is dead. He dares not turn his head. He is frozen. Then he hears the child scream. It is alive. But it is covered in blood, with broken bones. He can move, he can walk. Nothing has happened to him. Maybe he gets out, gets help, stops a car. Maybe he tries to do something himself.

During the night, the surgeons sewed my face back together. Again and again we went to the doctor, and he got some more glass out of this face, this broken face. A little later, as a teenager, I wished for a mask that would cover all the scars, the hastily sewn flesh. I envied the others with their flawless skin or their simple acne. You don't see it at first glance, only at second glance. The first glance sees freckles, the second sees the injuries. How often have I been surprised to be asked, “Where did all these scars come from?” Even today, I can feel slivers of car glass under my skin. I put my finger on my forehead and feel the encapsulated glass: one of the few things left over from that time.

I don't know how long my mother waited at the train station. A short time later, she left my father. She wrote him a letter. In this family, it was always the women who left and left their men behind. So now my mother did the same. My father had taken care of us for years. Now we left him behind in this place with the telling name: Stocken.

17

The admission form not only requests the anamnesis but also the diagnosis. From now on, I will also be assigning diagnoses: schizophrenia, major depressive episode, generalized anxiety disorder, eating disorder, personality disorder, and mental and behavioral disorders caused by alcohol, opioids, and cannabis. Pumpkin, walnut, lemon. My first patient: myself.

The head psychologist states that diagnoses are important for billing health insurance companies and for the self-confidence of psychiatry. They facilitate communication with colleagues and help in planning therapies. Knowing the name of the illness and its cause makes

it easier for both doctor and patient to feel reassured. The worst thing is not understanding. “But I mainly use diagnoses to insult people,” says the head psychologist, laughing.

Words are tools. A person is never just a borderliner, a depressive, or a schizophrenic. They are someone who can no longer cope with a task in life. The illness does not arise within them but rather between us—within relationships and the world. We must be cautious that people don’t eventually believe they are completely alone and nothing more than their diagnosis. No one is crazy; they just behave that way.

There are no clear physical signs of mental disorders. Diagnoses are interpretations, not hard facts. The difference between normal and abnormal? Often arbitrary. When she began her studies, homosexuality was removed from the list of mental illnesses. Overnight, millions of people were “cured.”

I appreciate her perspective. Instead of discussing disorders, she focuses on solutions and meanings. No one can be other than what they have become up to this point. For the past, their behavior was a meaningful attempt at a solution and a protective mechanism; for the present, it no longer serves that purpose. What is a person trying to communicate through their behavior? What role does it play in their life, their environment, and society? When and where does the problem not arise? What is already going well? And could everything perhaps be entirely different?

In search of my diagnosis, I head to the clinic's large library. Inside is a large wooden table, covered with used coffee cups, sweetener, and a sugar shaker. Next to it is a skeleton model, yoga mats, and an old rowing machine. The shelves are lined with books documenting the last centuries of psychiatric history. About three meters up, the shelves contain stuffed butterflies and dried plant specimens under glass domes.

I pull out a few books, sit at the table, and flip through the DSM and the ICD, encyclopedias of mental and medical illnesses. These resources are used by experts worldwide to make diagnoses. Every psychiatrist and psychologist has one of them on their bookshelf. With each new edition, the number of recognized illnesses has increased. There are hundreds of them, each with a corresponding code. My mother is an F10.2. My father is an F33.2. My grandpa is an F20.0. My grandma has an F31.5, an F20.0, and an F13.2, as well as an F10.2. Which diagnosis should I assign to myself? Is it even possible to diagnose oneself? I can’t find a description that fits.

I continue my search by leafing through old books—handbooks and classifications of psychiatry. They are filled with forgotten illnesses. Perhaps I will find a suitable description of my situation there.

With a brown cover and yellowed pages, I discover that in the 17th century, there arose a vision of being able to categorize mental disorders as clearly as plant species. With the measurement of the world and the organization of nature and wildlife, there was a desire to measure the

soul—or rather, its aberrations. During that time, the famous English doctor Thomas Sydenham wrote: *It would be a very good thing if all diseases were reduced to final and unambiguous types, with the precision that botanists have used to describe plants.*

He decides to be among the first to create a systematic classification of mental illnesses. Sydenham believes that men primarily suffer from hypochondria, while women are more affected by hysteria. He diagnoses his patients by examining their urine, noting that hypochondriacal men produce urine the color of lemons.

Diseases can now be classified like plants, and this organization was adopted by other researchers in the 18th century. Carl von Linné, who is better known than Thomas Sydenham, was not only a botanist but also a physician. Linné designed the famous classification system for plants, animals, and minerals called "Systema Naturae," which is also on my shelf. Less well-known is his effort to categorize diseases like trees and herbs in his book "Genera Morborum." Intrigued, I open the book.

It features 11 classes, 37 orders, and 325 species, including listings for mental illnesses: 3 orders and 25 subdivisions.

Order 1: Ideales (disorders of misjudgment or alienation of the mind)

Order 2: Imaginarii (disorders primarily impacting the imagination)

Order 3: Pathetici (irregular desires)

I look out the window and observe the gardeners at work as they prune a hedge and collect branches and leaves.

Alongside Linné's work, I find numerous other inherited classifications lined up on the shelves. In one, I discover twelve variants of melancholy. I delve into these books, trying to understand what I mean when I refer to someone having a specific diagnosis. For a long time, the field of psychiatry was divided, with countless proposals regarding how to name and classify mental illnesses. However, one thing I have learned in my studies is that the concept of the soul is vague; it consistently eludes the human desire for clarity.

Emil Kraepelin is considered the founder of modern psychiatry. He began his career in the late 19th century as a doctor at a district mental hospital in Munich, in the Au district. A few streets to the west, my great-grandmother moved into a lodge; a few streets to the east, my parents later lived; and just a few meters to the south lies my family’s grave today.

Kraepelin was a nature lover and an amateur botanist. Along with his brother Carl, who later became a professor of botany, he often roamed the forests as a child, becoming familiar with the flora of their homeland. At the district asylum, Kraepelin laid the groundwork for modern

psychiatry and wrote a textbook defining mental disorders as clearly identifiable biological entities. By not only describing symptoms but also focusing on the progression of the disease and its prognoses, he revolutionized the field. This approach and Kraepelin's classification system have laid the foundation for today's classification of mental disorders.

Kraepelin's legacy extends beyond his theories. Influenced by Morel's degeneration theory, Darwin's theory of evolution, and Mendel's laws of inheritance—formulated in a monastery garden while he was crossing peas—Kraepelin believed that the “pauperization” of workers, vagrants, the mentally ill, and alcoholics was the result of “degenerate” genes. He argued that mental disorders were hereditary, leading to the gradual “degeneration” of families. Instead of preventing this decline, psychiatry should embrace the “struggle for existence.” He posited that *our civilization hinders natural selection, which traditionally favors the survival and reproduction of the fittest. The acts of human compassion that strive to preserve the lives of the sick, weak, and disabled inadvertently contribute to the proliferation of inferior genes in future generations, thereby deteriorating the race.*

In 1933, Germany enacted the Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring, marking a troubling development. It was here that the world's first psychology laboratory was established, and the terms psychiatry and psychopathology were coined. Germany led the way in forming theories and practices for diagnosing mental illnesses, which is why some historians refer to the 19th century as the "German century." Unfortunately, this line of thinking reached a horrifying peak under the Nazis through the implementation of negative eugenics. The consequences of these theories, originating from the garden and the Galapagos Islands, led to the systematic extermination of many individuals. Thousands died in German psychiatric hospitals during World War I, and between 1940 and 1941, hundreds of thousands of patients were eliminated under the T4 program. Just as a gardener distinguishes between crops and weeds, psychiatry differentiated between lives deemed worthy of existence and those seen as unworthy.

Ingeborg Bachmann, in a letter to her psychiatrist, expressed the grim reality: *You can write a person to death.* She reflected on the absurdity of emotions like fear, stating that while the feeling exists for the patient, it seems irrational to her. Even after these events, the quiet extermination of individuals continued in clinics. During both world wars, in an effort to cut costs for caring for the mentally ill, resources such as food, heating, and nursing staff were reduced, leading to overcrowded wards. These poor hygienic conditions facilitated the spread of infectious diseases. Patients weakened and starved often succumbed to tuberculosis, typhoid fever, or simply physical weakness. The number of deaths continued to rise, necessitating multiple expansions of the hospital cemetery.

Bachmann was an intern at Steinhof during the same period when my grandfather was there. She attended lectures from prominent psychologists, worked closely with the renowned psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, and had Freud's complete works on her bookshelf. However, she was also intimately aware of the darker side of mental health treatment, grappling with pills,

alcohol, anxiety, panic attacks, and hospitalizations throughout her life. Her writing reflects this dual experience—not merely theoretical knowledge but an understanding borne from personal struggle. Perhaps that is why my neighbor recommended her literature to me; it provides insight from within.

(English sample of pp.192-200)

44

Whenever I arrive in Vienna, I feel like I'm in the right place. I immediately head to the nearest coffee house I trust and order a Melange and a pastry.

"Is there anything else that comes with that?" I ask.

"A fork," replies the waiter with his usual unfriendliness before walking away.

Next, I take the bus to Ottakring, winding its way up the Wilhelminenberg to the Steinhof grounds. I know this place from my past, but now I see it differently. I enter Steinhof through the iron front door, greeted by brick pavilions and sea-green cast-iron railings.

For years, I searched for my grandfather's file. *You shouldn't read patient files; you should weigh them*, my neighbor once remarked. That's how I felt when I first held the file in my hands—it was as thick as a book. How many grams of suffering are described here? How many grams of madness?

The file states: homeless, criminal record, Morbus Bleuler, insomnia, psychopathy, chronic alcoholism, chronic depression with psychotic symptoms.

He attempted suicide for the first time in his early twenties due to unrequited love. At that time, he was repeatedly admitted to the University Clinic for Psychiatry in Vienna, where he was diagnosed with depression and schizophrenia. I don't know what he experienced there, as there are no records from the University Hospital. During that period, experiments were conducted with unusual methods: patients were infected with malaria to treat their mental issues, and lobotomies were still being performed. In 1968, my grandfather was admitted to Steinhof for the first time, where every step he took was meticulously recorded.

The notes say he took many walks and complained about the inhumane conditions but offered no alternatives. Attempts were made to integrate him into occupational therapy; for the time being, he simply sat and observed the others.

He never received any visitors but often talked about a brother who never appeared. The causes of his mother's and sister's deaths are unknown.

My grandfather spent many years of his life at Steinhof. He walked, ate, and slept there. He was always doing something, keeping himself busy or being kept busy. Perhaps he referred to the place by one of its other names, quite typical for the area: Lemoniberg, named after the golden dome of the sanatorium church, resembling a halved lemon. My grandfather took medication for psychosis. Were the usual therapies administered to him at that time?

In January, they gave the professor electric shock therapy again in Steinhof, but it was ineffective, as can still be heard from time to time on the stage of the Burgtheater downtown.

The paths lead me to the Art Nouveau church with the golden dome, which is why this place is nicknamed Lemoniberg. Angels hang outside, and Jesus Christ resides inside. I look out at Vienna and wonder how my grandfather lived and died here. I know he passed away in the spring, and I know he wrote poetry. I would give anything to have one of his poems from Steinhof—this dreadful poetry.

In his file, I also read descriptions like: *friendly, quiet, and confused. Sometimes it noted: not depressed. Additionally, there was a dismissal—a note that he was found on a park bench the next day and re-admitted.*
He escaped several times, and emphasis was placed on his reinstatement. His brother and sons are unknown. The file details numerous suicide attempts, stating he remained in Steinhof until his death.

When my father stood here twenty years ago, he spoke with a psychiatrist who informed him that my grandfather had probably never actually suffered from schizophrenia — a misdiagnosis. Insanity may not exist, but my grandfather certainly suffered from it.

From Lemoniberg, my father drove across town to the central cemetery, where he found my grandfather's grave: no name, only a wooden cross. There, my father performed a kind of ritual—pouring beer and schnapps over the grave and lighting a cigarette.

"Now I can empathize with my father's lonely life," he later wrote in his notes.

To empathize means not only to feel what your parents and grandparents felt but also to experience what they did not feel. It is about catching up on emotions and feeling the sadness of several generations — the despair, the loneliest loneliness. Over time, my father became more and more like him. Both lived alone, and both forgot their sons. In our family, empathy doesn't just mean understanding another's experience; it also involves creating a similar situation.

Now I stand at my grandfather's grave, where nothing remains but earth and grass. I search for two sticks, thrust one into the ground, and tie the other to it. Then I, too, pour out a beer and let the cigarette burn down—a first family ritual, ashes to ashes.

46

I'm sitting in the storage compartment on Lazarettgasse, nestled between my mother's boxes and my neighbor's books. I could raise a golden turtle here, move in with it, and live to be two hundred years old.

Storage rooms are more than just square meters for storage; they hold very personal stories. Often, they can help take that small step toward realizing a dream, as a flyer suggests.

Three square meters, without windows, filled with shelves and artificial light, conceal a very personal narrative.

I rummage through the boxes like a dog digging in the ground. I refuse to believe that all I'll find are old documents and garbage. At first, I carefully sift through each letter, but soon my impatience drives me to dump the contents of the boxes at my feet. Envelopes flood the stone floor. If I were to stack the letters, they would reach up to my neck. I tell myself that I will open every letter — every single one. As if something could spill out, a photo, a message, something joyful.

I work my way through the pile, encountering everything from payment reminders to final dunning letters. Soon, I expect to find the letter that will solve this macabre puzzle. My impatience grows with each passing moment, leading to an increasing roughness. Before long, I consider simply tearing the tops off the letters. Yet, all I uncover are more letters from lawyers and government offices, along with thank-you cards from aid organizations. I lose track of how many letters I've opened when disinterest sets in. Creditors and collection agencies are patient; they will wait.

Petrified, I sit among the scraps of paper, staring into space as the light flickers off. I raise my arm, and the light comes back on.

Nothing remains. I stuff the letters and envelopes back into the boxes and search for the address of the nearest dump.

As I lift the boxes onto a cart to take them to a rental truck, a thought strikes me: all is not yet lost. The story can still be written, and the lost can still be retrieved. For every memory burned, a word replaces it. For every lost photo, a sentence emerges. What I seek here, I must first create. I certainly have enough paper.

I pick up a sheet, an old writ of enforcement. On its edge, I begin to write the first sentence of a story: "In the end, there are seven boxes stacked in a dark storage compartment in Vienna."

47

For two weeks I have been living at the Hotel Stefanie. Second floor. View of Taborstraße. The tram crawls past the window. The sky is pink like Aida and Manner. I have no more goals, and it's beautiful.

Maybe you can live like this, in a temporary situation, passing through, between places, a *hotel existence*. I love hotel rooms. What is it? The order? The calm? The possibility of leaving at any time, taking everything with you? Real life is moving away: apartments, work, obligations. Before my room is vacated, I vacate it myself.

Yesterday and tomorrow don't count here. I think neither of those who were here before nor of those who will come after me. The beds are made daily, the minibar restocked, the towels changed – every day the initial state is restored. Nothing remains. The walls are silent. Nothing that could tell a story speaks. Cleaning supplies remove every speck of dirt, every trace, every memory. It is impersonal and without history. Maybe I really do come from a family of hoteliers.

I go into the bathroom, look in the mirror and grow old. The neighbor whispers in my ear: *At some point, everyone is responsible for their own face.* Some sentences stick. Some people do too. I think of my parents' faces. My mother practised her smile from an early age. My father certainly worked hard for his dreamy look.

You can dig yourself into the pain like a mine shaft. But I could also do something else. I could say: it's not light, not bright, not beautiful, but it's okay. *This is what we call life.*

All generations before me had their opportunities, all had their limitations. For a long time I thought that I would soon live as poor and lonely a life as my father, as withdrawn and tipsy as my mother. But that is not written anywhere. I leave my mother be, leave her to the wine or the water. There were those moments, those years when she was so wide awake, so warm that you forgot everything else. I don't know how she managed it, building and dismantling this life. She once said, “I wonder about that too.” Maybe she didn't have the strength for a whole life, but only for part of it. Maybe you don't have to understand everything. She carries on. She will finally leave her partner. Another detox. Another attempt. A residential facility at the edge of the forest. But that is no longer my responsibility.

My father was always somewhere else in his thoughts. Sometimes it seemed to me as if he didn't belong here. When my grandmother spoke of aliens, she perhaps meant him. I wish he had a place that was truly his. A small hut in the middle of nowhere, where no one would drive him out. With a garden, of course. Let him sleep it off in his cave.

My family was without a tale. Now that I am writing something down, it comes into the light. It was a long way out of speechlessness. It is one version of this story, one could write a

thousand different ones. That's how it was, maybe, possibly. It took me an eternity to dissect us.

Writing truly is a butcher's trade. *It's easy to be mistaken for a slaughterer.*

You would have to write a book like this about every person if you really wanted to understand them. The file now contains over two hundred pages. I have collected everything I could find. Sometimes telling the story helps. This one is yours. I fished it out of the trash.

I'll make myself a coffee. *It's easy to prepare... empty the coffee stick into a cup, add hot water, stir – and the delicious instant coffee is ready... ideal for all coffee lovers who are on the go a lot.*

There is a feeling. I don't want to give it a name. And I don't want to think about it and scare it away. I just want to explore the feeling. And out of nowhere, an ancient sentence appears in my head, a fitting and true sentence. It is not mine.

Good night, my most beloved wicked mother.

Good night, my most beloved wicked father.

The neighbor's notebook

Page 2: Carl von Linné, Critica Botanica, Aphorism 210, quoted after Isidore of Seville or Sir Edward Coke.

Page 2: Ingeborg Bachmann, Male oscuro, Suhrkamp 2020, p. 91.

Page 4: Siri Hustvedt, The Shaking Woman or a history of my nerves, New York City: Henry Holt and Company 2010, p. 112

Page 5: Sigmund Freud, Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria, Collected Works Vol. V, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 1991, p. 240.

Page 8: Alfred Döblin, The Murder of a Buttercup. In: Gesammelte Werke, Vol. II, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 2014, p. 60.

Page 8: Very loosely based on the inscription on the wall of Michel de Montaigne's library (he literally wrote wisdom on his walls, which is one way to avoid forgetting your notes).

Page 11: Melanie Klein, Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms, in: The Life of the Child's Mind, pp. 101–126, Stuttgart: Klett 1962.

Page 13: Freely adapted from Allen Frances, Saving Normal, New York: HarperCollins 2013, p. 15.

Page 14: Freely adapted from Christa Rohde-Dachser, Spuren des Verlorenen, Gießen: Psychosozial Verlag 2020.

Page 15: Freely adapted from Stendhal, "She loves me, and boredom seizes me." Quoted in Julia Kristeva, Geschichten von der Liebe, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1994, p. 338.

Page 16: Carl Gustav Jung, Memories, Dreams, Thoughts, Olten: Walter 1984, p. 54.

Page 17: Christine Lavant, letter dated 27.3.1962, Art like mine is only a mutilated life: Posthumously published and scattered poems – prose – letters. Salzburg, Vienna: Otto Müller 1978, p. 234.

Page 18: Remarks On People And Customs On A Journey Through Franconia, Swabia, Bavaria And Austria, quoted in Daniel Vitecek, The Viennese Narrenturm. The History Of Lower Austrian Psychiatry From 1784 To 1870, p. 123.

Page 18: Alexander Pushkin, God grant that madness seizes me not, in: The Poems, Insel Verlag, Frankfurt 2003.

Page 27: Bavarian Mental Health Assistance Act, Art. 5, 1

Page 27: René Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy. 1st Meditation: On What Can Be Doubted

Page 32: Diagnoses as "insults"—a term used by systemic therapist and psychiatrist Fritz B. Simon, What Is the Case? And What Lies Behind It? Diagnoses in Systemic Theory and Practice, keynote lecture at a conference in May 2017 in Heidelberg

Page 33: Thomas Sydenham, cited in A. Edgahl, Linnaeus' "Genera Morborum," and Some of His Other Medical Works. In: Medical Library and Historical Journal, Volume 5(3), 1907, pp. 185–193

Pages 33: Carl von Linné, Genera Morborum, 1759

Page 34: Emil Kraepelin, Goals and Paths of Psychiatric Research, in: Journal for the Entire Field of Neurology and Psychiatry, Vol. 42, 1918, p. 196

Page 34: Edward Shorter, A History of Psychiatry: From the Era of the Asylum to the Age of Prozac, John Wiley & Sons, 1998

Page 34: Ingeborg Bachmann, Male oscuro, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2020, pp. 64, 91

Page 36: Freely adapted from the Australian psychotherapist Michael White, a pioneer of narrative therapy

Page 37: Thomas Bernhard, Heldenplatz, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2024, p. 29

Page 37: Records of the patient Johann K.

Page 38: MyPlace SelfStorage (Press Information)

Page 39: Ingeborg Bachmann, Sensa Casa, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2024, p. 7

Page 39: Albert Camus, The Fall, Hamburg: Rowohlt 2001, p. 18

Page 39: Anna Freud, Encouragement, in: Poems – Prose – Translations, Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2014

Page 40: Ingeborg Bachmann, Male oscuro, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2020, p. …

Page 40: Jacobs Coffee, 3in1 Classic (Product Description)