

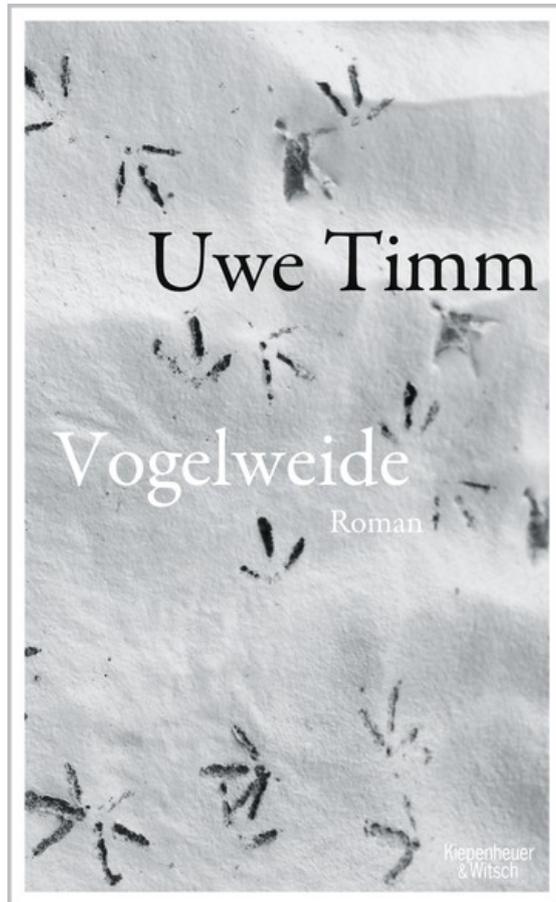
Sample translation

Uwe Timm VOGELWEIDE

("The Bird Meadow")

Novel

Translated by Anthea Bell



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The island is moving slowly eastwards. Three to four metres a year, depending on the strength of the winter storms and tides. Where he was standing now, there had been nothing but water and mud-flats forty years ago.

The wind had freshened in the last few hours. A blue-black bank of cloud lay over the western horizon. Gusts raised swirling sand from the dunes. The foam of the waves running out was driven across the beach in broad strips of grey and white. Seagulls swooped over the waves, and one of them plunged abruptly to the water with a small, silvery flash of something in its beak.

He had walked a hundred metres along the beach in the morning, covering a stretch that he searched every third day for flotsam. Today the haul amounted to an aerosol can, a glass tube containing tablets, a blue Adidas sports shoe, a can of blue yacht paint – he measured what remained of the contents: it amounted to 0.5 litres – a tub of chocolate mousse and a blue garbage bag. He collected all this in a plastic sack, which he took to the hut, from where it was taken to the mainland once a month at low tide by horse-drawn cart.

In the hut, he entered the items that had drifted ashore in his records, put water on to boil, cut bread, placed butter and jam on the table and poured boiling water on the tea in the pot. While the tea was drawing he took out his binoculars and watched the flock of birds over the neighbouring island of Nigehörn. They were waders, oyster-catchers, two or three thousand of them, he estimated, noting down the number.

He had just poured his tea when the phone call came through. He didn't recognize her voice at once. It was distorted and interrupted by electronic impulses, but he heard her saying she was in Hamburg, she thought it was about time they saw each other again, and then, rather formally, she wondered whether he had the time and inclination for a meeting.

I do have time, he said, and of course I'd like to see you. But you'll find it rather difficult to get here.

Selma had told her, she said, that he was living on an island and had been there for months now. Like Robinson Crusoe, but with a mobile. She thought it sounded exciting, if also a little comic. I can't wait to see it, she said.

He gave her the phone number of the farmer who brought visitors over from the mainland at low tide with his horse and cart. I'll have to check up on the tides, he said. And you'll need a permit for your visit.

Sounds like prison.

Yes. It's protected by law, he said, the island is a nature reserve. All the bureaucracy guarantees isolation.

She laughed, and said fine, I'm in Hamburg now, staying with a friend. I'll be with you in two days' time if you can get the permit.

He had last heard her voice six years ago: Please don't ring again. I won't take any more of it, I can't. Do you understand? This is *final*. That had been her message on his answering machine.

He had played over those remarks with the closing *final* again. And he had realized that there was no hope of getting her to change her mind now. It was her tone of voice, but most of all the fact that she had left the message on the answering machine. He listened to it several times, and then deleted it.

He called the authorities and said a woman friend, a very close friend, he emphasized, would like to come and see him for two days. Permission granted, said the departmental head, and asked if everything else was all right.

Visitors to the island were allowed only now and then in the summer months, in groups and just for an hour, if the visit was arranged in advance. Now that it was autumn no one came any more, except for Jessen the farmer, who delivered post and provisions once a week.

He sat down at the carefully set table, with his cutlery and napkin lying beside the plate. It was the little rituals that gave you something to hold on to in the isolation here. Years ago, in the Dionysiou monastery on Mount Athos, he had met a hermit who came to get fruit and vegetables from the monks. He had asked the pious man about his daily life, and the hermit, through a novice from Germany who acted as interpreter, was very willing to tell him about it: getting up with the sun, saying prayers when he heard the drum beat out the hour from the distant monastery,

sweeping his cave with a besom broom, eating his bread, cheese and olives, drinking water and saying prayers again. You could see it as the timetable of a bureaucrat: a man administrating holy business here below.

And his own day ran a similarly fixed course, determined by his duties as a bird warden: tidying the room, making his bed, sweeping the floor, mealtimes, washing the dishes, with no time left for frivolities.

Now, sitting in front of his plate of bread and the tea that had grown cold, and thinking of the phone call, her voice and the announcement that she was coming, his surprise and initial delight gave way to hesitation. For a moment he tried to persuade himself that the difficulty of the journey would keep her away, but then he had to admit that, given her determination, having to change three times was no reason not to come once she had taken the idea of the visit into her head.

He thought he still knew her. That remark of hers: It's about time we saw each other again.

For a moment he wondered whether to call and put her off. But when he looked at his mobile, he saw that she had withheld her number. He could have found an excuse that wasn't a lie. He could have said that bad weather was forecast for the next few days, even storms.

And it was a fact that the wind had risen late that afternoon.

Doubts entered his mind. The idea of having to share the hut with her for a night made him uneasy; it consisted of a living-room and three small bedrooms. Unaccustomed physical proximity, with all its startling movements and odours, talking and having to talk.

Over the last few years he had lived alone, for the last few months in this hut. And it was not impossible that he had developed habits he didn't want to share with other people. Getting up at least once in the night to pee in the open air, looking up, when there was no cloud cover, to the starry sky that seemed so close.

He would drink the elderberry juice that Jessen the farmer's wife sent over by her husband, with the information that *if the weather be cold and wet, if chills and damp in your bones be set, only the elder may banish them yet.*

If he couldn't get back to sleep he often talked out loud in the dark, not just to himself but to his ghosts, as he thought of them, friends and foes alike, living or dead. Strange to say, they sought him out here much more than in the city, even those he hadn't seen and had hardly thought of for years. They came to him in this place, perhaps because of the wind that blew almost constantly, the distant roar of the waves, the screaming – yes, it was a scream – of the gulls, and the absence of human voices. It was generally at night that the ghosts kindly came close enough for him to see them clearly before his eyes, but now and then they also came in daytime. These were not just passing memories; he held conversations with them.

He supposed that Polar explorers had a similar experience if they had lost a comrade and then, although he was already frozen to death and lay buried in the ice, suddenly saw him sitting in their tent again.

He often talked to his friend the Englishman, not just in his mind but out loud, telling him about his observations: the hawk who had been blown here to the island by the storm four days ago, the short-eared owls who threw scraps of food to their young in mid-flight. Above all, however, he told him about the turnstones. A pair of them had nested here on the island in the spring.

How precisely these eloquent names described the birds, he had thought years ago as he studied them with his friend. He and the Englishman, an ethnologist whose hobby was bird-watching, had twice gone on holiday to Amrum in the North Sea together. His friend had taught him about the flight of birds. They called it beach-talk when they let the March wind drive them along the coast by the March wind, or made their way against it, conversing with each other. Sometimes the words were snatched from their mouths by gusts of wind as they discussed Shakespeare, shell money, temple prostitution, the Ibo and the exchange rate of cowrie shells, and the caravan routes along which damask travelled through Africa.

How far away all that seemed now, and their anger as they thought of those who held power and how they dealt with the world. His friend in particular raged with wonderful stamina and energy, and knew an astonishing number of terms of abuse, mainly drawn from the anal area, for the neo-liberals whom he encountered at the university and in the administration.

Whenever his English friend went away after another visit to him in the hut, he was sorry to lose him. No more calling him at night – for although his friend never

complained of it, he suffered from insomnia – to discuss something of no importance that then always turned out, in the course of their conversation, to be something very important indeed. Eschenbach talked about his never-ending work on *Jonah and the Whale*, for which his friend had provided him with many recondite literary references. His friend was a man who read a great deal and had a remarkable memory, not a writer, and he was a man in search of knowledge.

I'm still evaluating our question-and-answer sessions, he heard himself saying. All those wishes, longings, disappointments that we recorded on tape. Meeting. Seeking. Finding. Loss.

A crazy project, his friend had said back then, when he was just embarking on it. And he repeated it again now.

Well paid, though.

The odd thing was that his friend had a beard, a full one. Had he let it grow during his illness? Eschenbach had not seen him in the last months of his life, hadn't gone to the south of France when he was on his deathbed there.

That's a whole stockpile of feelings. Your work will never end, said his friend softly.

Yes, but this is a time of cleansing.

In March, when he took up his post, as he called the time he spent here, he had arrived at the island on foot, early in the morning. His luggage, a case and a bag, was to follow the next day.

He was the only upright figure for miles around on this moist expanse of muddy land. A distant rumble attracted his attention; he was the sole feature of the landscape that might be struck by lightning here. He crossed the greyish-brown surface, sinking in up to his ankles now and then. Water that seeped, trickled, flowed in narrow channels, and he had to wade through them, water streaming westward. The ground, saturated with moisture, forming grey-brown bubbles with underground watercourses running through them, merged without a break into an overcast, dark grey sky. Deep silence. This was what the world must have looked like just after the land was parted from the water, the earth from the heavens. An unconscious void.

He took the path indicated by waymarks topped with black bristles, where the ruts of cartwheels were only occasionally to be seen, describing a curve around the embanked island of Neuwerk and going on towards the grey horizon. He waded through cold water in the channels, and after an hour and a half he saw the island of Scharhörn emerge from the grey in the distance, a slightly hilly tract of land, overgrown with bushes, not very wide: a strip of yellowish grey with dunes only a few metres high. The silence of his progress as he walked into peace and indifference, the absence of the hectic activity of the last few days.

He had set out from the city and went to the railway station. On the platform, he witnessed a violent argument between two young men, not in the least ragged or drunk but well dressed, carrying briefcases, probably on their way to the office or the university. He thought they were about to come to blows, but then they turned and marched away in different directions, standing there with a few metres between them, as if they hadn't just been shouting *Big-mouth* and *Bastard* at each other.

That had been his farewell to the city.

After three hours – he had taken his time – he reached the island. Fine rims of ice glittered on the firmer ground where samphire grew, rising gradually from the mud-flats. He went up the path through the marram grass up to the dune where the hut stood. A white container with five windows on the longer wall, standing on a plinth of massive piles three metres tall for protection from the storm tides. The walkway round it, which was secured by a wooden fence, had a view of the whole island, and beyond it to the uninhabited neighbouring island of Nigehörn, where an old, partially dilapidated hut stood along with a few trees and bushes. The two islands were separated by a broad channel, but they were growing slowly together as they moved south-east.

The island warden, who was first and foremost a bird warden, lived alone here from March to October.

This spring the young woman chosen for the job, a zoologist, had fallen sick, although *sick* was a rather indirect term for a pregnancy that was not without its problems. An acquaintance, a professor of ornithology whom Eschenbach had once helped to take a count of the birds, phoned him to ask – since young people suitable for the job couldn't or didn't want to be found in a hurry, and it meant a separation of some months from their partners – whether he might be interested.

He had said yes at once.

He was listening to the crackling and hissing of logs in the stove, and had just put more water on to boil, when she rang again. She had booked a hire car, she said, and could come tomorrow. She wanted to know about the tides, and when she could come over at low tide in the horse-drawn cart. And after all he hadn't said anything about bad weather, just: Bring something warm with you. Although he ought to have said: Bring a raincoat.

He had told the conservation authorities about her visit, he said, and she could stay for one night.

She had asked again, laughing this time, why this flight from the world? Why such a tiny little island?

You'll see it. And don't hope for beautiful bays and cliffs. It's nothing like that, just a flat, sandy island in the middle of a sea of mud-flats.

After this second call he went down to the beach. The breakers were high, with the tide pressing against the water as it ran out, and there was a fair wind.

He was naked, since he didn't have to consider anyone else's feelings, and walked past herring-gulls that flew up, startled, uttering wild, nightmarish screams, he waded through the ebbing waves and jumped into the water, which was already very cold and salty at the end of September. It carried him as he swam on his back and bore him up for a while. Then he changed to a crawl and swam further out, and as usual he thought that if he got cramp now, or an attack of faintness, there would be no one here to notice. It was an idea that held no terrors but, if anything, was rather reassuring.

He turned, swam back to the beach and lay down in the sand to let the wind dry him, shivering suddenly when one of the fraying little white clouds covered the sun. He had never practised yoga, but he thought it must be just like this when you sank slowly into yourself, and the back and forth of ideas and images, of wanting and wishing, disappeared in a twilit dark behind your eyelids.

What distinguished him from everyone he had left behind in the city was that he had no plans. He didn't have to plan beyond the present day. Unlike Ewald the architect, who was very much a planner – a planner of buildings and lives – and unlike Anna, who had called just now. He had heard that she had an art gallery in Los Angeles.

He too had once been a planner; he had planned to reduce superfluity. Keeping things terse, slimmed-down, fast. Ah, these hunters of composure, as Selma called them. Selma who sat at her work-bench making a silver bracelet. Now he was the collector of a little data about bird species and the flight of birds, about weather and the tides, water and mud-flats, he described things and that was all.

You're romanticizing, Ewald had once said.

What a word, he had thought, replying: Well, if that's the way you see it, I don't mind.

One reason for his alacrity in taking the job had been the renovation of the building opposite his apartment. Its tenants, with some of whom he used to pass the time of day, were mainly elderly, and financial inducements had persuaded them to move out. Renovation was not quite the right word; the building was being ruthlessly gutted, internal walls demolished, and the ceilings of the apartments had been propped up, with strips of plastic stuck over them to protect the stucco, which would probably be washed down and repainted later. He was woken in the morning by a long-drawn-out squeal from the small hoist bringing up materials outside the building, then there was a brief burst of noise from a pneumatic drill, then the screech of a circular saw. Then silence. The builders had announced their presence on the site. For a while he had wondered whether to go out into the country and take a room in a cheap boarding-house. But when he totted up the fees still due to him, he had to admit that his only option was to go on putting up with the noise ringing so insistently in his ears in the usually calm if bleak back yard. The idea of living beside the sea was enticing, and so, above all, was the thought of being on his own for a good stretch of time.

He had been to this island once before, decades ago. Just before their final exams, he and a school friend had cycled from Hamburg to Cuxhaven, and went on to Neuwerk in the horse-drawn cart. They had slept in a barn there, and three days later made their way to Scharhörn at low tide. It was forbidden to set foot on the island even at the time. He and his friend wanted to draw attention to ammunition dumped there after the war. They heroically called their venture *Occupation of the Island*. The police picked them up, freezing and exhausted, after a single night. In fact they couldn't have stayed any longer because they had not brought enough drinking water. Even the local press hadn't published any reports of their protest.

His abiding memory was of the wind, the sand and the screaming of the birds.

So the professor's inquiry was very timely, and as he had no commitments that couldn't be postponed or left until later it was easy to say yes. He was free to do as he liked. The price to be paid was his modest way of life, but he did not talk about that. And he had nothing to complain of after the catastrophe, the bankruptcy for which he was responsible. He had reached rock-bottom. Although the word *reached* was inaccurate; he had fallen headlong. Now he made his living from various commissions and other jobs. It was a very common way of life, as he knew from his circle of acquaintances: those who went on working even after pensionable age just because they wanted to, and those who went on working to avoid having to apply for social security. Hartz IV, the regulation concerned, was the verbal disguise for that, and he would have claimed support without feeling ashamed, but his work was interesting, he even enjoyed it. For a good three years he had been editing city and country guides for a publisher of travel books. He travelled in cities and lands that he had never seen and would never be able to see, and strangely enough, after he had corrected the texts he didn't even want to visit those places. Kathmandu and La Paz, Iceland and Bhutan. The main part of his work was checking the facts and moulding the eccentric sentences into shape. He thought of it as *moulding* them because he really did discover how malleable sentences are, particularly when they are wrong, crooked and distorted in the first place. How astonishingly original bad spelling can be.

Now and then he went into a big bookshop that provided upholstered seating corners, thus enticing customers in to spend time and money there, and dipped into recently published novels. He copied out sentences that were notably successful or unsuccessful in their phrasing. The managing editor of the travel books firm, to whom he sent examples of linguistic bathos on the part of highly regarded authors now and then, was always advising him to publish a collection of contemporary stylistic gems, but to do that he would have had to acquire and read those and other books, and it didn't seem to him worth it. This went on over the years. Now and then the editor rang him saying: I have another of those verbal tangles, this one's on Mexico, would you have time to deal with it? And if he felt inclined to – that was the real question, since he had plenty of time – he said yes and set to work.

Earlier he had written poetry, and had even published a slim volume, more of a booklet really, under the imprint of a small publishing firm. One of those poems dated from the Occupation of the Island, as he and his school friend called it.

The Message

*The cuneiform tracks in the sand
Are beyond interpretation.
Ornithologists tortured
Sandpipers and oyster-catchers
With limed twigs in vain;
Even the probability calculus
Of the Assyriologists
Could not decipher that script.
A computer wrote:
 Mene Tekel.
It was left over from the programming
Of a subject index
To the Old Testament.
The message will not reach us,
And, extinguished by the tide,
Nothing will be left
But a rumour:
 From the sixth book of Moses,
 From the philosophers' stone
 From the formula of the world
Hope.*

Re-reading it, he thought the bit about torture was dramatically far-fetched, and *beyond interpretation* both affected and superfluous. He'd still had to learn how to leave things out at that time, how to cut. It struck him as contrived, and a sign condemning the poem as a whole was the fact that he could no longer think himself back into his mood when he wrote it.

Unlike that other, very distinct image. The woman walking along the rows of seats, her attitude, her height, holding herself so upright, no looking around, no searching, no hesitation. She had seen the empty seats in his row, and unhesitatingly had walked along the rows towards him. Her hair was blonde to pale brown – no, it was the colour of brass with a greenish touch in it, something he had never seen before – and she wore it tied back in a pony-tail.

She sat down beside him, leaving one seat free between them. During the lecture (*The Meaning of Town Planning Today*) he had placed his hand on the empty seat, and once, when he briefly glanced her way, he saw her own hand, a hand well used to grasping things, lying beside his. Her nails were not painted. His assumption that she had children was to be confirmed later.

Her hand and his lay side by side, not intentionally but by chance if you think of planning in relation to the will, yet full of significance, for after a brief glance and a mutual smile they both withdrew their hands at the same time.

A happy moment.

Later, he had asked a physiologist about what we call shining eyes. The man said that in fact endorphins stimulated the lustrous bodies in the eye, and they created the shining effect. A word for a phenomenon that had taken centuries to find its scientific explanation. Like the expression *on the same wave-length*, in use long before the discovery that every physical body has a certain frequency: *He's not on my wave-length*.

That leads to interferences, the physiologist had said, either negative and decreasing or positive, building up and superimposed, thus creating pleasing harmony.

To that Eschenbach had replied, hesitantly, that a glance, a direct and intuitive glance, was not the same as seeing.

What?

You can see when someone's afraid, but no one conveys his fear to you in a glance. The glance includes what's caught at the moment of glancing, that's the sight he sees. And he glances back. Isn't that the truth of the feeling?

In reply the physiologist had merely said *possibly*, with a touch of irritation in his voice.

After the lecture, when the audience was on its feet and making for the exits, and their row had to wait for a little while, Eschenbach had plucked up his courage, as he put it to himself, and addressed her, asking whether she was an architect. No. She asked him the same question. No. Two times no is a link between people that lasts for at least a year, he had said. It wasn't original, but she laughed, and that led to the next question. Could there be more correspondences between their professional lives?

She was a teacher, she told him, of art and Latin.

Oh.

That's what everyone says.

Sorry. How can I make up for that *Oh*?

What do you do, then? she asked provocatively.

I simplify things. I bring order into disorder, and in turn that creates more disorder.

Now I could say *Oh*. And she laughed. But what exactly do you do?

I manage a software company, he said – playing it down, because he owned the company.

And what's it all about?

We develop programs that make everything work faster and more effectively. Or no, aim to make them work that way. But it's not as interesting as your Latin and particularly your art teaching. Not a very usual combination. Art must surely be the subject that all students enjoy.

At that moment a tall, lean man had come over to them, gave Eschenbach a friendly nod and, with a nod of his head to a group of men and women a little way off, told her: They're waiting.

As she left, she turned back once and waved to him. He felt as if she were being dragged away from him.

From then on he went to lectures on architecture and town planning, hoping to meet her, always with the embarrassing sense that he was acting like a schoolboy. He did finally meet her, but not at all in the way he expected.

Selma the silversmith, with whom he had been for two years – you couldn't say he had been living with her, because they had separate places – got an invitation from a man who owned an art gallery. Selma had made this man a bracelet.

The gallery was exhibiting pictures by a young and apparently rising artist. In the big room, small tables had been arranged in such a way as to form a large one, covered with paper tablecloths. The moment when he entered the room with Selma and recognized her among all the people standing around was a shock, not of joy or delight, it was just a shock that went through him. She was wearing her thick hair pinned up, and it shone the colour of brass again in the cold light. She wore a black, close-fitting dress with a white collar, and she was in conversation with other guests,

including the man who had taken her away from him on the evening of the lecture. It was in her glance of surprise that he found himself again. And so they greeted each other. He had kept that image, he still kept it here in the hut, remembered with distressing exactitude and in spatial depth.

Selma nudged him, indeed shook him. Hey, what's the matter?

When the guests standing around dispersed and sat down at the long table, where there was no pre-arranged seating plan, to eat lentil soup made according to a North Korean recipe, Selma pointed to where the woman he had been staring at was sitting with the man who, it soon turned out, was her husband beside her. So the four of them sat together. Eschenbach mentioned in passing that they had met once before, and the woman told her husband that he had been there as well. He shook his head and couldn't remember the occasion. They gave their names and talked about their professions, Anna the art teacher, her husband Ewald, an architect, Selma the silversmith, and once again Eschenbach mentioned his company and had to explain what was already obvious and easily understood about the other careers. Yes, it was a software company.

What does it do?

It's for working out all possible developments, simplifying and making the most of them. In short, for bringing order out of chaos. Or at least trying to, he corrected himself.

Ewald the architect wanted to drink to that and said it was just what he could do with. His architectural bureau was about to build a housing estate in China – no, what was he saying, not a housing estate, a positive city. The tower of Babel, even at the planning stage. Did Eschenbach's work have any application to the construction industry?

In principle, yes, said Eschenbach, who was not interested in looking for a customer here but had to concentrate on not looking at her, Anna, the whole time while he talked about algorithms and heuristic methods, words whose meaning eluded him even as he spoke them because what he saw suggested to him very simple words: lips, eyes, eyelids, chin, cheekbones, hair – hair that cried out to be touched.

Selma, wonderful Selma finally said, you talk as if chaos were about to overwhelm us. The system would be great for me at home. Although she was so close to the analyses of order, she said, everything was always topsy-turvy with her.

Ewald said the project was in a different league, that was all.

Anna tried to interrupt him. Oh, please no more about that construction work in China.

His office, he continued, especially he himself, was overwhelmed with the building. Twenty people in his office were dealing with the project. And then there were the Chinese. The bureaucracy. Incredible.

Selma took that as her cue to start talking about her own trip to China, Hong Kong and Macao years ago.

On business? asked Ewald.

No, she said, privately.

Eschenbach knew that it had been a journey with a lover, and it came to a dramatic end. Her lover had been arrested in China. It was to turn out afterwards that he had been an arms dealer, but he had told Selma he dealt in antiques. Not exactly a lie, because he was selling second-hand weaponry. After flying out with him first-class she had to fly back in economy, with a beautiful little Ming vase on her lap; she had managed to get it through Customs in the guise of a small souvenir. Later, she had given it to Eschenbach for his birthday, just like that. The most valuable birthday present he had ever received.

The name Anna, he said, was as interesting in its sonority as linguistically, as it could be read forwards and backwards, and he would like to tell her, a Latin teacher, that there were also palindromes in information technology, although they didn't have to make sense, they just had to be symmetrically constructed round a central point. She asked whether he had studied mathematics. No, theology, he said, then a bit of sociology, it was only later that he'd made his way into computer science. Now this, now that – still unusual at the time, although it was perfectly normal today.

Then the conversation had turned to Chinese restaurants in Berlin.

Selma and Ewald, both of them connoisseurs of Chinese cuisine, compared the quality of various restaurants. Ewald mentioned one full of devotional items rescued from the Cultural Revolution, a place where he often took his business contacts, and where rumour had it that the family's grandmother still did the cooking. And he told a joke that he had heard several times on his last visit to Shanghai. Why do Europeans have such long noses? Because they have to go poking them into everything.

My goodness, said Anna, if all Chinese jokes are so laborious...

But Selma laughed until everyone else had to laugh with her.

Then the female half of the gallery-owning couple asked for silence, said that unfortunately the artist himself hadn't been able to come, but after all, his pictures spoke for themselves, and then she went on for some time about habitual modes of seeing things, deconstruction and the significance of colour breaks. Adding, as if the word *breaks* had reminded her of business, that prices were available on application.

There was applause, and murmurs of approval. At that moment Anna, dressed as she was with discreet elegance, said: I ask you, look at this bunch! And out of her mouth, which usually framed such thoughtful remarks, came the words: I mean, this pair of gallery owners, husband and wife, what a po-faced couple!

Ewald said: Not so loud!

No, really, Anna insisted. Look at her! A dry black ghost all done up to look like an intellectual. Those outsize horn-rimmed glasses on her nose. That silly mocking smile on her mouth. And the guy beside her, that look on his face, the ever-so-cool airs he puts on. Makes you want to lay into him. As for the others – well, there you have a cross-section of our society. Dough and aesthetics. A good thing the artist didn't come, I like him better for it even if his pictures are useless.

Ewald tried again: Please, Anna, not so loud! At least wait until we're outside!

No, it has to be said here.

But you're sitting here anyway!

Exactly, we're sitting right in the middle of it, so that's why we ought to go. And turning to Eschenbach, she said: Don't misunderstand me, I've only had a single glass of red to drink. It was rather vinegary at that.

Eschenbach, surprised by her unconcealed malice, laughed; he agreed with her, he said, about both the characters here and the wine. As he said so, he had fleetingly touched Anna's hand, and he felt as if he had suffered a small electric shock. The foolish thought came to him that the electric charge might be to do with her thick hair that had such a metallic sheen. Could you charge yourself up just by sitting somewhere, or was her fury huge enough to be measured in amperes?

Selma insisted on a meeting next weekend at the Chinese restaurant mentioned by Ewald.

Next Saturday?

Ewald searched his electronic timer. Yes, I can make that.

Anna said she'd have time too, a remark that was sweet to Eschenbach's ears. Selma was free then anyway. And Eschenbach decided to postpone or cancel any engagement, however important, that he might find in his planner at home.

The two couples said good night, assuring each other that it had been a lovely evening in spite of the useless pictures. Eschenbach also agreed, although he hadn't really looked at the pictures, something abstract in monochrome grey.

The first warm spring evening; even the weather suited their mood. Arm in arm, the two couples went down the street to a taxi rank.

How close to him Selma still is, how friendly, meeting him without any resentment. Here on the island, too, he senses her warmth, the pleasure she takes in the future, her physical ease even as a ghostly lover.