

The Fluid Land

a novel by

Raphaela Edelbauer



Sample translation by Marshall Yarbrough

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The Fluid Land
(Das flüssige Land)
by Raphaela Edelbauer
novel
August 2019
350 pages, hardcover
Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart

A dizzying, powerful and highly original debut novel.

When her parents die in an accident, the highly talented physicist Ruth Schwarz is confronted with an almost intractable problem. Her parents' will calls for them to be buried in their childhood home, but for strangers, Gross-Einland remains stubbornly hidden from view.

When Ruth finally gets there, she makes an amazing discovery: beneath the town lies a huge cavern which seems to exert a strange control over the lives of the inhabitants. There are hidden clues about the hole everywhere, but nobody wants to talk about it. Not even when it becomes clear that the stability of the entire town is in jeopardy.

Is the silence controlled by the powerful countess who rules the community? And what role does Ruth's family history play?

The more questions Ruth asks, the more vehement resistance she encounters from the residents. But she digs deeper and deeper, and soon realizes that the key to deciphering the mysterious social structures in town lies in the history of the hole.

In the language-critical tradition of Thomas Bernhard and Elfriede Jelinek, Raphaela Edelbauer weaves village social structures into an opaque dream fabric that is frighteningly true to life and that gets to the bottom of repressed memory. This novel is a showcase for the gifts of an extraordinary new literary voice from Austria.



The Fluid Land

Raphaela Edelbauer

I can vividly remember driving down the rough path, which wobbled in my rearview mirror as if it were suspended from the trees. The improvised road seemed to be anything but an official route: the spruce trees had been cut down with a chain saw, the stumps hewn so close to the ground that you could just manage to push larger cars over them. But though this had cleared the trunks out of the way, new shoots were already sprouting up from the ground. I immediately lost my bumper, despite the fact that I was only moving at a crawl by this point. Moving forward at all brought considerable difficulties, as the ground I was driving on was shifting in all three dimensions at once. When I tried to go downhill, my car was pulled sideways by its angular momentum and crashed into a stump. In extricating myself from the ditch I had landed in, I sliced through a bush, which tore off my left side mirror. Although it was only three o'clock, the light was dim—so thick had the forest become. My car got stuck between two fir trees. I had to get out and push it through the bottleneck from behind, and no sooner was I back behind the wheel than I slid off the road again. An hour had passed, and I had barely moved.

Finally a meadow marked the end of the wood, and even better: a short distance ahead I saw the start of a paved road that led into a town. I put my car in neutral—by now it was rattling on its axles like an insect stuck on its back—and let it roll for the last hundred meters leading out of the wood. Branches had gotten wedged in the frame all over the hood, and the dents in the doors made me doubt if I would even be able to get out. It was impossible to say how much time had passed from when I first entered the forest and when I reached the road. When finally I was driving on asphalt again, I saw what looked like a newly erected road sign rising up in front of me: GROSS-EINLAND. [...]

Never was I so intensely aware of what an old Austrian town looks like than in the moment when I drove my battered vehicle through the square opening in the city wall. About a hundred meters past a small cluster of houses, I crossed over a stone bridge and had reached the middle of town. Orderly in a way that only a medieval market can be, the epicenter of everyday activity



came into view just after passing through the gate. It was a rectangular main square framed by picturesque buildings: a doll-house-like elementary school; a red post office with a golden post horn; a bakery with a gleaming pretzel bobbing back and forth on its swinging doors; an inviting tavern that gave off a cozy glow; an old-fashioned eating house, dimly lit in the already faint evening light. As I had not set foot in any sizable human settlement in a week, the sight of the buildings, the cobblestones, the lanterns—seemingly hand-lit—put me in a state of exaggerated cheerfulness. The tiny, winding streets went off in all directions, only to vanish mysteriously when they turned a corner. Meanwhile everything was unbelievably clean and well-maintained—a perfection that I had never encountered in even a single square meter of Vienna. To the right, on a steep cliff well outside of town, was a four-towered, brightly lit castle, which rose proudly into the sky.

Amidst this flood of impressions I suddenly heard a soft rapping on my window, coming from somewhere in the unbroken darkness outside. From the car I could discern nothing but an unsteady flickering next to me. Once I had rolled down the window I saw that a figure in strangely antiquated garb stood before me. It was a small, compact man with a mustache and wiry hair who was dressed from head to toe in a black uniform and carried an old-fashioned gas lantern in his left hand that matched his cape and hat. In his right he held a halberd.

“Is this area closed to traffic, officer?” I said, convinced that the man was a policeman made to dress up as a tourist attraction.

“I’m the night watchman,” he replied. “And this area isn’t closed to traffic.” The man clearly wasn’t fooling around—he was already writing down my license plate number on a notepad.

“Where are you headed?” he asked me curtly. “Not that you’ll get very far, being a stranger.” He kicked the pavement with the tips of his shoes, which caused a metallic clanking to be heard, and I saw that he wore steel caps on his boots.

“I’m looking for a place to sleep tonight,” I answered. The night watchman turned away from my car and blew his nose with unbelievable thoroughness; for what must have been fifteen seconds, neither of us said a word. “Do you know where I can find one? Maybe a small inn or something like that? As I’m sure you can see, my car is just about totaled, I had a little trouble back there in the forest,” I tried a second time.



“I'm well aware of that, but you won't get a room here.”

“Why not?”

The night watchman laughed and shook his head, then he shrugged his shoulders four times in succession, shook his head again and bounced up and down several times.

“Because you're not a local—you're not registered in Gross-Einland.”

“Well, I guess that's true,” I said calmly, “but if I were a local, why would I need a room in an inn?”

This seemed too much for him: the night watchman squirmed and strained like a man who was beset upon from all sides.

“Look, the rule is that as a tourist you need a certificate of registration to get a room in an inn. You can try it, but they'll tell you the same thing I'm telling you. It's a matter of following regulations.”

“But that can't possibly be the law. Who came up with it?”

This question caused the sweat to break out on my interlocutor's brow.

“The Countess,” he said finally. [...]

The hole was of unknown depth. Its ramification and water saturation level were equally unknown. It ran beneath the mountaintops and houses like an underground mycelium, penetrated to the surface in capillaries and interlacing networks and, continental drift-like, pushed the nervous earth into gritty crumbling heaps, beneath which the rotten, fungal process of decay had set in. Over the decades the soil had grown softer and softer: squelching sediment that let itself be swept away from beneath the houses and streets, abandoned itself to a process by which it became fluid, a minute, painstaking process carried out by thaw and needling rain, humid fall evenings and garden hoses. And every downpour, like a spontaneous hemorrhage, brought this aneurysm swelling under the town almost to the point of bursting.

The hole was essentially impossible to contain. It was an unending exhalation of the land, caving in its chest, breaking through the ribs and threatening to crush the organs. The only blessing was that it all happened in such endless slow motion that generation after generation had parceled out the task of worrying about it—and one could, by way of alibi,



pour cement into the shafts every week. There was enough time to swap out the splintering window frames that had given way to the subsidence before the children finished school.

The main chasm, an abyss no fewer than fifty meters wide and two hundred meters deep, yawned open beneath the market square and jeopardized the structural integrity of the entire city center, whose foundation was sitting on porous foam, like the icing on top of a sponge cake. This shaft, which hadn't formed by chance, but rather had been chiseled into the heart of town by centuries of mismanagement, had a main entrance, by now boarded over and cordoned off, right behind the church—but also seven or eight side entrances, which in the school, in the park, next to the ruins of the old castle bore witness to century after century of deeper drilling and more extraction. Every additional and parallel action of the mining operation, privately organized surveys and rapacious commercial forays over the centuries had caused the grotto to become so thin-walled and unstable that it was easy for nature to tighten her grip over the whole structure. Below ground, however, all these changes went unnoticed: there, in absolute tectonic stasis as well as perfect darkness, all animation met its end. The horses who had toiled to haul the slaked lime out of the rock two hundred years ago had had their eyes gouged out—a horse that could see would never have willingly descended into the blackness. For twenty years or more, that is to say an entire horse's lifespan, the animals had had to bear these conditions in order to serve as transporters for the minerals.

It wasn't hard for me, later on, to discover the history of the over-extraction. Like everyone said: it was all out in the open.

In the year 1890 an industrial magnate named Winfried Kneiss had begun mining the chalk deposits, which the town had known about since the middle ages, although a rumored legend that gold had been discovered hung over the enterprise. He had equipped himself with a legion of subcontracted workers from Burgenland and western Hungary, who every Monday were taken by train as far as Gloggnitz, after which, between four and nine o'clock in the morning, the column had covered the twenty-three kilometers to Gross-Enland on foot. At this time of day the streets were swelling, and houses divided up into



small apartments bulged from within with human material until Friday evening at seven o'clock, when the pressure was released. On the weekend the village became a ghost town. The lime, tons and tons of it, was taken from the mountain and pumped into the arteries of the Austro-Hungarian empire, where it was needed for the flourishing iron industry in Prague, Krakow, and Lviv.

Between the wars nothing happened—that is, of course, everything happened, because after the mine was officially shut down by a spontaneous sell-off, the local population, waiting at attention, began to descend on their own initiative with improvised tools. The hole exerted a mesmerizing power, inspired a collective desire to break the economic hymen which had separated the land from its population. In no time a nightclub was set up underground, then a casino, and the year after that a brothel.

But these depths were eroticized unofficially as well: groups of young men descended into the side tunnels as a test of courage; poor families followed the suspicion, long felt, like an itch, that gold could be found at the bottom of this stone basin; sleepwalking old men were seen near the tunnels in the gray of dawn and vanished without a trace.

In 1939, the shafts, which in some places were carved forty meters deep into the mountain, were taken over by the Wehrmacht: an invisible, unbombable site for munitions production. An extension of the Mauthausen concentration camp was built, and now, as had been the case fifty years before with the Hungarian workers, it was the most normal sight in the world to see undernourished men and women passing through the city center, driven over land from their barracks on the other side of the forest into the tunnels.

This had all been carved into the ground, processed, neatly framed, and summarized for the info signs —there was a memorial site which allocated an exact administrative radius to the act of remembrance, within the bounds of which you could plant about two dozen gladiolas. Thus the hole had a clearly defined biography. No one was afraid to touch on it; it was just that the whole porous, honeycomb-like land threatened to collapse under this touch. [...]



The next morning it took less than ten minutes of professional assessment for the mechanic to inform me that a quick repair was impossible. On account of the time it would take to order certain parts as well as his estimate for processes incomprehensible to me, I would have to book a full week at the Merry Pumpkin, which I was actually glad about. On the spot I bought a blow-drier, notepads and pens, a bathrobe, and other necessities, which could have led someone to conclude that I was getting ready to stay for a year. Something about Gross-Einland bid me to stay—after achieving the nearly superhuman feat of having found the place, I sensed the irresistible urge to stick around for a few more days. I could continue taking my meals at the tavern, that way I would save myself the purchase of a hot plate and on top of that would have the opportunity to meet a few locals, a thought that for the first time in my life I greeted with joy.

After I'd left the auto repair shop I sat down in a café which lay a short ways away from the main square next to a small church. "The Stone Soup Café" was the mildly quirky-sounding name mounted above the entrance. The window offered a good view of the church's façade: leaves of ivy tumbled one after the other in a cascade to form a kind of framing chase work around the windows, so that unknowing observers might spend a long time wondering whether the church was in Cluny or Oxford. Before this backdrop I buried myself in the local newspapers.

On this very first day I met Ferdinand, who was later to become one of my best friends in town—and who right at that moment had just come through the door. Heavily panting under the weight of his considerable gut, he climbed up a ladder to put some posters up before returning to the floor, bathed in sweat. All the café's tables were occupied, and after looking around for a while he finally headed towards me. I was no more than five pages into the paper when he, a mixture of sweat, flesh and rhythmic exhalation, sat down at my table without a word.

"Tomorrow's the day," he said, as if resuming a conversation we were just having. "Unfortunately I can't do too much lifting, I had that hernia you know"—here he gestured towards his stomach, on which there was a knot-shaped bulge which probably came from a bandage.



“We have to dump five thousand kilos into the hole this week, or else the market square will be a meter lower by March. After the rain last week the whole thing has sunk thirty centimeters.”

“I see,” I said calmly. “Well, you'd better not do too much lifting then.”

Although I tried not to let it show, a sudden thrill had come over me when he mentioned the hole—an irresistible urge to find out more about this subject.

“So does everybody help with this project, or is it the town's responsibility?” I asked.

“Well, actually, no one's really doing anything, up to now anyway,” he answered and lifted his massive shoulders, causing his undershirt to ride up over his belly button.

He was a man about forty years old with a blue driving cap on his head. He filled his clothes out so rotundly that I didn't dare imagine how there might be room in his body for any organs other than the stomach and intestines. It was really no surprise that he was ordering beer at ten o'clock in the morning, though the speed with which he knocked it back certainly was. Like a hurdler he downed each glass without breaking stride. What baffled me the most though was that I took an immediate liking to him.

“How can a market square sink?” I carefully tried again.

“The hole,” he repeated, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “It's getting bigger. At first, twenty years ago, we thought it was only that bad in the area between the church and the cultural center. But now the town hall is showing cracks too—everywhere, in the plaster, in the floor, by this point all the renovations are purely cosmetic.” He took a stack of three or four paper coasters and carefully tore them in half. “And now we've poured a good hundred tons of cement in there, but the whole hillside under Gross-Einland is hollow, can you imagine that? I've always said the thing is bottomless. At some point old Pergerhannes is going to come climbing out of it.”

“Who's Pergerhannes?”

“Nobody,” said Ferdinand quickly, “at any rate, the pit is getting bigger every day.”

“A pit under the town,” I repeated quietly, so as not to interrupt the informational torrent spilling from his mouth.

“We've been dumping the rubble from every construction project in there for years anyway. It all has to be done by hand and the dust is horrible. That's where I've got my back problems from, you understand, not to mention COPD for five years. Insurance won't pay for



the treatments, but so long as I make the rounds through town every day and write a report, the Countess at least pays me for that.”

“And which countess is this?” I asked.

“Which countess! What do you mean, which? The only one. Our Countess.” He had to cough heavily from laughing so hard. “Me, personally, I have my own special rituals with the hole—which by the way, almost everybody else here does too. If something is weighing on me, I write it on a piece of paper, add a drop of blood to it and toss the paper inside. Brings good luck,” he said and winked.

I soon learned that Ferdinand was actually a truck driver. “Got trained in it, then got stuck with it,” as he put it—though on account of the bad condition of the roads he hadn't been behind the wheel of a truck in nine full years. Now he ran a “shave parlor” instead—“we cater to ladies, too, especially even”—although he had such a tremor that his customers must have feared for their lives. As I had quite rightly ascertained yesterday, there wasn't a single passable road leading out of town, and only one highway—although unfortunately, on account of a faulty design, it just went in a circle. The onramp led right back to the offramp.

“Do you know somewhere where I could go for a little walk today?” I asked, trying to sound innocent. “Over there is the town limit,” said Ferdinand, “from there you can hike ten or twenty kilometers out into the countryside. Maybe we'll see each other soon at the shave parlor!” I thanked him and left him with his third beer.

I decided that, before I went off into nature as Ferdinand had suggested, I would inspect every inch of the center within the city walls. The whole city center was broken up into four quadrants, like slices of cake, which were separated from each other by walls. Thus there were four sectors, with sometimes stark visual differences between them, which I now set out to explore, clockwise, one by one. Gross-Einland was unbelievably beautiful, like the set of a film about the middle ages in which the pinnacle of craftsmanship was showcased on an endless row of facades. Everywhere on the cobblestone streets, people sat cheerily chatting away and drinking their spritzers, although it was already fairly cool fall weather. You couldn't escape the idyll. Naturally the conservative nature of it all made me uneasy—a lot of the social configurations looked like something you might find in a campaign ad: families sitting at lunch, a dish of water placed under the table for their dog; young couples whose body language



seemed constantly to be saying: not to worry, we're already engaged. But then I came to the main square in the middle of town.

In daylight I could finally see what I hadn't been able to in the twilight yesterday: the whole square was sunken, starting from the edges and moving in an elliptical shape towards its concave low point in the center, a good meter below. Worse still: behind the city wall you could see the church tower, which was tilted to the right at a dangerous angle. The hole, I thought excitedly.

[...]

“Welcome everyone to the tenth salon of the year,” said the Countess. “You may relax.” There was a large taking in of breath all around, as if we had all collectively surfaced from underwater. Only in this moment did I realize that I too had been holding my breath and was now holding tightly to the table, breathing heavily like everyone else.

“We have a new guest in our midst, the young physicist Ruth Schwarz, who in the future will be serving as my advisor in questions of stability with regard to our large nuisance.”

I protested feebly, but still hadn't caught my breath—for a second I raised my hand, but this was only taken by the others to mean that I was identifying myself as the person in question. The Countess continued with her introduction: “Ms. Schwarz, here at this table are the most important figures in our fair township: I will forego a round of formal introductions, but you shall get to know them all in time. Dear friends, I plan to bring Ms. Schwarz up to speed on all of our projects. She is a native,” explained the Countess.

“Only my parents are from here,” I finally managed to object.

“As I said: a native,” the Countess cut me short. “Ms. Schwarz, this is, for all intents and purposes, the town council, you may therefore feel that your presence here signifies that a high honor has been paid to you.” I raised my hand again.

“Shouldn't we wait for the mayor?” Everyone except the Countess laughed, as if a child had said something adorably stupid.

“Ms. Schwarz, the mayor is not privy to our business,” the Countess said calmly. “You see, in this community, as in our country as a whole, there are two bodies which operate separately from one another. There is the old order, as we practice it here, and then the new, which at a certain point was simply overlaid atop the first, without regard for the organic



structures that had developed before then. The two are now butting up against one another, which causes a whole host of problems.” At this point she signaled the servants to enter, and the topic was ended. “The hors d’oeuvres, please, and today's agenda, Engineer Heinzelmännchen.”

Four young women now brought in tray after tray, heavily laden with antipasti, truffle salami, fine French cheeses, olives, vol-au-vents, roasted duck in cranberry sauce and dozens of bread baskets full of pastries. Exquisite red wines were served. Everything was numbingly rich, and I was only dimly aware that an older gentleman with a high piercing voice had begun to recite the day's order of business. “Preliminary discussion number one: introductory discussion of trade regulations. First point of order: the art initiative to make use of eroded areas. Second point of order: discussions pertaining to the allotment of properties on the Wastl-Elevation.”

The rest was lost in a blur as I enjoyed a scallop with orange-garlic sauce and fried rosemary that sent me into ecstasies. I would simply sit mutely before this spread, grow intoxicated on the culinary offerings and head back home before anyone could get to me. Engineer Heinzelmännchen, like a debutante at the Opera Ball, was responsible for the curtsies and fanfares of every point of order, but was again and again being corrected by the Countess, who led him in his little dance.

“We have received petitions to the effect that the people would like to see one of the large supermarket chains, which are so dominant in the rest of Austria, open up in town, instead of our tried and tested system of small shopkeepers,” he said. “But of course we've known this for years.”

“Absolutely not, that is out of the question. Let us open up the discussion,” said the Countess, with the certainty of a judge delivering a verdict.

“Naturally we have no interest in the products of globalization,” a man in an old military uniform began the show debate. I could read the name on his chest: Colonel General Heidenthal. But the longer I studied his decorations, the more unsure I was about whether it wasn't a pretend uniform, since there were subtle alterations that made it different from the normal army uniform. “The question arises, then, as to how we can give the impression that they are nevertheless available. Up to now we have been able to reproduce about fifty percent of the desired products.”



“Lilly, what do the shopkeepers say?” the Countess asked an older woman in a dirndl and apron.

“We're still working on Coca-Cola. There are complaints of a licorice smell. The cream cheese often clots, in many cases we're having to write new labels with different expiration dates every day. So it's really somewhat less than ideal,” she said.

“In my view we must desensitize the people and convince them through public intervention that they mustn't be so capricious in their tastes,” said the Countess.

The case was this: local products were being promoted through a downright massive initiative, but because the people wanted international brands, the latter were now being reproduced by local firms and sold as the originals with homemade labels. It seemed however that this had led to a problem that hadn't been thought through beforehand, because the people naturally wondered why the gummy bears from the advertisement were available, but not the other types of candy from the same brand—and now a legion of food scientists and small shopkeepers had to work constantly on copies of a limitless variety of brands, which nevertheless never completely matched the originals.

The supermarkets were thus Potemkin villages, with shelves full of pharmacy-brewed Coca-Cola knock-offs, locally produced toilet paper in mass-produced-packaging, and salami which, according to the label, came from Hungary, but in reality came from the butcher shop on the corner. I was amused for a while at this reversal of relationships, and I asked myself where the oysters on my plate might have come from, which had been brought in earlier on large trays. From the puddles down in the hole?

“We could ask our councilmember in charge of advertising to design a campaign, which for now would put the blame for the slightly divergent taste on the refrigerated supply chain. We must always give the impression however that the products are still edible, that only the taste, not the quality, is affected, and that maybe this even increases their appeal,” said the woman in the dirndl, fearfully watching the Countess's reaction.

I didn't understand who a lot of the people were who they were referring to, nor did I understand the measures or resolutions, which in the end were always dependent on the opinion of the Countess anyway. They hadn't gotten any further with the first topic before the next one was called.



“The art initiative,” cried Engineer Heinzemann in the middle of the still ongoing discussion. Everyone went quiet.

“The art initiative is happening, period, that's the end of it,” came the Countess's edict. “Since everything is now settled, I may now fill Ms. Schwarz in on our plans. You know of course about the hole. And that since the beginning of this year we have had to struggle with certain difficulties?” she said and gestured for no apparent reason at the parquet floor.

“I've seen the main square,” I said, to cover up my ignorance of the matter. A certain awkwardness had insinuated itself throughout the room, by which only the Countess herself remained regally unaffected:

“For many centuries we had an extremely lucrative mining operation in our town, which unfortunately over this long period of time left the ground a bit soft. The matter is this: at the moment the subsidence is proceeding more rapidly than previously expected. By now certain properties on the main hill are indicating subsidence at a rate of one centimeter a day. Centuries-old marble floors are snapping in half, and atop these stone foundations there are people sitting in their living rooms, which is, admittedly, an infelicitous situation,” she explained.

“Naturally it doesn't look good when buildings start to tilt, and it is noticeable for visitors as well. Not long ago a tractor was swallowed up, luckily without the farmer, who at the time was in his hog pen,” she continued. “We have done our utmost over the past decades to stop the subsidence at the root, but filling the hole with cement was pointless, after all we are talking about what must be billions of cubic meters. Herr Loipold, our geologist, can perhaps explain in greater detail.”

It was the pushy Philipp from earlier, who now stood with a map in his hand which he spread out on the table so that everyone could see. On it was a lateral view of Gross-Einland: the area of the town proper lay flat as a birthmark on the muscular shoulder of the Hochwechsel and fell off steeply to the left and right. Underneath the town, as the diagram revealed, was a gigantic cavern, which, airy as a gothic cathedral, was held up only by thin columns of stone. The most potentially disastrous thing about it, which I could tell immediately, even as a layperson, were the water reservoirs that were distributed over several levels—beneath the cavern was yet another, and beneath it still a third. The porous shelves of



earth on which the water stood, like thin layers of dough, were all that separated the different levels.

“First we have to prop up the main chamber, otherwise the most valuable properties, the historical buildings, will collapse. The sinking dates back to the sixties,” said Philipp.

“To the fifties, if you really want to know,” the Countess broke in. “And we will prop everything up, this is about remedying the whole syndrome.”

It occurred to me that the Countess would always allow the other person to speak first, only to strike like a viper at the weak point in whatever the person had said.

“You also know of course that our fair town was severely damaged in the mayhem of the Second World War, and that after the bombing a layer of earth around two meters deep was added, on top of which the buildings could be rebuilt in a manner true to the original.” She paused dramatically. “As the subsidence progresses, however, more and more parts of buildings keep sinking through that layer, which is also regrettable for the town's overall appearance. In summation, we have decided,” the Countess stood up, “that our erosion should become one of the world's largest works of art.”

Now the listeners, stiff up until now, broke out in frenetic applause, which the Countess quieted down with royal nonchalance: “We will declare the subsidence a happening and organize tourism around it in high style. Above all the idea is to make relevant, lasting art, but we wouldn't mind making a little money either. Naturally, Ms. Schwarz, you can imagine that it takes time to develop such an all-encompassing concept. Great art is also a great deal of work—and by the time we have the ideas we've have been floating around here ready for market, a few months, if not years will have passed. That is precisely why we need you.”

The idea was absurd: how was mass tourism supposed to work in such a sleepy backwater? There wasn't even a road leading into town.

“I have to disappoint you, I have no artistic talent,” I said.

“No, you silly girl. You will of course be finding a way to slow the subsidence and buy us time until we have more concrete ideas for the art initiative. We need a physicist to develop a substance for filling the hole that can be sprayed inside in a publicly effective manner.”

“Ms.—Countess, I can't do that. Again: I'm not a biophysicist, my work deals with theoretical physics. With time. I've never even done an experiment, I work exclusively on paper.”



“Wonderful, with time—then you can lengthen the amount of time it is taking for our market square to sink. This is about giving the people hope, do you understand?”

Stunned by the tone of utter conviction that the Countess adopted, I couldn't manage to protest any longer.

“I'll do some reading and see if I can contribute in some way,” I said. It was as if they had all been saved—the group again broke out in applause, and I was myself relieved not to feel everyone looking at me expectantly anymore. A sense of community had developed among us—that is to say, I had gone from outsider to insider, as if the petals of a flower had closed over all of us. I suppose that with my promise to the Countess I had become one of them, and shockingly, for a moment, I liked it, before I realized what I had just committed to. No matter: after I had arranged the burial, I would be taking off anyway.

“As discussed, we are planning a large exhibition that is intended to draw several hundred thousand visitors,” a young woman was now explaining, who I recognized as Anita the librarian. “We're thinking of two to three times the capacity of Documenta. The first step will be to have the hole declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, together of course with the subsidence.”

I felt around in my purse, my fingers splayed like a whisk, found my pills and swallowed a Xanor. I waited anxiously for the medicine to kick in, a dulling effect whose failure to set in made me even more anxious. I'll excuse myself, I thought, but I no longer knew what for. I had washed the anti-anxiety medicine down with a good deal of alcohol. Someone touched my shoulder and asked if everything was alright. I saw that a flip chart was being filled up with statistics. Roasted goose halves arrived and started flying into mouths. I broke into a cold sweat. I could hardly keep up the pace.

The presentation became more and more fragmentary and disjointed, as if I were watching a montage: “The goal we are envisioning is to be able to celebrate the grand opening roughly twenty months from today. In order to do so we have to find a brass band, also the volunteer fire department doesn't have enough personnel for security coverage. In the basement there will be a real Chagall which our Countess is lending us”—more applause—“and the necessary supports have already been ordered from China. The people will be informed bit by bit, eventually there will be a referendum. The working title, as you know, is: Project Underground.”



In the middle of the presentation I stood up so quickly that the plates I had been piling with more and more food went crashing to the floor. “I don't feel well,” I said, since they were all waiting for an explanation for my behavior. “I'm going to leave early today,” I added, as if I had been going to every salon for years. I raised my hand to wave—realized in mid-motion however how inadequate the gesture was, and left my hand hanging in mid-air until I finally summoned the resolve to leave the table. No one followed me, and I flew down the stairs, where I escaped the fortunately servant-less anteroom. The fresh air sobered me up. But my relief at being by myself again was accompanied by a feeling that it had been wrong to leave—as if I were missing out on something that would now be permanently denied to me. I still had to walk back through an icy, eerily quiet night, and as I turned around, the mildly illuminated window once more appeared enticing. Only then did it occur to me again: less than two weeks ago my parents had been sitting up there.

[end of the sample]