

Christiane Neudecker

The God of the City

[Der Gott der Stadt]

Outline + Sample Translation



Literary Fiction

Luchterhand

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At the beginning was Death. Somebody drowns trapped in the ice on the Wannsee in Berlin, a corpse is dangling from the ceiling of a theatre. The two deaths are decades apart, but the day of death is the same: January 16.

In 1912, poet Georg Heym drowned while skating, and in the mid-1990s undergraduate students at an elitist East Berlin school of acting were set the task of examining Heym's enigmatic Faust fragment. Then a body is found on the school's rehearsal stage. Was it murder, suicide or a pact with the devil?

For readers of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*.

Christiane Neudecker, born in 1974, studied stage direction at the Ernst Busch college of acting and now freelances as a writer and director in Berlin. She has received several prizes for her novels and short stories, and her recently published *Summer Novella* made it to the *Spiegel* bestseller list and was the *NDR* broadcasting Book of the Month. Her new novel, *The God of the City*, has already been awarded prizes, including that of the German Literature Fund and by the Berlin senate.

Sample Translation

by Katy Derbyshire

Prologue

No.

We don't know for sure, of course we don't know, but the light above the River Havel must have dazzled them as they set their feet on the frozen surface.

There will have been a glint on the air, fanned fingers of drifted snow sending glittery traces across the otherwise dull ice. On darker days, a clouded mirror of hard frost ran from one bank to the other, coating the edges of the Schwanenwerder and Lindwerder islands like milky, unpolished amber. It was different now, though. Everything glistened.

They say it was a clear day, back then, we'd read that somewhere – a cool and very clear winter's day. No crackle of snow crystals on hazy air, then, no dance of fat flakes beneath the shade of deep-drifting clouds. Instead, bright rays of sunshine bouncing off thousands of shimmering ice prisms to gouge through the pupils and slice through the retinas of all who beheld them.

A dazzle must have buzzed above the Havel and the Wannsee lake, a dazzle that later called forth disaster.

Absolutely crazy that you can still find these things out today: the 16th of January 1912 was a Tuesday, and yes, it was a clear and sunny day.

It's no coincidence that the other, much later day was clear and sunny too. I remember it well. I could see it even when I got up in the morning. The sky was toxic blue and stabbed high above the snow-capped roofs, the chimneys not reaching it. It was a day of hard contours, that day when one of us (no, I can't name them, I still can't) decided to die.

Nor is the date a coincidence, that 16th of January 1996, of course not. No one took note of it later, during the investigation.

The professor noticed it of course, we all noticed it, but we didn't talk about it, not even in whispers, in the curved corridors of our college, not in the steep stairwell tower up to the lecturers' offices and the secretarial department, not even at home to ourselves.

We were conspirators by then.

They say it was minus 14 degrees, back then. In cold like that, you'd think the water surface

would have been frozen seamlessly. The two of them thought so as well: the poet Georg Heym and his friend Ernst Balcke buttered some bread and grabbed hats, scarves and gloves, strode to Charlottenburg station and took the suburban train five stops to Pichelsberg. That's where they got off; the inspector on the exit barrier confirmed it later. Their racing skates dangled from their shoulders. They stabbed their pointed sticks at the freezing cold air like conductor's batons and crunched along the snow towards the icy Havel.

Eighty-three years later, someone – perhaps at the same time of day, perhaps a little earlier – opened a door in the depths of our college theatre, to a darkened room.

There is no link; that's what I'm trying to prove. And yet everything is connected.

Where exactly they went onto the ice, we don't know. There are suspicions and assumptions, research by Balcke's brother, newspaper articles from the days that followed. They'd planned to skate via Gatow to Schwanenwerder, *Der Tag* wrote in its evening edition. They say they took a rest at a restaurant on Lindwerder. It might have been near the Schildhorn landing pier that they took the first step from firm ground onto the lake's edge, then; that's possible.

But they weren't seen.

And while, in another time, someone fumbled for a light switch on a black-painted wall, their blades slid across the blazing white ice. They laughed, they held their faces into the icy wind, they tried out turns and skating backwards. They chased one another, while in the other time, in that other place, a bulb went on and its light was cast into a windowless backstage room. Aluminium boxes piled high, spotlights enthroned on dusty shelves, waiting cables circled around metal wall hooks, like – I have to say it – venomous snakes, bringers of death.

Yet it wasn't the cables that were to become the tool; it was a rope. Not a strap, not a wire, not a chain sling from the stagehands' arsenal. Just a simple polyamide rope. Probably chosen for its high breaking force, the stage manager explained to us later, sweating. Not that we had asked him.

I think the rope was simply on hand. The box it must have been taken from, on that 16th of January 1996, was directly by the door. Someone lifted the lid – possibly in a hurry, possibly drowsy – and grabbed it and then chose the corridor to the stage: down the stairs, through the theatre's underground foyer, past the ticket booth and the dressing rooms, up to the double-walled fire door at the end of the hall. We could walk that way in our sleep.

Heym and Balcke, though, lost their bearings. Their blades flashing, they veered off. They left the middle of the stream and shot through the signal markers, far from the spreading arms of the skeletal trees on the banks. Without hesitation, they raced towards the twinkling fishing holes, frozen over too thinly, no fisherman sitting by them who might have warned them, no sign that might have signalled danger.

Perhaps it was a decision, a conscious deviation. Perhaps they didn't notice.

Perhaps there was a trick of the light.

The woodsmen working in Kladow, who heard their screams and didn't help, made excuses later: They hadn't wanted to put their own lives on the line. Not for other people's recklessness. The lake was dangerous, everyone knew that. And they didn't have ladders or ropes.

There was a crack as, years later, someone dragged a frail wooden ladder into the auditorium and set it up alongside the seventh row.

The air was stuffy and warm. It smelled of scorched colour filters and burnt dust, of acetone, lemon-scented cleaning fluid and rancid pan stick. The emergency lighting flickered briefly, its greenish shine reflected in the dead lenses of the extinguished lamps.

The sun above the Wannsee didn't flinch when the surface broke.

Ernst Balcke was the first to fall. His forehead must have crashed against the suddenly gaping edge of the fishing hole. Descending, he saw the bared jags of ice racing towards him, and then it was over. Balcke sank surprised and still, in the midst of the glinting, gurgling sheet of splinters and splices. He did not fight.

Someone set one foot on the first rung and climbed slowly to the top, up to the theatre's ceiling with its web of steel tubing.

Heym screamed.

A rope was thrown over the steel struts of the lighting system. It dangled almost placidly back and forth between two affixed profile spots, the leaden pendulum of a grandfather clock, while Heym cast off his gloves and threw himself onto the ice, probably with a yell.

A hand stopped the swinging. It reached for the end of the rope and knotted a loop, calm.

On the frozen lake, Heym crawled up to the broken spot. Tears leapt over his face as his bare hands began scooping ice water. They went under and under, trembling, searching for his sunken friend.

Polyamide looped around a neck.

There was a fall, a crack.

And a body slid into a lake.
Kicking limbs knocked over a ladder and trod air or icy water.
The struggle for breath.
Shouts, from bloodied throats. A sigh. Who spoke of dying?
A kingfisher cawed.
At some point, silence.
That was how it started for us. No, that's wrong. That was how it ended.

(pp. 114-121)

The oil lamp's light was weak. It cast a dusky circle on the table top, barely illuminating our faces. We were sat around the wooden table we had pushed into the middle of the room. We had closed the door by now, the stove roaring in the corner. It was so unbearably hot that I wondered whether my vest was presentable enough to take off my T-shirt as well. François' shirt was wet through under the armpits and Nele surreptitiously wiped a few drops of sweat off her upper lip. Schwarz's forehead was shining. Only Tadeusz looked pale and cool, as always.

Brandner hadn't sat down yet. He circled the table, handing out dusty glasses. For himself, he put down a red and white dotted mug. 'This secret domicile is not set up for so many guests,' he explained. Then he poured a new round, this time with a bottle of grappa that hadn't been on the shelf; he had extracted it from the depths of the sideboard. He poured his own last; I noticed him filling the mug almost to the brim.

Unlike us, Brandner had only taken off his coat. I didn't understand why he didn't seem to be sweating in his thick knitted jumper. He looked perfectly relaxed as he stepped up to the table and raised his mug full of clear grappa.

'Ladies, gentlemen,' he started, 'this is the moment when it all begins.' He paused and looked us up and down, as if seeing us for the first time. 'This,' he said in the end, 'is the instant you will remember. You will embark on an adventure, in the tracks of an artistic genius. You will enter his world and walk his paths to the abyss. You will feel his turmoil, his torments, his genius. You will encounter his demons – and your own. At the end of this journey, you will be more mature. You'll know whether you made the right decision.

Whether you have what it takes for this profession you've chosen. Because it's a profession

that's not just any job; it's a calling. A calling that can only be carried out by those truly called to it. May you be up to the task. May you prove worthy. May you honour Georg Heym. All rise.'

We didn't exchange glances as we reached for our glasses, pushed back our chairs and stood up. Our eyes were glued to Brandner, nothing but him. My cheeks were glowing and I had difficulty breathing smoothly. I wanted to write Brandner's speech off as ridiculous but I couldn't. No one had spoken to me like that before. Not ever. Everything seemed to burn itself into me at that moment: the smell of smouldering wood and mildew. The crackle of the fire. The tip of the strand of hair falling over Brandner's forehead. My thudding, thudding heart.

'To Georg,' Brandner said.

'To Georg,' we murmured.

The grappa burned in my throat. I wasn't used to spirits so I had only sipped. And yet as we sat down, I felt the grappa suffusing the whole of my body. Nele slammed her empty glass on the table: 'Any more?'

François beamed at her, Brandner laughed and refilled the glass. Schwarz leaned over the table and pushed his glass towards the bottle. The grappa seemed to liven him up. 'So what Heym text is it, then?' he asked.

And all of a sudden, I knew.

It was so *obvious*.

'*Faust*,' I said. 'It's a *Faust* fragment.'

Brandner, withdrawing the grappa bottle from Schwarz's glass, paused and raised an eyebrow. Tadeusz turned to me; Nele bit her lip. I couldn't believe it – I was the only one who hadn't forgotten Brandner's hint. *Heinrich, mir graut's vor dir*.

'You're right,' Brandner nodded. He screwed the lid back on the bottle and put it down, on the floor next to his chair. 'The fragment is dated 1911, a year before Heym's death. It's a very unusual take on the Faust story.'

'How exciting!' Nele exclaimed. Her cheeks were flushed and her blond hair reflected the oil lamp's glow, making her look so much brighter than us. Schwarz and Tadeusz nodded at Brandner. Only François seemed puzzled. He slid back and forth on his seat, suddenly avoiding all eye contact. I wondered whether he needed the toilet and didn't dare say so, after the incident with Woll.

'François?'

Brandner spoke his name very quietly, almost concerned. I think all of us were surprised.

Apart from Tadeusz, Brandner had only ever called us by our surnames.

Something about him made it seem like an honour when he used a first name.

The fire crackled in the stove; I could hear the others breathing. Outside, the wind had picked up again, brushing against the walls of the hut and unsettling the dead branches on the roof. It sounded like small animals scraping against the plastic sheeting with their claws.

There must have been a gap up by the stovepipe, where a slight whistle sounded.

'I don't know so much about Monsieur Faust.'

François said it quietly, as if he hoped no one would hear him. Schwarz laughed.

'It's a pretty German play,' said Nele, reaching across the table to pat François on the arm, 'by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.'

'He knows that!' I called out, indignant. I didn't like the way Nele was touching François. The way she was making him look small in front of Brandner. I thought it was brave of him to admit to not knowing something; I'd never have done it.

'Not if you think of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*,' Tadeusz contradicted her, 'or the original material or Johann Spiess's *Faust* book.' He was leaning right back on his chair, watching Nele through narrowed eyes. She pulled a face and took her hand off François' arm: 'I just meant...'

'Let's just pool what we know about this *Monsieur Faust*,' Brandner interrupted. 'And we'll stick to the best-known of the versions for now.'

'He's a dissatisfied, vain old man who doesn't stand by his own actions,' I blurted out.

Immediately, I stopped and wished I hadn't said anything, but Brandner laughed. 'Good – what else?'

We looked at each other. We took a breath.

Then our exclamations came tumbling after one another. It took a few sentences and then we were on a roll. We slung words into the overheating air, we vied with each other, we held nothing back, trumped one another. We had quickly summarized the plot and then we broke it down, undressed it, mocked: Frustrated academic promises soul to the devil, devil transforms him into young man, young man gets girl pregnant, girl ruined. But what's it really about, Brandner insisted, what's at its real core? Is it this Faust, is it this Gretchen? No no, we called out, it's about betrayal, about thirst for knowledge. About doom and death. About passion, seduction, guilt! Brandner topped up our glasses as we searched for more and more words, grappa or plum brandy or vodka, we drank everything in front of us, our

cheeks glowed, we lost all track of time. It's about murder, we exclaimed, about truth and madness! The world! We drank and yelled: About yearning for understanding, about love, about religion! At some point Schwarz stood up, lopsided, and roared: Mephisto! Mephisto is my friend! François had a laughing fit, a chattering laugh that made his belly bounce, and we couldn't help it, we giggled and hooted until Nele was waltzing around the room, twirling and twirling and making the hem of her dress fly up, we clapped out a rhythm, Tadeusz drummed on the table, I banged a spoon against my glass, Brandner smiled, a sphinx impossible to interpret but that didn't matter because I banged on my glass, faster and faster, until Nele stumbled and held onto the knob of the hut's door and tore it open with a gasp and cold air came rushing into the room.

The oxygen and the cool brought us back. We calmed down, Schwarz leaned against the sideboard, Nele went back to her chair, panting. On the floor next to Brandner's chair leg there were suddenly three bottles, two of them empty, one half-full. I was sweating and terribly thirsty.

Brandner rapped his knuckles against the middle of the table, and it was only then that we noticed the white sheets of paper there, all of a sudden. They were arranged in a circle, each little pile facing one of us. I couldn't have said when Brandner had put them there, none of us could have, but that didn't matter because we knew instantly what it was, what it had to be.

The fragment.

All at once, I wasn't thirsty any more. It was superfluous for Brandner to raise a hand to silence us. We didn't move a muscle. We fixed our eyes on the paper as though we could make out the writing through the blank rear sides, or at least the number of pages. I squinted at the slightly disordered edges: Nele had only one; on my pile I spotted three. Brandner opened a little drawer under the table, which we hadn't noticed before. He rummaged through lengths of string, corks, bottle openers, batteries and tubes of glue to produce a handful of pens and pencils, and held them out. 'I'd like you to start,' he said as we automatically reached for the pens, 'by looking at the passages I've given each of you. Each of you gets different scenes from the fragment. Look at those scenes, just those excerpts, one after another. Let every one of them make its impression on you separately before you know the context of the fragment as a whole. Note down your thoughts, your first associations, no matter how absurd they may seem. You'll never get that first impression of the material again. It will help you later on.'

Schwarz, who had kept out of the limelight until now, pushed himself off from the sideboard, grabbed a pencil out of Brandner's hand and dropped down to his chair. 'Right then. All aboard?'

I nodded and placed my fingertips on either side of my pile. I felt like a runner before the starting gun, my hands on the line. All my senses were wide awake. Nele, François and Tadeusz did the same. Even Schwarz reached his hands out and let them hover above his pile. 'On your marks...' he said, '...get set... go!'

We tore at the sheets.

– *On the moon* –

I stared at the three words. *On the moon*? Was that really all it said? I couldn't believe it. I sneaked a glance at the others.

Nele was leaning over her sheet of paper, which was covered in type. She laughed quietly to herself. François was already scribbling away at his like crazy, shielding what he wrote with one hand. I could never stand it when kids at school did that. I had to control myself not to kick him in the shins under the table. Schwarz was leaning right back, staring at space and chewing on his pencil. Brandner himself had grabbed a book from the sideboard and seemed to be deeply concentrated on it. Only Tadeusz looked at me. With a tiny motion of his index finger, he drew a question mark in mid-air. I reassured myself that Brandner wasn't watching and then raised my hands, palms to the ceiling, and rolled my eyes. Then I gestured at Tadeusz's paper. He pulled a face for a fraction of a second.

I bent back over my extract and sighed. *On the moon*. I was so disappointed. I wished I could go straight to the next sheet, but I wasn't sure if Brandner might not be watching us after all. I couldn't imagine him wanting to miss out on the effect the scenes had on us.

So I obediently put pen to paper. It couldn't be that hard to imagine a scene between Mephisto and Faust on the moon.

Mephisto as an astronaut, I wrote, Faust with American flag. Zero gravity. Emptiness. Planets. Earth in the distance. Houston, we have a problem... I ground to a halt. The fragment was from 1911, well before the moon landing. Wasn't it important what Heym might have thought when he noted down the idea? What image did they have of the moon back then? What did it stand for? Had there even been plans for space travel at the beginning of the 19th century? Did people know about the moon's gravity? And how was I to find all that out?

I sighed and rubbed my temples. I noticed I was getting a headache. I didn't want to ask for

a glass of water; I had a feeling that wouldn't be appropriate. Or Brandner would take it as a sign of weakness.

Aside from that, I couldn't give up. I had another two pages to look at. Who knew what else the fragment held in store for me.

I straightened up a little. Then I turned over the next sheet of paper.