

Winner of the Goethe-Institut Award  
Translation from *Schwitters* by Ulrike Draesner  
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## 1: Ruminations

Stretching its spinstery fingers, the fog crept across the meadow a few inches above the ground, seeming to render it both more and less visible with each breath. "Spinstery" was probably not the right word, his self-doubt told him; even "probably" was probably wrong – he no longer trusted himself in any language. Most likely, spinstery was a logical leap, the work of some word-spinning sprite that was jumbling things up in his head. He found himself mixing English and German sounds, and he liked it, liked the *feuchte* fingeriness of the English fog, this dog with an "f", panting across the English meadow yet at the same time glued to the spot, creeping&crouching, lurking&lunging, endlessly shape-shifting. Not quite like a living thing, but almost; not quite mad, but almost, and unquestionably beyond anything that Kurt, aka Curt, could conceive of or comprehend. The fog transformed the sheep into sheep-shaped mounds with limbs and tufts of dirty-white fleece sticking out here and there, its semi-transparent dampness not even touching the creatures themselves but curving around their bodies and planting one sheep outline after another in the tingingly crisp air of the early October morning.

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And there he sat, the outline of a man, observing his own liking for fog.  
Watching himself fall in love with fog.

The man with the spinstery life, who had sought refuge here in Ambleside at the end of the war. A good year they had been here now. Last stop Lake District. Lake Destruction, something seemed to whisper to him. It hung over him, panting. But he wasn't going to let it capture him. Even when it called down to the hollow form of his body, his outline, bent and grey, large and lumpen, Kurt in his barn, some old barn somewhere, silent as a sheep.

There had been a brief mention of his arrival in the local paper: German writer and artist A. Schwitter, exiled from Oslo. They had even gone as far as to print a photo. It was so blurry he hadn't recognised himself at first. For a second, he had assumed there was another artist in the locality and felt glad, thinking it was the farmer who owned the sheep – a neighbour. In this bare mountain landscape, human beings were such a rarity that everyone counted as a neighbour.

He had scrutinised the photo for some time, unable to remember where it was taken.

Scrutinise: it sounded like screw-tin-eyes. Tin eyes screwing into something, probing and examining. He could feel it changing him, physically even, this habit of thinking in English instead of German, his loved and lost, vagarious and precarious mother tongue.

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He enjoyed the feeling. He, the outline of Kurt from Hanover-There. When he stared with German eyes at the name Revonnah (when had he started saying words backwards?) the German syllables *renn-von-nah*, run-from-there, stared back at him, until the English Curt, speaking aloud, finally split the word into "Ha?", "no!", "over."

Hallo neighbour! And now here he was, sitting – to his own continuing astonishment – in an English meadow. With no trace of destruction, just sheep and their hollow forms. He didn't care that his face, reflected in the strip of mirror above the kitchen sink in the morning, resembled a bowl of gruel. For the first time in ten years he had left a place – London – because he chose to, and for a destination he had also chosen. For the first time in ten years he had moved, not fled. This time he had been able to take his female companion with him. Ambleside was his village of choice. A quiet little backwater nestling between peaks with names like Loughrigg Tarn and Old Man of Coniston, and fells such as Heron Pike and Crinkle Crag, an elongated ridge with five summits and deep troughs between them. He had only learnt the word "fell" since moving here. It meant a hill or rocky mass above the tree line – glacial, barren, scarred. Here, the Lakeland sheep grazed on even the toughest grass, while butler Fog treated his Lady Meadow, Bestbottom of Autumn to a perpetual feast of seasonal murk.

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He had stopped here to rest. An old man who got breathless after ten minutes trudging up one of the hills amid the unique, undrying beauty of Lake Destruction.

Stimulated by the vivid multiplicity of its shades of grey.

Greyhound grey, granite grey, sky grey, slate grey, slug-slime-silver grey, glinting flint grey, twilight grey, dawn grey, northern grey, yarrow grey.

He had stared at the photo in the paper, struck by how curiously apt and even satisfying it was that his features should be so distorted. Schwitters, the man who longed to turn into a sheep, concealed&revealed by the wise English fog that doubled every object into form and outline. If he were a sheep, would he be a black one? A *schwarze* Schwitters. Might just as well call myself something like Ash or Wash, be a jolly chap and slip off the local tongue with gruel-like ease.

To get the neighbours on side. It was *vertrackt*: complicated. Like the English "track". To track someone down was to pursue them. But no, that was a hangover from Norway: watch out or they'll come and throw you out. England was infinitely preferable on that score: Compulsory registration? No such nonsense here!

He had grown accustomed to London, only to tear himself away once again. And Wantee with him. No-one had told him to go to Ambleside. True, they could no longer afford to live in the city, but that wasn't the main

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motivation. It was his art that drove him. Take your life into your hand. No, Wantee said, it's take charge of your life. Here, you charged up your life like a battery or handled it like freight. In German, it had the quality of an animal, held in your hand, pulse to pulse. He could feel it cowering there. Trembling.

A morning in a meadow of merciful fog. The ground unsteady in places. That was natural, apparently. An English meadow was more water than soil; it existed in a state of matter that differed from sea water only in degree.

The war had warred itself out. His country lay in ashes. Half the world lay in ashes on his country's account. Such was the march, the sprint, the headlong rush of history. It rushed along after him. The streams carved their patterns deep into the meadows, the water ran to the sea. No destruction here in the Lakes, but then again, nothing left untouched by the war either. You only saw it on the second glance. Many households had lost the man of the family. Doctor Johnston had come out of retirement and returned to his old practice. On the way to the next village westwards was a curious piece of land streaked with gunpowder dust: the site of a former munitions factory, now demolished. Never again would he set foot on German soil. He had survived, but the people around him spoke a foreign language and knew nothing of his past. Even to his closest companions, the man he had once been remained invisible, if not unimaginable. The fact hit him with blinding clarity now, after more than six years in the United Kingdom and five years living with Wantee. His roots were severed, his fortune gone; he

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was a penniless wretch in a pitiful state of health. Their evenings consisted of a cup of tea and an early night. Heating: the very idea! Bread: if only! To the villagers, he looked like a tramp. Children pointed at him, and the wind from the fells tugged at his lungs, tearing the air apart. He was getting on for sixty. Sometimes the wind was a tonic; at other times, he struggled to make headway against the blasts. His arteries were ninety-five, his left hip eighty-two, he had pains, he had memories, he wanted to forget what "having" meant, now that he himself had "had it", in the local lingo. Hitler was dead, peaceful nights were no more, and dreams were blighted by mildew.

In May 1945, the English had broken out in song. Their word victory rhymed with history. And, alas, with misery. The German Führer and his Russian adversary had set the world ablaze so malevolently that the fires were still raging even now, a year and a half after the fall of Berlin, after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The war may have ended, but when would it stop? To see the flames, Kurt only had to step onto the narrow pavement outside the house at twilight, and there they were, flickering away not far above the ground, like a bonfire after the potato harvest back home in Hanover. The home that once was.

Passers-by walked through the fire untouched by the heat, unseeing. But his eyes followed the licking of the flames night after night, and the silhouettes of the writhing figures inside them – dry, ghostly figures that seemed to

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have pursued him, Kurt von Rückhause, Kurt from Back-Home, all the way here.

On good days, the little brook on their doorstep sang a different tune, the grass in the meadows grew lush and green. Perhaps he could, after all, spin war into art, straw into gold. The landscape was glorious, so rugged and fresh, with animals all around; the air smelt of peat and sea, the locals were friendly, they had their portraits done by Curt and paid him, and they served bitter, his favourite beer. He had come through the Blitz unscathed. His son lived in safety in Norway, his hands could hammer, knead, carve or write without hurting, he could walk and bend, had a doctor who, for all his dreadful stories, played a passable game of chess, and the persistence of the fires helped him gather strength for his fight.

And on bad days? No, he didn't count those. You lived through them, that was enough. The wind whistled. Sheep heads emerged, as if trunkless, from the fog. Mighty balls of wool, with two or three legs braced firmly against the earth, rooted in the ground. Here and there a single sheep's eye, blinking against the sun.

Three years ought to be enough. He asked for three years.

Looking up, he saw that the sheep had drifted away. Moving heads above the fog, sans spine, belly or legs. Moving sheep shapes, their fleeces matted and crinkled, like a bowl of dried porridge. Sheep one in position three,

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sheep two in the corner of the board, sheep three and four ruminating, side by side, on the merits of absolute territoriality. The fog, the cold and the wind played a tune: K. Schwitters, Stay, Fighter! His shoes – a donation from a London clothing bank – were as tough as his bones.

Two years if he put his back into it. *All seine Kräfte aufbot. Aufbrachte.* No, *aufmachte.* Goodness gracious, his German! Since he couldn't rescue any of the Merzbau constructions, he would embark on a new one.

The Allies had declared victory, and the victory had crumbled into victories. Victories with conflicting meanings. Hitler had lost the world war.

But the family-shattering war, the damage-inflicting war, the people-corrupting war, the war of extermination – that war he had won. And Stalin had won the world war to boot. The entire continent reeked of blood. Far too many of those who had survived endured a living death. For some, the winning never ended.

No wonder Käthe Steinitz, writing in English from the US, talked of a new war. She had moved to Los Angeles after her husband's death, and sent coffee, shampoo and peanut butter wrapped up in newspaper comic strips. Kurt cut out Superman, Popeye, Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny, combining and pasting, making miniatures, developing, copying, asking for more. In her letters, his old friend also told him of the harassment she suffered as the ex-



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German, the rehabilitated German, the "communist" or "communist immigrant". They call it a cold war, she wrote. Her lines were censored.

And meanwhile here was he, resting on a peaceful stone in the peaceful English morning sunshine. Good day to you! A solitary cog in the Lakelands machine that didn't run true. Feeble and fault-prone, an unpredictable mass of veins, bronchial tubes and blood called Kurt. But he wouldn't let them grind him down.

Your last shot, said his English voice.

He knew what that meant and shrank from it. No-one saw the effort it cost him to do any kind of artistic work. Indeed, what was there to see but a well-built man bent over a lump of plaster to which two hands sought – sometimes with the aid of a trowel but mostly with bare fingers soon caked in their turn with the powdery white sulphate – to impart the essence of a chicken.

In his childhood, his father had spent a lot of time away from home. He had always found the goodbyes a terrible ordeal, apart from the few seconds after Eduard Schwitters' disappearance though the barrier onto the platform. Every time someone passed through, the two wooden panels, which ended an inch or so above the ground like stable doors, would go on swinging back and forth for a while. In the top third of the panels were windows through which the left-behind could watch their loved ones' heads

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disappear. If you were a child, all you would see was wood or sky; if you were the young Kurt, you would kneel down in front of the gap and peer through it. He still loved it to this day, that shadow play of the swinging doors. Whenever he reached through the shadows, his father's hand had always reached back from the other side and enclosed his fingers.

Odd, perhaps, that he should think of this right now. But memories followed their own laws, and he had learned to go with the flow. One tended to focus on the pleasant things, forever pushing aside the not-so-pleasant. The memory habitually mixed up time. Perhaps that was one of its best, or at least most striking, characteristics: its trick of presiding over the sequence of hours, stirring up their innermost order. In this case, it wasn't hard to guess why the station platform had come to mind. He was depending on a hand over which he had no control reaching out to him from a place he couldn't see. He needed to connect with his own self, with all his past and future selves, before he could begin to sculpt a block of stone, mould a lump of plaster, bend a piece of wire. And once he'd achieved that, he needed another bit of luck. There was nothing for it but to wait for the hand from the other side, that eternally other side. Wait for it to reach him, enclose him and guide him safely over the flitting shadows of all that he had ever known, all that he had ever been.

He asked for three years. Three years for a new construction.

Kurt, now Curt.

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Curt, in a nutshell: a few tufts of sheep fleece, a few spoonfuls of fog  
vapour.