



IRIS WOLFF

Die Unschärfe der Welt

The Blurriness of the World

Literary Fiction

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Klett-Cotta

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Against the background of the collapse of the Eastern bloc, this kaleidoscopic novel highlights a finely woven net of family members bound together by love, nostalgia and idealism.

A family of four generations, their closest loved ones and one hundred years of history of the Banat region in Eastern Europe: Their ties are so closely knit, they do not tear, even across borders. And if »family« means the people who are closest to us, this might also include the befriended gay couple who lives hundreds of kilometres away in a different country, with a different political system; and it might also include the neighbours who help harvesting the quinces and pears.

Would Florentine and Hannes have opened their door for the two young travellers even if they had guessed what role the visit from the GDR would play for their family? Would Samuel have given his best friend his full support in leaving his home country even if he had understood the extent of his decision?

Against the historical background of the Romanian Revolution and the Fall of Ceausescu, the protagonists of this captivatingly poetic novel keep converging, always linked to each other despite strokes of fate and geographical distances. The story forms concentric circles that approach the main character Samuel, while the very centre remains a blank space, since he is the only character in this multi-perspective and polyphonic novel who doesn't have a voice of his own.

›The Blurriness of the World‹ is a novel about how loss and new beginnings are linked, about friendship and what we are willing to give up for the happiness of another, about the beauty of a life close to nature and close to the people we share it with, but also about the burden that comes with it. And not to forget it is a novel about dreaming cows and the colours of sadness. With great precision and artistry, Iris Wolff explores the possibilities and limits of language and memory—and tells about who we are, seen through the eyes of the others.



Iris Wolff, born in 1977 in Hermannstadt, Transylvania, studied German language and literature, religious studies, graphics and painting. For many years she worked at the German Literature Archive in Marbach. She received several awards for her literary work including the **Ernst-Habermann-Prize**, the **ALPHA-Literature-Prize**, the **Otto-Stoessl-Prize**, the **Thaddäus-Troll-Prize** and the **Marie-Luise-Fleißer-Prize**. She was nominated for the highly regarded **Alfred-Döblin-Prize** and received Scholarships of the Art Foundation Baden-Württemberg, the state of Baden-Württemberg and the Künstlerhaus Edenkoben. Wolff is a member of the international exile PEN. She lives in Freiburg, in the South West of Germany.

What the press says on the previous books:

»What is particularly striking about this author's books is their unique, extremely precise and at the same time poetically sparkling beauty.«

– tagesspiegel

»No one has ever made history waft so beautifully.«

– Stuttgarter Zeitung

»An author with a magical linguistic intuition.«

– Denis Scheck, SWR “Best List”

»There is a resistance in the tender and lucid prose of this author who does not want to convince us that the world is bad, but a place worth exploring, especially in literature and with the help of literature.«

– Laudatio zum Otto-Stoessl-Preis 2018

»Iris Wolff narrates her story with a profound tranquillity and thereby expands time. It does not even take her two hundred pages to tell a whole century and numerous human lives. And not one single thing is missing.«

– SWR2

[Extensive press kit available]

Interview with the author:

Your novel interweaves the stories of seven characters. What is the link between them?

The novel opens at the end of the sixties in a Banat village, when a young woman, Florentine, tries to get to the nearest hospital by sleigh to save her child's life. Her family – the still unborn son and her husband Hannes – and her new home in Banat are the novel's starting point, the vicarage with its large vegetable and fruit garden its secret centre. It is from here that the paths of the family members branch out with those friendships that have the power to shape a life and take the readers far beyond the borders of the country. Each chapter focuses on one character with his or her own particular challenges, but all of the protagonists are constantly present and little by little the traces they leave in the lives of the others are revealed.

In what sense does Samuel provide an anchor in your novel?

The book tells his story, though never from his own perspective, but rather on the basis of encounters with other people. I wanted to show in a narrative way that it is not possible to look at a biography individually. The novel starts off with the perspective of Samuel's mother Florentine and ends with the perspective of his daughter Liv, thus spanning half a life. Samuel appears as a different person in the presence of each individual: in the intimate silence with his mother, playing football with his father, camping with his best friend Oz who he wants to save from making a far-reaching mistake, or trying to teach his daughter the greatest possible independence and integrity. He is the centre of the circle to evolve around it.

You span a wide arc from the interwar period through communist Romania in the 1960s and the collapsing GDR all the way to southern Germany today. What role does history play for your characters?

The focus is not on the small part of history that the characters are experiencing, yet it determines their lives. They help to shape history and at the same time try to escape it. My characters are always closest to me when they fall out of time. Sometimes they find the courage to subordinate their own happiness over a wider context – like Samuel, who gives up a lot to save his friend Oz. Or when they, like Samuel's grandmother Karline, favour invention over truth. Karline experiences the biggest political changes: from monarchy to communism to democracy. In a life marked by loss and disappointment, she finds shelter in the “chamber of remembrance” where the memory of her interwar youth is kept alive, in particular a meeting with Romania's king. She will still remember his face when she dies in a nursing home in Germany.

"The Blurriness of the World" is not least a novel about imaginary and quite real boundaries that your characters cross. To what extent are flight and migration key experiences for your characters?

The history of violence and dictatorship in the 20th century has left its mark on the courses of people's lives. So, what is the immaterial baggage that you take with you when you are forced to leave a place behind? After his escape, Bene, a student from East Berlin, builds up a new existence as a bookseller on the North Sea. When the Wall falls, he doesn't find the courage to travel back to Berlin. He realizes that he has not only left a place behind, but a whole life plan. Samuel will also at some point ask himself whether it is possible to cross the borders backwards, whether he can pick up the threads to his family he had cut before. Because of their migration history, all the characters keep questioning what is important to them and who they are. Identity is not something fixed – it is determined by political circumstances,

landscapes and places as well as by the people you encounter. This demands a certain openness from my characters, not least because of the linguistic and religious diversity that characterizes Eastern Europe.

For none of your characters language is a matter of course. Stana, who falls in love with Samuel, puts it this way: “Language could never be more than a run-up to the jump.” What's that supposed to mean?

Stana, just like all the characters, experiences that she can only ever come close to reality. All my protagonists are repeatedly confronted with the task of getting involved with this reality without having predefined concepts of what it actually is. Since they lack certainty in general, language is also something unreliable. Florentine's husband, Hannes, is forced to record in Romanian language all the visits to the vicarage for the secret service, and he is happy that he still has a language in which the words actually mean what is being said. Bene knows that language is always metaphorical and that when you talk about something differently, your experience changes too. The novel ends with Liv's perspective, and in the face of her great-grandmother's death, she realizes that it is not possible to sum up a life in a few sentences; there will always remain contradictions and mysteries. But in this vagueness, in this ambiguity, there is always a sense of freedom.

The Blurriness of the World

by Iris Wolff

Sample translation by Alexandra Roesch

The pear trees bore small, hard fruit. The quinces were ripe.

Florentine felt it would be ungrateful not to eat every single gift of the garden, to boil it down to jam or dry it in the attic. For the first few years, she had tried to manage everything on her own (until the berries coloured her hands and dreams), since then the neighbours had helped. They had a way of pausing at work, wiping their hands on their smocks, first the palms, then the backs of their hands, with their upper body slightly inclined; as if they needed those few centimetres gained by the slight inclination to convey a message that would otherwise be lost. Taken away by the wind, carried to the treetops.

Her silence must have given the impression she considered herself superior. Florentine felt an uneasiness towards words that she could never completely resolve. The vagueness of statements unsettled her. No matter how hard she tried, speaking did not match the reality of the experience. She liked to indulge in her thoughts as

she plucked currants and raspberries, harvested grapes, picked apples – listening to what the words negotiated with each other, what memories they touched. They were located in an indeterminate space, where thinking and feeling flowed into one another.

There was no doubt that it was her fault that Samuel was not speaking yet although he was two and a half. Florentine had been silent as he grew in her belly, silent as she walked across the fields with the pram or strolled along the river. Dispatching boats on puddles, spending the summer in a hammock, arranging dried corn cobs in the shape of faces in the snow – her games of silence. Samuel showed when he liked something; he left no doubt when he didn't like something, he spoke with his laugh, his eyes, but not a word had come from his lips that sounded like mama or papa, or whatever it was that children usually first say.

'You have to show him,' people advised her.

They bent down to the boy, forming individual words, exaggerating them, pointing to objects at same time.

'Ball,' they'd say, with their tongue curved in their mouth.

'Mama,' they said, pointing to Florentine, who froze under the elongated double vowel. Samuel looked at mouths, balls, his mother, his father, and remained quiet.

Hannes grew impatient.

Florentine could wait.

She remained silent alongside the chattering neighbours, concentrated on the rustling of footsteps in the leaves, the thumping of a woodpecker. Quinces went into wicker baskets, pears into metal bowls, plums into enamel dishes. The low sun reddened the sky and

the tiled roofs. The garden lay in shadow. A gentle breeze cooled her neck, catching a word now and then.

As one point one of the women held out her hands.

Florentine looked at them, then at her own.

‘You’re the only one with red hands.’

A flock of sheep grazed outside the village in early November.

At first Samuel watched the flock from a safe distance. Then he headed for some sheep on the edge. They let him stroke them as if they didn’t even notice him. The dog sniffed at Samuel’s outstretched hand, then left him alone. Soon Florentine had to be careful not to lose sight of Samuel among the sheep. After a week, she sat down next to the shepherd and shared bread and cheese as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Fortunately, the shepherd was not overly interested in conversation.

One afternoon Paul joined her with Oswald and Thea.

The children ran among the flock.

Florentine and Paul leaned against a fence and followed the movement of the sheep which were grazing, oblivious to everything around them.

Now and then someone said something.

It gets dark early.

Or: it’s cold today.

Florentine liked sentences like that. Little reassurances that justified and maintained the silence.

If she lifted her gaze, the sheep were always scattered differently across the meadow. If you kept your eyes on them, they didn't seem to move at all. A tractor drove across the field, fog muffled the engine noise. The bright sound of a bell came from somewhere. Florentine was seized by anxiety, a sudden fear. As soon as the dog barked, she started running.

Samuel, Oswald and Thea were standing close together, staring at the ground. Oswald picked something up. The children separated as if something had stepped into their midst.

'Bang!' Oswald shouted with the muzzle of a pistol pointed at Thea.

'No,' cried Paul. 'Don't!'

The sheep scattered.

Samuel looked up briefly, then threw his whole body against his friend's.

Oswald staggered and fell.

Florentine got down on her knees beside him. The boy lay motionless and rigid on the floor, one hand on his stomach, the other still stretched out as if he were aiming. Florentine released the rigidity of his hand and lifted him up; he became very light in her arms.

Paul wanted to say something, but she shook her head.

And while Thea began to cry, as if only the reaction of the adults had shown her that something had happened, Samuel stroked the fleece of a sheep, without turning his eyes away from Oswald and his mother.

Paul picked up the pistol.

It was loaded.

‘Do you think that’s a good idea?’ Hannes asked, as she washed the green stains from Samuel’s clothes.

‘The sheep will be gone soon,’ Florentine said, ‘then we’ll look for something else.’

‘Maybe an activity where the child will learn to speak.’

Florentine scrubbed the trousers a little harder.

She didn’t mention the pistol.

She stayed at home for a few days, spread leaves and compost over the flowerbeds and horse and cow manure on the pruned roses, built a winter shelter for hedgehogs with Samuel out of wood, brushwood and leaves, and protected the potted plants against the coming frost.

A letter arrived from Bene.

In his clear, slightly bulbous writing, he wrote about his first practical lessons as a teacher, invoking memories of late summer. He only mentioned Lothar in one sentence, but it was so full of love that it became clear: he knew that they knew. The planned stopover had turned into three weeks. They had bathed in the Mures, split firewood, helped with the harvest and preparing meals. They had lain by the well and had made their way back to Berlin at the beginning of the semester.

Hannes said he felt as if the two of them were still here, on a blanket in the garden, all their wishes concentrated on this narrow rectangle.

When Florentine went back to the field with Samuel, a boy was waiting for her instead of the shepherd. He was sitting on a stone, reading. Florentine assumed that Romanian literature spread across the country mainly through shepherds. Sheep were sacred animals in Romania. There were also lots of cows, buffaloes and cattle, but there were songs and poems only about sheep.

The boy raised his hand to his cap in greeting.

This is someone who dreams of something else, she thought.

Florentine rarely allowed herself to draw conclusions that went beyond what concerned her. Others had opinions; she had only the sum of many, often contradictory experiences. Whether, despite all insights, one became wiser, wise enough to judge others, was doubtful. Something did not change, something seemed to be there from the beginning, and Samuel, who got lost among the sheep, reminded her of this every day.

Florentine examined the grey of the horizon. The village looked faraway. The pastures dark, the fields washed out. She hoped that it would be a while before the winter months banished life back into the rooms, before the snow came, the storms, and she had to seal the doorways and windows with rags and newspapers.

When she asked the boy if he would be back next year, he shrugged his shoulders, indecisively, complyingly.

Samuel lay stretched out on the ground next to a young sheep.
'We must go.'

As he didn't move, she picked him up. A movement went through the flock. Samuel and Florentine lifted their gaze.

There was the grey of the sky.

The river and the willows.

The plains and the solitude.

There was the edge and the middle.

The yes and the no.

The uncertainty.

And yet, Florentine thought, this landscape leaves you as you are.

Snowflakes fell out of the grey. They fell silently on Florentine's coat, put pearly drops on Samuel's face, and he said a word, with two twanging and one blunt 'a', so loud and clear that the wind couldn't take it away.

'Zăpadă'.

The tin tub was no longer big enough. This year her knees popped out of the water like little islands. The well water had warmed up throughout the day. She had skimmed off the dead mosquitoes, knocked the sand off her feet, and laid her clothes over a chair with three legs. She had got into the water, sunk until the water line reached her chin. She had bent her legs, and then, because she realised that this wouldn't work, stretched them out on the edge of the tub. She

wiggled her toes. If sadness dwells in the chest, then funniness dwells in the toes. Everything in the body has a fixed place, Stana thought, and worked to complete this map.

She liked her underwater body. Her thighs felt smooth, her breasts firm. Her hair was soft, the scratches and impurities disappeared. She stroked her belly, her ribs and neck, closing her eyes. Swallows chattered in the silver poplar – or was it just one? One swallow could sound like two, in eternal dialogue with itself.

No one could see Stana. The walls to the neighbours were high, only a small skylight of her own house faced towards her. But there was no one in the attic, it was only used in autumn, when nuts were laid out or when her mother was looking for something that they had sorted out when they moved that was to be reintroduced to the household: a bumpy coffee grinder, a clock ticking too loudly, hopelessly knotted shoelaces.

Stana had waited for the moment when her father was out of the house. Some, other fathers went to work in the mornings and only returned in the evening. Others, most of them, worked on their own farm. She wanted the former. A father who was away during the day, who couldn't just turn up when she was peeling potatoes with her mother and laughing (which he always thought was about him), who couldn't just stand in the doorway when she was lying on the bed reading (which he interpreted as laziness). Perhaps that was what she disliked most about him, his constant judgements – rarely those that flattered her or her mother. He could only conceive of everything that happened as a reaction to himself.

If someone looked down, it was because they had a guilty conscience; if someone looked into his eyes, he considered it a provocation; if people whispered in his presence, it was only because they betrayed him; if they remained silent, it was out of pure displeasure. His life consisted of suspicion and irreconcilability, interrupted by moments of calm, or something close to it, perhaps indifference. It was as if he was standing next to the tub, staring at her light, thin body, blurred under the surface of the water. Had there been a noise? Stana quickly sat up. Water overflowed.

Shadows of trees stretched across the yard. A mouse crossed the meadow and disappeared into the shed. The vegetable patch lay in the sun, peppers ripened next to tomatoes, green beans next to courgettes, watermelons lay on the ground. They were so big that they had to be rolled into the house. Stana would fill the watering can with the bath water and, as soon as the shadow of the neighbouring house hit the yard, she would water the beds, giving the vine and tomatoes water from below, knocking on the watermelons, listening to the muffled, bright sound that told when they were ripe. Her previous apartment only had a balcony; here Stana had been given the garden as her new task, which she liked, much more than her responsibility for the laundry.

But before beginning her evening routine, she took a breath, pulled her legs in close and dived down. Under water, she opened her eyes. All she could see was plain blue, all she could hear was the sound of the tub, an echo of her movements. Then she saw a face above the water. Ash blond, wavy hair, barley-coloured eyes and dead straight eyebrows.

The shame was still burning in her stomach when she went to bed. She had eaten dinner without a word, had not responded to her mother's questioning looks, nor to her father's remarks, which, like every evening, contained more or less pronounced reproaches. She had watered the flower beds, tilted the trough to the side to pour out the rest, the high, tinny sound that came from it sounded like her anger.

It had cost her all her self-control to sit up in the tub, covering what had been barely concealed moments before. She had not uttered a word at first. Neither had he. But she could see how insecure he too was, surprised, embarrassed and about to leave without a word.

'Turn around,' said Stana.

He turned around.

She got up from the tub, wrapped herself in a towel and took a seat on the three-legged chair, which she regretted immediately because, as was to be expected, it wobbled – which demanded even more effort from her not to lose the last bit of self-confidence.

A caterpillar crawled along the edge of the tub. Its green body seemed transparent. A butterfly was struggling not to drown.

'What are you doing here?'

Samuel turned to her again. Fixed his gaze on her face. Not at the towel that was tightly wrapped around her, not at her legs with drops of water shimmering on them, not at the rivulets from the hair stuck to her neck.

'Sana, I just wanted ...'

It was obvious how embarrassed he was. This situation demanded more from him than it did from her, even though she was

the one who had been lying naked at the bottom of the trough and was now wobbling around on a three-legged chair with all the dignity she could muster.

‘Let’s talk some other time,’ she said and rescued the butterfly with her cupped hand.

He walked across the yard so quickly that it just passed as walking and not running, as if he had only waited to be finally delivered from her.

Still in bed, Stana could hardly think of anything else.

Her room faced the street, and footsteps could be heard in places. The headlights of a car searched the walls, then it got dark again. What had he been thinking, he must have seen her clothes over the chair? Had he assumed she was wearing her bathing suit like on the Mures? Was he trying to scare her? He hadn’t moved, he had looked at her like something strange – yet there was no one whose face was as familiar to her as his. There had never been a time without Samuel. They had spent their evenings under the kitchen table while their parents played cards. They had made a cave in the living room with blankets and pillows and tried to convince the adults that this would be their future home; food could be served through the opening, a supply of toys had to be provided, and personal hygiene was negligible.

She had ridden donkeys with Samuel and herded sheep. They shunned no danger: made faces and drank water before eating, even though it was said that if you pulled a face and the church clock struck, you would stick like that forever, and that you would get frogs in your stomach if you drank too much water. Samuel had taken away her fear

of water after a course of swimming lessons in Arad, where the teacher had pushed her in the pool with a carelessly inflated swim ring and said, Now swim! That was the way it was done, Stana's mother was told, every time she collected her crying child. If she wanted to raise a child with the heart of a rabbit, she could gladly take her daughter out of the course. And because Stana's parents couldn't swim and no one, least of all her father, wanted to raise a rabbit heart, Stana was not removed from the course.

The water carries you, Samuel had said, you just have to make yourself light.

As light as the wing of a dandelion?

As light as a maple leaf propeller?

Yes.

Stana learned from the wind walkers, learned not to fight against the water, and also, not to fight her father. Not at every opportunity, not always. Samuel had taught her when to look away and when to stand up to him. You don't look a wild horse in the eye, but you do a belligerent dog – casually, without staring, so that it didn't feel threatened, but in such a way that it perceives your strength.

To distinguish the horse days from the dog days became her task. Sometimes things went wrong, sometimes it was impossible to foresee what irritated her father. Like when he sent her out in winter because the laundry had been hung upside down. There had been frost, and his underwear, shirt and trousers were frozen. He had shown her with a casual gesture what would happen if the laundry were to snap, and so it took her almost an hour for her to take each piece of laundry down and hang it up again, carefully, with stiff fingers.

The waistband facing down, the shirt collars as well, otherwise it looked as if there was a person hanging on the washing line, he said, as if he was hanging out there on the line.

Those were the things that only mother knew about, but even if Stana had a swollen eye or a split lip, everyone acted as if nothing had split, nothing was swollen. Doors were in the way, objects which you could bump into. Capricious, unreliable furniture that had a life of its own and appeared before Stana so quickly that she couldn't avoid it. Sometimes Stana would deliberately run into a door frame in front of everyone. She thought she was making a good job of it.

She could not fool Samuel. Under his gaze things turned to stone. He could hold her or make her disappear, depending on the situation. Samuel's eyes were the colour of ripe barley in summer, and turned amber in fall, a comparison Stana had first made when her mother had given her an amber pendant for her fourteenth birthday.

When she thought about where Samuel lived in her body, she found he was now everywhere. She felt it in her fingertips, in the strength of her shoulders. He had taken up a wide space in the middle of her chest, he sent a light, floating feeling into her belly. Lately there had been a connection between the region of her heart and her lower abdomen, a hot, swirling, totally unsettling feeling. She pulled the blanket up to her chin. Samuel had, without knowing it, taken the map of her body for himself and, if there was one thing she was grateful for that night, it was that this atlas was invisible.

* * *

Samuel procured the plane. A propeller-driven machine that was used to fertilise fields with pesticides. The farmer was in the loop, had received an appropriate gift in return and would report the machine as stolen.

It was hard to leave without being able to say goodbye.

Oz left all his money for his father. He put his mother's necklace under his sister's pillow for her, a moonstone necklace he had always defended as his property – maybe because he'd had the least time with Nika.

Unlike Samuel, he left no messages. Samuel had written letters for both his girlfriend and his parents, which he only half succeeded in doing after trying many times.

'A parting doesn't hurt any less when everyone knows about it,' Oz said.

But Samuel insisted on these letters, and Oz felt like a traitor on his last visit to the rectory. Samuel had been to see Stana – he was thoughtful, absent, a bit cold, which was all the more noticeable because Samuel's (otherwise unconditional) attention was something that Oz, like everyone else, took for granted.

Hannes got off his bike, his cheeks ruddy and his cap pulled low over his forehead, shouted something across the yard, maybe a greeting, maybe news, and Samuel and Oz watched from the corridor as Florentine came towards him from the garden, with her own grace and seriousness, both unaware of what was going to happen that night.

They fled between three and four, a time when even the rangers were tired. The sound of the propeller would betray them. But by the time the guards realised it was not a farmer fertilising his fields at an unusual time, they would be on the Hungarian side. They would fly so low that they would stay under the radar. The fuel would take them as far as the Austrian border.

Samuel started the plane. Everything began to vibrate. The seat, the metal, the windows, the seatbelt. Samuel's hands around the control stick vibrated, as did his arms, his shoulders. Oz, who was sitting behind him and had often imagined this moment, realised that this scene had gone through his mind like a silent movie. He had forgotten the sounds. The machine was rolling across the ground, picking up speed. The propeller was roaring, irregularly, as if it had hiccups. They took off, everything rattled, and Oz was sure that everyone could hear them, that the sound could already be heard at the border, that people were stepping out of their houses and everyone, even cats and dogs, even the sunflowers in the fields, were stretching their heads and looking up at them. They would be discovered, brought down like pheasants in at a shoot.

The machine was at an angle in the air. Oz's stomach slipped upwards. The horizon, the fields, the expanse. Then the plane bumped like it was on a road full of potholes. Samuel looked to the side and the plane turned to the left. A tear rolled down his cheek. The pressure? The altitude? The parting? The fear? Oz knew what Samuel was giving up for him, what he was doing for him. What he had always done for him – waiting for him after school, telling him that it wasn't bad, to be alone, to be afraid (of classmates, teachers, sports), it was just

surrendering to fear that was bad. Together they had climbed trees, had made the first slingshots with which he learned to aim and which, for the first time, had made him feel he could defend himself. He fired it at windows, he fired it at a fellow student and gave him a black eye. It got him into trouble, but it helped.

Samuel had given him his nickname, Oswald was too long, and the 'wald' made no sense in his name. The wizard Oz, whom he had come across in a book, had the ability to always appear as a different figure. As a beautiful woman, as a dangerous predator or a ball of fire. Everyone sees what they want in you, Samuel said, it doesn't mean you're like that.

He had asked his friend again and again if he was serious about it. If it was worth the risk. What happened to him was irrelevant, but that if the plan went wrong, Samuel's life would be ruined, he could not ignore that. It will succeed, Samuel said, with a certainty that Oz did not feel. It would succeed and their families would follow.

The flight had become quieter. Beneath them fields, the shadow of the propeller machine. A second, silent shadow. Then clouds covered the moon, and both shadows disappeared. Samuel raised his hand. That was the signal. Now they had to fly over the border, a line that had ruled their lives. It had been so all-encompassing, the world had ended so irrevocably there, that it would not have been surprising if there had been a line marked through the landscape to distinguish one country from the other.

They had chosen an area that was sparsely populated, at some distance from guarded border crossings. And yet, at any moment, Oz expected the sound of machine guns, the plane exploding, their traps.

If this failed, there would be no second chances. He looked back. On the horizon, the anticipation of morning. A loud, ringing blue. Maybe he thought that because everything was happening in sounds. Because there was nothing else but the roar of the propeller. Dawn was growing louder. His hope was growing louder. And when he realised how long they had been flying along unhindered, that there were Hungarian fields below, Hungarian roads, he realised that the dragon, his all too familiar inner monster, that had been accompanying them all the time was struggling to keep up. It fell back. Just a little at first, then so far that Oz could barely see it.

With a hiss that was louder than all of it, the engine, his heart, the blue, the dragon sheered off. Oz laughed, a big, all-encompassing laugh. A hysterical laugh. A hungry laugh. And Samuel joined in. He held the controls with one hand and raised the other hand, fist closed. Oz slapped him on the shoulder. They laughed until their faces hurt, until Samuel got a stitch in his side and Oz couldn't breathe.

No matter how many times he checked the sky.

The dragon stayed away.

What followed could be counted on two hands.

Farewell to the propeller machine.

Waiting for papers in Austria.

Their escape story in the papers.

The onset of winter.

Onward journey to Germany.

Transit point for ethnic German immigrants in Nuremberg.

Language test at the State Arrival Centre for Refugees and Ethnic German Immigrants in Rastatt, with the result: they speak fluent German, language test not required.

Temporary housing.

Spring.

The German they heard was rounded, with long vowels and lots of sch-sounds. It was unfamiliar to them, and they knew they were strangers with their angular, idiosyncratic pronunciation. When asked where they came from, they said Banat. And they might have said Atlantis, Wonderland, Middle-earth. They said Romania. And they were taken for Romanians, as if there were a conformity between a country and the nationalities that lived in it.

They went to a grocery store. The Germans shopped in stores as big as warehouses. Their shopping trolley remained almost empty; the choice overwhelmed them. They wanted to buy water and took the wrong crate. The liquid was transparent, only a small lemon depicted on the label revealed that it wasn't water. Oz thought of how many times he had queued up at five in the morning and asked what was available today. With any luck, that 'something' wouldn't have just run out when it was his turn. He was used to going from store to store, hoping for more than one ration. If you needed new shoes, the saleswoman in the shoe shop would only sell them to you if you had something to trade.

Everything was available here. Always. And if a particular type of sausage was sold out, the shop assistant at the meat counter apologised, until Oz felt like he had to reassure her. Here they waited at traffic lights until they were green, even if no cars were coming.

There were people who jogged through the city and ran on the spot at junctions until the traffic was clear. Oz joked that they were on the run from the Securitate. There were families with two cars and others who didn't have one because they were cycling to protect the environment. Oz made sense of it to himself by saying: because you could have everything, you could show who you were or who you wanted to be by both possession and renunciation. And because there was so much, things had to be done simultaneously: jogging and pushing the stroller, watching TV and talking to guests. But no one sat outside the house here. You didn't go and visit someone unannounced, did not call someone out just because you wanted to talk. There was too much of everything, and too little of something else – time.

You trade something, leave something behind. You don't know what it was until you've gone. And when Oz looked east, it seemed like the horizon was shimmering green.

One afternoon they were on the mainland in Bene's Ford Fiesta. Lately, the spark plugs had been giving him trouble, Bene noticed the engine stuttering, and soon it would flood again. Samuel turned up the volume on the radio. The 'Free Europe' station brought news from Romania. There had been reports of riots in Timisoara. The demonstrations spread, thousands took to the streets in Arad, and now in Bucharest as well. The army used water cannons and live ammunition against the

demonstrators, but it was also reported that some soldiers showed solidarity with them.

Samuel talked about his parents for the first time, and Bene pictured a garden, a kitchen where people played cards, a fountain, stairs, a woman. He inquired about the name of the village and recognised the vicarage where he had been with Lothar in the early seventies.

Bene abruptly took his foot off the accelerator.

Someone was honking behind them.

When they realised that they had met each other, Bene as a student, Samuel as a little boy, they began to laugh. Bene had never heard Samuel laugh like that before. It came from his stomach and shook his entire body. When they had calmed down, Samuel looked at him with a look of gratitude, a touch of relief.

A song was being played on the radio, one of those songs that were in the charts. 'Man child, look at the state you're in / Could you go undercover / And sell your brand-new lover (could you?).' The engine stuttered, the car slowed down and Bene let it roll into a parking space. Samuel closed his eyes, leaned his head back. The clarity and uniqueness of his profile became apparent once again, so much so that it was painful for Bene.

Samuel seemed not to notice that the engine had stopped, and they had come to a halt.

It was only when Bene put his hand on his shoulder that he opened his eyes like someone who didn't know where he was.

‘Šeststo,’ said Samuel, roughly estimating the amount in his head.

Bene slid the sheet under the other slips of paper – looking busy, innocent. Finally, since it was impossible to sustain Samuel’s gaze, he admitted that it was a customer’s bill.

‘Looks like he never paid for a book in his life.’

‘He hasn’t.’

Samuel had come into the bookstore after closing time. He browsed the tables, read a little of some of the books, put them back down, perhaps a little more fleetingly, a little faster than usual, and finally stepped up to the counter where Bene was busy cleaning up. It had been a good day; few of the customer had needed much persuading that books would make good Christmas presents.

Why he kept this list at all, Bene could not say. He would never demand that the man paid what he owed, which was now a three-figure sum.

‘The customer is a poet,’ he said, as if this would explain it.

‘And that’s why he’s allowed to put it on the slate?’

‘Konrad is allowed to chalk it up because I know that every book he wants is sensational. If he orders a book, I’ll immediately order twenty. That’s our deal. I don’t know if he knows that or simply thinks I’m an idiot.’

It was only through Konrad that he’d discovered Infante’s ‘Three trapped tigers’, this melancholy, exuberant, chaotic and daring masterpiece. Konrad was the first to request ‘Perfume’ in the shop, even before it lodged on the bestseller list for years.

'I think every bookstore should have a Konrad,' Bene said, to close the discussion.

'And sea-buckthorn schnapps,' Samuel added.

Bene invited him to stay for dinner.

It wasn't until they were upstairs that he noticed something was wrong. Samuel cut the bread crooked, and when he couldn't open a jar of pickled cucumbers, he put it back on the shelf, unopened. They ate in front of the television. As soon as the news started mentioning Romania, Bene pressed the record button.

Candles burned on the table, fairy lights in the window, and Bene and Samuel watched as the young demonstrators shouted: 'Down with Ceaușescu'. Then army soldiers were shown in the conquered palace, they had removed the socialist badge from their caps and uniforms. The newsreader announced that the dictator and his wife were on the run.

Samuel asked if he could use the phone.

Bene broke one of his rules, went into the kitchen and did the dishes. When he was finished, he listened at the door. Nothing but silence. Samuel was sitting on the sofa, motionless, the phone on his lap. Bene went to the bookcase, quietly, as if he couldn't break the silence, pulled out a book and sat down beside him. On the cover was Jupiter, the tutelary god of Rome, depicted as a bull abducting Europe, seducing Leda in the form of a swan, robbing Ganymede as an eagle. The book opened on its own at the place where the vine leaf lay, between the Trevi Fountain and Piazza Navona.

'I spoke to my mother,' said Samuel.

'What did she say?'

'Come home.'

The streets of the village were deserted. Everything looked the same. And was not the same. Bene noticed the dilapidation, the buildings that needed restoring, the flaking paint on the facades. He could remember the church, its narrow tower, the ochre-coloured walls, and also the green gate of the vicarage – he didn't recognise the rest of the street, and he wondered how Samuel felt on seeing it all again.

Now they had passed the church, stopped at the gate.

Now they were here.

They stayed in the car until the gate opened. A man with a full grey beard came out. He wore a brown suit and slippers as if he had left the house in great haste. Samuel got out so quickly that Bene hesitated to follow him at first.

The two men hugged each other, and Bene though it was an embrace that knew no sense of time. Hannes stepped towards him, Bene felt the man's strong upper body, the beginning of a paunch and the scratchy beard. Hannes's sheer joy at seeing his son again transferred itself to everything. It was as if he'd been waiting for Bene, too.

As Bene drove into the yard, he praised his Ford, which was filthy all over. The spark plugs hadn't caused trouble once on the journey. The garden was shabbier, smaller than Bene remembered it. The roses had been cut back; the fruit trees were bare. It was summer memories that he had, rose borders, vines, fruit trees, the smell of honeysuckle – and by the well at the back, Lothar and him.

First, he noticed the birds.

A many-voiced flapping of wings.

After having been in the car for so long, listening to the monotonous sound of the engine, the air, the soft, many-voiced chirping immediately put him in a state of clarity. The bushes and trees that were closest were dark, almost black; those at a distance a light bronze. Behind the last rows of trees there was a brightness as if the world behind was fading away. Leaves rustled; birds flew up. A sound of absolute presence. Then he saw a woman. Thin, almost gaunt, in a dark blue coat, a headscarf tied at the back of her head. Her face still wore the same resolute, uncompromising expression that had always been hers. Narrow, covered in freckles, and just like her eyes, it had barely aged; eyes that were hard to describe – slightly sunken, and high-arched eyebrows.

Florentine was scattering sunflower seeds for the sparrows. She paused in mid-movement. Her hand opened; the bowl fell to the floor without making a sound.

Samuel did not move.

Florentine stood still.

Then she opened her arms.

Samuel walked towards his mother's open arms.

Behind this scene, sparrows fell upon the bowl of sunflower seeds.

The kitchen looked just as Bene remembered it. He thought it was probably even the same oilcloth on the table.

Hannes did not leave his son's side. Bene blushed under the man's gaze. You brought him back to us, he seemed to say. And Bene thought, I am here so that I don't have to be somewhere else. It's as simple as that.

After lunch they brought in the packages from the car: pickled meat, pasta, bread, sugar, matches, shampoo, soap, canned beer, cigarettes. There were several visitors. The gardener Ovidiu slapped Samuel on the shoulders, constantly shouting: 'Per avion!'. Samuel's escape must have been a sensation, and it was only now that Bene learned all the details. The bell-ringer Rositante gave them both wet kisses. When she heard that he was from North Germany, she told him that she had a brother in Hamburg. Did Bene know him? The visitors were given some of the things they had brought with them, and would, as Florentine assumed, tell the whole village that Samuel was back.

Hannes noticed that Samuel kept looking towards the door.

'Paul has moved to Reșița to be with his daughter.'

Bene could not understand the significance of this sentence and was surprised to see that Florentine's eyes were full of tears.

'I couldn't save him,' Samuel said.

'No one could.'

Florentine stepped behind her son. Samuel leaned his head back, closed his eyes.

‘At least you tried,’ she said quietly.

Bene pretended to have left something in the car. His chair scraped across the floor, the floorboards creaked, the door clicked shut – he had the impression that all these noises lifted a spell, were capable of calling something that shouldn’t be called by a name. He breathed a sigh of relief when he was outside and sat down on the edge of the well.

In the evening they heard on the radio about the first laws passed by the transitional government and that there was still sporadic shooting in Bucharest. When asked who was behind the coup, Hannes said that the Securitate would profit the most from a free market economy – given the money they had and couldn’t spend. The coup must have been planned. How else could you explain the fact that oranges had been available in the country at Christmas?

When Florentine wanted to start the washing up, Bene took the dishcloth from her hand.

‘I’ll do it – later.’

‘You haven’t changed,’ she said with a smile and went to the stairs in the backyard with a cigarette.

There were people who spoke first and thought later – as if this word predetermined a chronological order. People who didn’t ask a single question for an entire evening, and others who asked questions incessantly to keep the conversation away from themselves. There were people who disapproved of you, others who affirmed you, and

only a few, like Florentine and Hannes, who had that openness that goes without judgement.

One night in the rectory had been enough to show Bene: there was nothing that didn't come back, nothing that could be left behind. He couldn't lock up time in books, everything lived on in him. The kitchen had done it, the well in the garden, and there was nothing reprehensible about the longing to go back to the places that had shaped you. Not to confirm once-held beliefs, but to compare the place where you had become a different person in the meantime.

Samuel stepped into the kitchen. Bleary-eyed, in his father's pyjamas, since he had not taken his night things with him. Florentine poured him a cup of coffee. They leaned against the sink, Florentine in her housecoat, Samuel in his pyjamas, and when Hannes came in, quite formally dressed, they both had to laugh.

Florentine kissed Hannes on the cheek.

Then she looked questioningly at Samuel.

'There is someone who has been waiting for you,' she said.

'I wrote to her,' Samuel said. 'She never answered.'

'There is an answer you don't know yet.'

Steps could be heard in the corridor.

It seemed an eternity before there was a knock at the door.

'Come in,' Florentine said, never taking her eyes off her son for a moment.

Samuel froze. It was almost as though he were just a hand and a coffee cup – a hand holding a cup, nothing more.

A petite woman in a fur coat stood in the doorway. She squared her shoulders, looked directly into Samuel's eyes, with a trace of love, a trace of suspicion, a trace of hurt.

'Sana,' Samuel said.

She was holding a little girl by the hand.

Sample translation by Alexandra Roesch