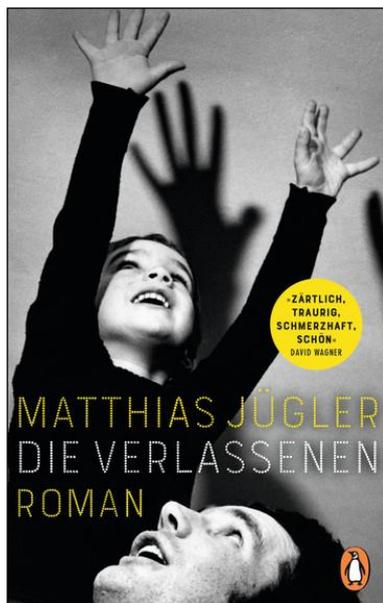


Matthias Jügler

The Forsaken

[Die Verlassenen]

Outline + Sample Translation



Literary Fiction

Penguin

176 pages

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Nobody is safe from those crucial moments that change everything

What would you forget, if you could? Johannes looks back on his childhood in East Germany, and the fine cracks that ran through it: his mother's early death, his father's mysterious disappearance. All his questions remained unanswered, and he now treads carefully on his path through life. He's a melancholic loner, who has settled into a quiet existence. When Johannes finds a letter in an old chest – addressed to his father and sent only a few days before he left his son without a word – the discovery transforms not only his future, but also his past as a child in the GDR before the Wall came down. His memories arrange themselves into a new pattern, and with it his attitude to his own life changes.

With penetrating vigour and forceful clarity, Matthias Jügler tells a story of loss and betrayal, of the value of memory and the urgent questions that are troubling a whole generation. A warm-hearted, radiant novel written with extraordinary linguistic intensity.

Press:

"Matthias Jügler's deeply felt and beautifully narrated novella is a striking portrait of the tensions and complexities of life in the German Democratic Republic."

New Books in German

"A novel that calmly unfolds its power, and amplifies that power without pageantry. [...] Jügler's coolness is reminiscent of Scandinavian storytellers. Nothing escapes his keen eye for social detail, which means that readers everywhere will connect with the novel [...]. An astonishing and touching novel, without the least hint of 'Ost' propaganda about it."

Mitteldeutsche Zeitung

"A masterpiece of concision."

Berliner Zeitung

"A profoundly moving story, told vividly and with much empathy."

NDR 1 'Kulturjournal'

"*The Forsaken* is about accepting the truth even if it turns your own past upside down [...]. Its style is dizzyingly intense and compelling."

MDR Kulturmagazin 'artour'

"A riveting novel. Jügler's style is unadorned, yet so intense that it sometimes takes your breath away. He gives voice to a whole generation, and finds words for what, in the GDR, was unspeakable, and about which many East German families remained silent for decades."

NDR Kultur

"Jügler writes sober, pithy sentences [...], which make it an unbelievably good read. Once you've picked up *The Forsaken*, a ringing phone stands no chance. He reveals the substance of the long shadows cast by the East Germany state [...]. One of the novel's strengths is the way that it leaves the reader room to manoeuvre and think. A brilliant novel."

MDR KULTUR „Lesezeit“

"A haunting, penetrating exploration of the chasms and disruptions created – then as now – by the injustices of the GDR. [...] A forceful, vibrant and sad story [...]."

Die Seitenschneider

"A thoughtful political thriller, ending in a gripping showdown. What makes it so particularly good is that it is moving, yet never maudlin."

Der Tagesspiegel

Matthias Jügler, born in 1984, did a degree in Slavonic and history of art in Greifswald and studied creative writing at the Institute of Literature in Leipzig. His 2015 debut novel *Raubfischen (Fishing for Predators)* was awarded numerous prizes. Jügler has been a writer-in-residence in Pfaffenhofen, won a scholarship from the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin, and was a writer-in-residence at the Goethe Institute in Uzbekistan. He lives in Leipzig with his wife and children, and is a freelance editor.

Sample Translation

by Imogen Taylor

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There is an elephant in this room. The thought came to me in an English lesson not long before I turned fifteen. We were reading an article from *The Observer* about plans to expand the European Union eastwards, and each of us had to read a sentence out loud and translate it. When it was my turn, I came unstuck at the phrase ‘elephant in the room’. Could anyone help me, Ms Dietrich asked. As there was no response, she explained what the expression meant: a problem or situation that everyone was aware of, but nobody spoke about. The next student read aloud, but I was no longer listening. I had the feeling I was no longer in the classroom, but somewhere out of the world. I felt strangely dazed, as if I had fallen from a great height and hadn’t quite come to yet. Although everyone in my class knew that I had grown up without my parents, no one had ever asked me about it. The elephant in the room was huge; you couldn’t miss it.

I was what you call a loner, didn’t belong to a group of friends and was often on my own—though I can’t say I minded. It would have been easy to bully me, because there was no one in school I could have relied on to stick up for me. And yet, people left me in peace. This wasn’t something I’d ever given any thought, but Ms Dietrich’s translation of the English expression brought it home to me and made me think about the reasons behind it.

When I was fidgety in class, for example, or hadn’t done my homework, I had no need to worry about the consequences. Once, in a geography oral test, I told the teacher I didn’t feel well—I hadn’t done any revision and could answer hardly any of the questions. To my surprise I was allowed to go and sit down and given until the next lesson to prepare for the test. Other students didn’t get off so lightly. But in all the years no one had ever complained about the blatant double standards being applied. Not that I knew of, anyway.

Out of school, too, I was treated leniently. Several scenes in my memory now appeared in a different light. There was that time with the ball, for instance. It was forbidden to play ball in the backyard and I had often looked out of the window and seen Mr Petzold the caretaker shouting at the other kids in the building for breaking the rules. But when he caught me with

a ball in the yard one day, a good year or so after I'd come to live with my grandmother, he just came up to me and said, 'You do know that's not allowed, don't you?' Mr Petzold was long retired, but he still kept an eye on things and no one wanted more to do with him than necessary because he yelled his head off at the slightest hint of a provocation. That day, though, he spoke to me so gently you would have thought he was asking me a favour. It wasn't just Mr Petzold either; I could think of any number of similar situations where instead of being told off, I got away with a friendly caution—if that.

I realised in that English lesson that what some would call my fate or misfortune was the reason that everyone was so kind to me, so lenient.

I left without telling anyone I was going. It would mean missing maths and PE, but that didn't bother me. For a moment I thought I might really have fallen; I was trembling at the knees and didn't feel at all well. Wherever I went, I saw elephants. There were some in the schoolyard; there were some at the kiosk next to the bus stop where I was always hailed cheerfully by a friend of my grandmother. There were several in the backyard and on the stairs up to the flat; they popped out every time I bumped into a neighbour.

At home I was given soup and put myself to bed. I was determined to ask Grandma about these elephants, but I didn't know how. I could hardly go to her and say: Dad's been away on business for two years, don't you think that's something we ought to talk about?

The next morning I woke early, at about three or four o'clock. I thought I'd heard something and for a while I lay still in my bed under the window, listening.

Then I heard my grandmother talking. I knew she sometimes spoke in her sleep. Until I was fourteen I had often slept in her bed—I wasn't afraid of the dark or anything like that, but much as I enjoyed being on my own during the day, at night I liked to have someone to snuggle up to, someone whose presence prevented me from feeling alone. I had never been ashamed of this need for closeness, and secretly I knew that Grandma felt the same. When we couldn't sleep and it was raining outside, I sometimes got up and opened the window a crack and we would lie in bed listening to the rain. I loved those moments when we lay under the duvet, without talking; to this day I sometimes think of those nights in Grandma's room. And whenever I do, I hear her ask that question—a question that everyone asks someone at some point, but that sounded different coming from her: 'What would I do without you?'

When Grandma spoke in her sleep, it was only ever odd words or syllables and seldom made sense. What I heard now was rather more: she was talking properly—and as loudly as

she did when Mrs Degen from the third floor had dropped in without her hearing aid. I got up and groped my way along the dark passage to her room.

The little light next to the bed was on when I went in and I saw at once that one of the earthenware jugs had fallen off the chest of drawers. Grandma was sitting on the edge of the bed, her hands cupped into a dish, cradling the broken pieces as carefully as if they were newborn kittens. She's gone mad, I thought—but was instantly annoyed at myself for thinking it.

'How could it have happened?'

She repeated the words a few times, her voice listless and monotonous. Her eyes were glazed like a sleepwalker's, but she was clearly awake, because she turned to look at me and said my name. I sat down beside her, took the broken pieces from her hands and put them on the chest of drawers along with the other jugs and the beer glasses—all those holiday souvenirs that I cursed when I did the dusting. I took Grandma's hand and stroked it.

I often think back to that night, to how I thought of the elephant and suddenly got it into my head that now was the moment to broach the subject of Dad's disappearance and get to the bottom of things once and for all. I was agitated, as if I were about to sit an exam I hadn't prepared for.

But when I realised which of the jugs was broken I abandoned the idea. I saw Grandma's initials on two of the pieces and knew it was the jug that Dad had made for her in art class. On one side he had painted the sun and on the other, her initials. A couple of years ago, there had been a fire in one of the neighbouring buildings, and Grandma and I had talked about what we would take with us if there were a fire in our building and we had to evacuate. 'I'd pack you,' she said, 'and my knitting things and the jug.'

I plumped up the duvet and told her to take off her sweaty pyjamas and get a clean pair from the wardrobe—then we'd have to see to it that we got back to sleep. She mustn't worry about the jug: it would be no trouble at all to stick it together again. She didn't demur, but changed her pyjamas and got back into bed.

That night our relationship changed completely. All at once, I was the one who knew what was to be done and gave instructions; she had done as she was told without hesitation. I got into bed with her and she lay quite still and quiet, breathing steadily; now and then she sobbed, but I didn't say anything. Dear God, I thought, what were you doing, mucking around with that bloody jug in the middle of the night? Then I turned onto my side so that our backs were touching. The warmth of her body did me good; it was cool in Grandma's bedroom and

although there were still regular frosts, she had changed her winter duvet for a thin summer duvet some weeks before.

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No one is safe from those moments of profound change, when life suddenly seems to veer off course. For years I was convinced that I had known several such moments in my life: my mother's death in 1986 when I was five, for instance; Dad's disappearance in 1994, then the long bouts of fatigue and pain.

But after a few weeks or months I always recovered my equilibrium. That's how it felt, anyway. Despite all I had lost, I led a steady, peaceful life. I left school, went to university and eventually got a job in municipal administration. I am still working there today. It isn't fulfilling work, but of all the jobs open to me it was the one that best suited my temperament. I have an office of my own and can be alone for hours at a time if I want.

Then I found the letter, and when I read it I knew that here was a moment unlike any of the others, a moment that changed not only my future, but my entire past—or what I had previously thought of as my past. Everything was suddenly different and as I read the two closely written pages, I felt myself gradually losing control. Katja was pregnant by this point, so I didn't dare tell her about it. As soon as I reached the end of the letter I started over at the beginning. I made notes, I underlined words and sentences, I copied out entire passages, thinking that it might help me to understand. In the end I was too tired to carry on and crawled into bed with Katja. But I didn't sleep for long. I got up and made my way through the dark flat to the kitchen where I had opened the letter and I switched on the light to make sure I hadn't dreamt it.

The letter was in one of the books that had arrived one Sunday afternoon. It was Dad's birthday and I had made up my mind not to talk to anyone that day and not to leave the flat. At about four the doorbell rang. A man said he was a friend of my parents and asked me to come down.

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'you've got the wrong flat.' I hung up the intercom phone and went back to my room. A moment later there was another ring.

'That is Johannes Wagner?'

'Yes.'

'Then it's you I'm looking for.'

When I opened the door to the street he was already taking boxes of books out of his car. The books, he said, had belonged to my parents. His voice was cracked and shaky. What made him so sure that I would take the books? I could have told him that none of this had anything to do with me—that I'd drawn a line under all that and had no use for these books. But I didn't. I stood rooted to the spot, watching as he took box after box from his car. When he had deposited the fifth and last box on the pavement in front of me, he said that my father had particularly asked him to bring me these books at some point. Perhaps it was chance that he had brought them on Dad's birthday. He gave me his hand which was so cold that it startled me and I forgot to say goodbye to him. Then he got in his car and slowly drove away. I can remember neither his face nor his name nor the car registration number. But I have a clear memory of the light that day, of the sun on the white houses all around me. No matter where I looked I had the feeling that I was looking into the sun. I carried the boxes down to the cellar and opened them one by one. Now and then I took a book out and held it in my hands for a moment before returning it to its box. Then I went back up to the flat.

I wasn't much interested in literature at that time and would always rather have watched a film, however mediocre, than read a book. The only reason I hung on to these books was that they had belonged to my parents. Unlike me, they had been true literary enthusiasts. Dad had run a reading circle, first in the parish rooms in Halle and then, when that was banned, in our garden in Gröbers. Friends of my parents, and friends of their friends, would come to Gröbers once or twice a week to sit outside the summerhouse and read aloud to each other. They would read for hours and afterwards they would discuss the texts and get drunk in the apple orchard. All the guests were either writers or painters—or liked to think they were. This much I have been able to find out.

I had often toyed with the idea of getting rid of the books, but a few years ago that changed. Whenever I found myself in the cellar, for whatever reason, I would come over all sentimental at the sight of the boxes, like someone reading old letters, remembering a time that will never return. After a while I began to go down to the cellar just to see the books and hold a few of them in my hands. This seemed to me a way of getting close to my mother and father. It never occurred to me that I might get closer still by looking inside the books. Though I had often held them and examined their covers and smelt their strange smell which seemed to grow stronger every year, I had never turned their pages and certainly never looked for anything. What was there to look for?

It was a colleague in the accounts department who gave me the idea. I sometimes bump into Martin at the vending machine in the kitchen. We make small talk as the coffee trickles into the plastic cups, then we both go back to our desks. On this occasion, though, Martin called out to me. I was on my way back to my office, sighing because I still had five hours to kill, and he asked if I'd like to go for a walk with him—maybe the following day, after work? He would like to hear my opinion on a couple of matters. That was how Martin talked; it always sounded as if he'd written everything down and learnt it by heart.

The next day Martin and I took the tram south to Raven Island. We walked on gravel paths and mud tracks along the pitch-black river, talking about colleagues and about plans to demolish a tower block in the city. Then we came to a bench and stopped for a rest, the roaring of the nearby weir in our ears. For a while we were silent. Eventually Martin told me he'd found out that his wife was cheating on him. He had gone into her study and, sitting down at her desk, he had leafed through her diary and then opened a novel that was lying under the diary. A small photo had fallen out showing her with a man in what he called an *unambiguous pose*.

After he had told me his story I found myself thinking about the books in my cellar. The idea that they, too, might contain something—documents, for example, or photographs of my parents—was deeply troubling to me. I'd had the books for six years but the possibility had never occurred to me.

For a few minutes we sat in silence, one at either end of the bench. You could have been forgiven for thinking that we were strangers to one another. I watched two children throwing things to the ducks, thrilled to see that they would eat anything that landed in the water. Then I got up and suggested we head for home.

'Yes,' Martin said, and the way he looked at me, I knew I ought to hug him. We could have become friends at that moment. But I did nothing. I didn't want to hug him or offer words of comfort. I was desperate to get back to my cellar as quickly as possible and start going through the books. Maybe it was a strange thought (and secretly I was afraid of disappointment), but I had the feeling that my parents had been waiting for me for six years; all I had to do was open the door and let them in. Martin looked as if he regretted confiding in me. I put on my rucksack and said, 'Good, let's go.'

I had been through three boxes without finding anything of interest. My only discovery had been underlinings and notes in my parents' handwriting; I now know for sure that the books had belonged to them. Some of the underlined sentences I read aloud, thinking I might discover some hidden message. But I didn't.

My parents' handwriting was familiar to me; I had read a lot of their letters. When Dad worked in Rostock for a few months when I was a baby and my mum stayed behind with me in Halle, they wrote to each other almost every day. Grandma showed me the letters years later and I read them with greed. Seeing how I felt about them, Grandma asked if I'd like to keep them and I accepted without second thought.

The sense of elation I had felt on entering the cellar was almost gone. This changed when I opened the fourth box. One book caught my eye immediately. It was bigger than the others and less worn. Abandoning my system of working through the books from left to right, I grabbed it without waiting: a seventh-grade biology textbook, printed in 1959, the only textbook in the collection. I found my mother's name in block capitals on the cover. Then I saw a letter tucked between the pages. I took it out and replaced the book in the box.

I began by studying the stamp. When I was eleven I had spent a whole summer's pocket money on stamps that I had painstakingly stuck into albums. It was a brief but consuming passion. There had been no one to share it with, but that hadn't bothered me. I had liked having something of my own, something that only I knew about. Later, when I lost interest, I gave the albums away. On the stamps that I collected were famous people, buildings, landscapes. The stamp on the letter that I was holding in my hand was different from any I had ever seen before. It showed two men shaking hands, one of them in uniform—perhaps a soldier just returned from the war. Behind them stood a woman and three children, their faces devoid of expression. And although their mouths were closed I heard one of the boys say: *But I don't know this man*. The words had an unpleasant effect on me, as I stood there in the dim light of the cellar, in front of those boxes of books.

On the stamp was the word NORGE, a word I had never seen before. The postmark was dated 16 May 1994. The letter was addressed to my father. It was a while before I could bring myself to turn over the envelope and find out who had written to my father a few weeks before he disappeared. It wasn't easy to decipher the handwriting. It looked as if a left-handed person like me had written with their right hand: *Inger Kjaerstad, Fylkesveg 24/243, Rønnes/4885 Grimstad, Norge*.