

Anna Stern

*all this, now.*

Sample Translation

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Publisher's Note:

*The novel all this, now. starts with Ananke's death. For the first two thirds of the text, the author Anna Stern fills the left-hand and right-hand pages with two distinct narrative strands: on the left is the present day (here in roman), when Ananke's friends - Vienna, Eden, Cato and the narrator, Ichor - are trying to come to terms with their loss and grief; on the right (in italics) are charted their memories of their and Ananke's childhood and youth. What follows is the beginning of the novel.*

ananke dies on a monday in winter, between four and five p.m.

*we don't exchange presents. the only thing we give each other are our names: ananke gives me the name ichor.*

all across the country, it has been a particularly dreary month. in the mountains, they say it's one of the coldest februarys of the past thirty years. only rarely does a little snow reach the flatlands. towards the end of the month, a continental cold front coming in from the north-east brings with it a brief cold spell.

*at around the same time, initially unexplained, the switch from i to you.*

unlike snow, rain and fog, the cold is usually invisible.

*your stay in london is coming to an end. it's saturday, the first week in april is almost over, and you're sitting in the museum café with a glass of milk, reading the paper. in your thoughts, you are still at the exhibition (somewhere in between), which you've now been to for the third or fourth time, you're musing on synaesthesia, underwater life and the significance of genetics in modern animal husbandry: you read only inattentively. but you get stuck; again and again, your eyes stray to the little box in the bottom right-hand corner, under a picture of salisbury cathedral: did you see anything out of the ordinary? it may be that at the time nothing appeared out of place or untoward, but with what you now know you remember something that might be of significance. your memory of that afternoon and your movements alone could help us with missing pieces of this mystery. the weather was poor that day, so there were not as many people out and about. you automatically ask yourself what you did on that day this witness appeal refers to, that day at the end of march. at first there's nothing, it's white, it's still. then, oh crap, you say, you say it out loud and get up, oh sodding hell. you rummage for your mobile, look up ananke's number, ananke down in the south, ananke on the other side of the mountains, you think of what you're going to say, tanti auguri, how could anyone forget something like that, that day, how could you: your memory of that afternoon. but before it rings at the other end, a voice speaks into your ear: questo numero non è valido, once, twice, you drop your hand, what a shitshow, come on now, really.*

it's already evening, already dark, when you get the call; when swann says, you should sit down; when swann says, ananke is dead. for a moment, you still believe, for one more chronon, there's a chance. then the crash, then the shards, you're kneeling on the floor picking up what's left of before, swann's breath still in your ear, sharp are the edges of the pieces and the blood on your hands is red. you ask nothing: there are no admissible answers, not to the how, not to the why. you say, i'm coming home, eden and i, we're coming home, now.

*every year, the first week of the summer holidays is taken up by the swimming course, that hunt for badges (fish, crab, penguin and polar bear). the weather's often miserable, it's cold for that time of year and it rains a lot; and even when it doesn't rain for once, even when the sun comes out for a change, this early in the morning the meadows by the lake remain in the shadow of those big trees, and the grass is damp with last night's dew. on those days, you go to the outdoor swimming pool by yourselves, and the whole thing feels like an adventure: in the mornings, swann packs your rucksacks not only with your swimming things and towels, but also with tangerines and pretzel rolls, and a small carton of apple juice, and, if you're lucky, one of those vacuum-packed sausages the length of a pencil; you think the ones with the green writing taste nicer than those with the red or blue writing, even if avi says that the sausages all taste the same. swann also invariably slips you a coin, with which you buy yourselves chips or an ice-cream, or more of those sour wine gums, liquorice catherine wheels and coke-flavoured frogs than you can eat in a day, and by way of goodbye you get a holy-water cross on your forehead. but none of this, all that freedom, all that bliss of spending the break between two swimming lessons jumping into the lake from the diving platform, or, shivering and with chattering teeth, biting into a ripe tangerine, the sugary juices running down the corners of your mouth over your chin, none of it can change the fact that you hate this week, that the fear of failing the course just like last year is preventing you from enjoying all that freedom and bliss.*

you go out into the winter, blind, into the night. the tears freeze in the corners of your eyes, on your numb cheeks. the cold hits you without shape, without smell, and still without a sound: no people anywhere. not anymore.

*the first time ananke and you are allowed to go into town by yourselves, you buy matching pyjamas. ananke's is blue and yours is red, and on the long trouser legs and sleeves are printed stars the size of a fist, and moons, outlined in white and yellow inside. when you come home with those pyjamas, swann howls with laughter, a laughter you don't understand. you wear the pyjamas that night and the next night, and every night after that, until the trouser legs only reach the middle of your calves and the material is getting see-through at the knees and elbows. it isn't that you like those pyjamas, or ever liked them; what you like more than anything is picturing ananke less than a hundred metres away from you as the crow flies, as you lie there at night, in the dark: ananke in the same pyjamas, in the same darkness, maybe dreaming the same dreams.*

you find eden at training. you sit down on the bench in front of the changing-room hut on the edge of the forest, within sight of the stud farm, you lean back against the wood, eyes closed, the blackness, the cold, the horses panting in the silence, the distant traffic noise from the city. you always believed that disintegration, decay, was a slow process, a building decays over time, radioactive nuclei have a half-life of thirty, twenty-five thousand, fourteen billion years. but now, here, in the wintry dusk, after that call, after swann's words: you no longer see the before, you don't know how to make it whole again. then there's a movement from the direction of the forest, eden's footsteps on the gravel, the heartbeat that makes yours whole. you get up and step into the darkness, which is now complete, here, between the trees. you go up to eden and say, eden, and you both stand there, two halves of a whole, mirrors within mirrors, and you say it, you say it out loud for the first time: ananke is dead. your breath a cloud, dissolving in the black.

*you're four years old, and it's autumn, and it's a special day. you wake early, and are already hopping with excitement: today. today's the day. you climb out of bed and, still dressed in your nightshirt, creep from your room, the wooden floors cold against your sweaty child's feet. the house is utterly silent, no one's up yet, other than you: eden is sleeping, and avi and swann are sleeping, and egg, egg is always sleeping anyway, after all, egg's only a baby. you cautiously descend the stairs, step by step, listening to the wood, hoping that it won't suddenly creak. in the kitchen your little rucksacks are already lying on the table, your blue one and eden's green one, on yours a bear, on eden's an elephant. you've helped swann often enough, you know how it's done, you fetch salt and flour from the cupboard and yeast from the fridge, arrange everything on the worktop, the big bowl too, and the scales, and then you climb onto the stool by the kitchen island and begin. later, you're sitting next to eden in the bicycle trailer, the bowl and the kettle between you, avi pedalling away in front. you punch eden in the ribs, eden says, ouch, stop it, that hurts. you say, you stop it, don't call me a flour devil, that's mean. it's true, though, swann said it, swann said, you're a little flour devil. you stick out your tongue and punch your twin in the ribs again; avi says, that's enough you two, or i'll turn round. it smells good in the forest, of pine needles and moss and damp wood. you ride as far as the fire pit by the stream, closely followed by bas with ananke and vaska in the trailer; fred already knows how to ride a bike; the bike is red, and since the summer fred no longer needs stabilisers. you kids set off to*

the light on the trains is too bright, so you keep your eyes closed; the world is too loud, and yet you're afraid of losing yourself in the silence. eden is next to you, also blind, also mute; you don't need to talk about it: the images in eden's head, the words, the fear, you know them already.

*look for firewood, fred and vaska and ananke, eden and you, but last night's unexpected rain is making things difficult. i said dry, says bas, when you get back to the fire pit loaded with branches and big pieces of bark, dry, children, you know what dry means. fred explains that you tried, you looked everywhere, you searched as far as the witch's rock, but everything is damp, damp is the driest you could find. well, then, says avi, we'll just have to turn damp into dry, if we don't want to starve to death. while the others take care of the fire, you, vaska and ananke go off again. you're on the hunt for snake-bread sticks, this long and this thick, you don't know exactly how long or how thick, but you're sure you'll recognise them when you see them. vaska already knows how to handle a pocketknife, and when you spot a good stick you call vaska over, and vaska saws off the branch. when you return to the place by the stream with seven sticks, the fire isn't burning properly yet, but the first flames are licking the pyramid of kindling in the middle of the stone circle, red and orange and a bright, hot yellow. good for you, avi says to fred, and raises a hand for a high five, well done, fire-indian. fred really does look a bit like a red indian, with black streaks all over the face, on the cheeks and on the forehead; fred tries to wipe off the war paint, but there's so much soot and dirt on fred's hands that it only makes things worse. until the fire is burning properly, until the embers are hot enough to heat up the pumpkin soup in the kettle, hot enough to wrap the bread dough round your*

when you climb the stairs at the station, a light snow starts to fall, flakes that melt at first touch: nothing persists beyond the moment. you walk the last bit across the meadows and through the forest hand in hand. eden's clasp, fingers that grip yours, nails cutting half-moons into skin, but you don't let go, you couldn't if you wanted to. you're clinging on too. then the house, and then, too: swann and egg and avi. you have arrived: you're home. in the middle. at the start. there, where everything once.

*sticks and bake it till it's crisp, you play hide-and-seeK and catch, and fred even swings across the roaring water on a rope, all the way to the bank on the other side. later you sit around the fire, your faces red from the autumn cold, the tiredness and the heat from the fire, and you eat the soup and the bread, while avi tells you the legend of the cherokees, the story of how the earth got its fire, the raven its black plumage, the eagle owl the rings around its eyes, and the whip snake its black scales.*

now, in the evening, as eden and you get home from ananke's death, when swann comes towards you and embraces you, when avi kisses your forehead, you realise: family isn't blood; isn't genes. family is memories; is tears, mingling on tired cheeks; family is what you make it; whatever you allow to be a family.

*ananke is your firecracker. christmas is over, tomorrow's new year's eve. consequently: it's still dark when the alarm goes, four, half five, you can't remember what you agreed. you throw back the blanket, slip into your tights and the polo neck, dress up warm, said swann, it'll be freezing cold. you push the curtain aside, there's snow out there, it's a clear night and the moon and stars are shining bright. in the kitchen, eden is heating up milk, which you drink with more cocoa powder in it than usual and standing up, your eyes resting on the frying-pan lids tied up with string on the table, on eden's trumpet lying next to them. then off into the street, off to fred and vaska and ananke's, and then it begins: the racket, dragging people out of bed, reaping sweets and making bas and avi hand over their money with the old rhyme: so this day starts, so the year ends: today's new year's eve, the morrow's new year, deal me five francs or i'll snaffle yer ear. then, later: those sleepy morning hours spent in bed; teeth sticky from all that sugar, the gruesomely dyed lips; potato soup for lunch and snowball fights in the afternoon. then, later still: sparkling grape juice, and pizza from the wood-fired oven; table torpedoes and card games; and, at the end, the best, the biggest, the most beautiful of all: rockets and lady crackers, spraying suns, and the star-showers of the volcano fountains: come what may, together we'll make it.*

you're sitting at the window in your old, lightless room, the garden outside lies in darkness. you can't see the pine, which isn't there anymore, which you kids used to climb, ten, fifteen, twenty metres high. you can't see the football goal, which leto got someone to weld for eden and you: corroded by rust, the net in rags, grass and rambling roses winding themselves about the posts. the mound of earth, your mountain, the currant bushes behind it overshadowed even in daylight. the derelict rabbit hutch on the western side: you remember milli's silly stunts, neni and grappa's soft black fur, the shock when you came back from holiday to find adge lying decapitated in the rabbit run. when you look up, far into the darkness, there's the emptiness of the unlit windows; the windows where there's no ananke; the windows behind which you used to sit on the floor or at the table, playing, eating cake, watching tv; windows, where you know what the inside looks like from the outside and the outside from the inside; and windows behind which, somewhere, there's bas and roan, fred and vaska and ash - the same questions sitting in their bellies, like lumps.

*the doorbell rings, but you don't answer. it rings again, and when you open the door ananke is standing there in front of you, come to say goodbye. you can't ask questions, words fail you, you hug, ananke presses a piece of paper with the new address into your hand. you stare at it (you think of the corn and the river and the sea beneath the moon), and ask if you can come visit. not yet; better not; maybe later. you wake up and can't move. cato is lying next to you, and you can hear a breathing that's not your own.*

eden seeks refuge in aristotle. comes into your room and says, the best thing of all is actually impossible for you to attain: not being born, not being, being nothing. you remain silent; egg, too.

[...]

*[The following extract is from the final third of the novel.]*

you put the notebook away.

it's been a hundred and fifty days, exactly a hundred and fifty days. you sometimes ask yourselves whether you could make a heart that's stopped for a hundred and fifty days beat again. if it hadn't been burnt. if its ashes weren't lying in the ground. if you implored, prayed for it. but after a hundred and fifty days your pleas and prayers are no use anymore: after a hundred and fifty days all the fuses blow.

when you sit down at the table next to cato, you can tell that vienna is already tipsy. eden pulls out the chair next to vienna, gestures to the staff. finally, says vienna, you took your sweet time. pay no heed, says cato, vienna's drunk. am not. are too. you order a glass of apple fizz, eden a gin and tonic. and another beer, if you please, says vienna, and, to you, seriously, apple fizz. don't tell me you're back on your serotonin candy. haha, you say, and say that you don't feel like it, in this heat you don't fancy alcohol. have you ever heard such a thing.

you're the only people in the gravel yard outside the bar, which is in an old train carriage. the sun is dropping slowly down the sky, but it's still warm. it's been warm for weeks. the soundscape of a football match reaches you from an open window somewhere. the world cup. you yawn; you're tired, tired of the day, tired of football, tired of the summer, the weeks seem endless. you'd much rather be somewhere cool, maybe where there's snow, than here, in the sweet shadow of the plane trees, amid the rattling of the trams, the chanting of the football fans in your ears. you'd rather be alone, not with your thoughts but asleep, without consciousness, outside time. instead: beer garden, vienna tipsy, cato well on the way there, and eden... eden is eden. you push the glass with the apple fizz about on the table in front of you, its flaking yellow paint exposing the rust, the decay, the dilapidation. you don't need a degree in psychology to

know that vienna's not well, hasn't been all right for weeks, but you lack the strength, you don't have the patience, and you doubt that any of you could. but there must be something, eden said, we can't just. so now: the sun is sinking lower, goals are being celebrated and booed, and they're lighting candles around you. the others order something from the grill, but you aren't hungry, you only scavenge a little, a piece of pineapple from eden, a bit of sausage from cato, merely to humour your appetite. empty glasses are swapped for full ones, cato and eden start giggling, and vienna, vienna's blind drunk: vienna's on top form.

i've an idea, says vienna, and taps on the table with one finger, three times, i have a brilliant idea. you lean back in your chair and brace yourself, ready for whatever might come, for the full potential of vienna's alcohol-induced idiocy. let's hear it, says cato, finally, knowing that there's no way getting around it anyway, that vienna only reluctantly lets go of an idea. thanks, cato, for your kind words, says vienna, and bows until forehead meets table, then listen, my dears, listen to me, for my idea is revolutionary, my idea will release all of you, you'll be eternally grateful. why, you ask. because, i say, be-cause: i've an idea how we can get rid of ananke, how we can free ourselves from ananke's ghost. nonono, humour me. i know you're thinking i'm nuts, you're thinking, now vienna has gone and lost it completely. but not at all, i'm seeing everything clearly: i can see that you're not okay. you may laugh, you may get up and breathe and function all day long, but at night you lie down with your thoughts, with the images behind your eyelids, at night you, too, are just glad that the day is done.

you turn your glass this way and that, think about getting up and going to the toilet. vienna is vienna, vienna likes to talk. vienna talks and doesn't slur when she's sozzled, vienna only becomes a little bit mental; everything else is the same. yet you think that maybe you don't want to listen to this. or can listen. or should. but something, something makes you stay in your seat, your tiredness, a sudden inability to move. you don't need to feel bad about it, vienna continues, i don't know how closely you were listening, but i still remember eden's readings, they said that a certain measure of grief is something positive, natural, necessary. and i bet ginsburg told you (vienna points across

the table at me) the same thing. but it's different in our case, we're no longer talking about a positive, necessary grief. i'm telling you: ananke is still with us, ananke's ghost is here, now, at our table, ananke's listening, ananke's looking over our shoulder, ananke is always there too, and i'm telling you: it can't go on like this, it'll break us.

silence. you feel uncomfortable, you want to say something, want to object, to stop vienna, to stem the flow of words, but there's only that lump in your throat, as if you'd swallowed a whole egg. don't worry, says vienna, i haven't lost it, honestly, i get that ananke's dead, i know what dead means, i know that ananke isn't coming back, not as ananke: ananke has gone up in flames, ananke's in the ground. but i'm telling you, something must have gone wrong, a part of ananke has escaped, isn't down there, is not in that hole. (you try to resist, you push away the thought, but virginia woolf's mrs dalloway elbows herself right to the front: that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places, after death. perhaps - perhaps.) and this is what's haunting us, you and me, what wakes us at night with a start, makes us trudge through the days as if paralysed, like puppets guided by alien intentions, apparently willing, but in truth will-less.

you seek eden's eyes, and cato's, but without success, both are fixated on vienna, staring as if in a trance, eyes wide open, the mirror image of the candles on their eyeballs. and to be honest, it isn't really surprising, says vienna, exploiting your sluggishness, doesn't it turn your stomach, too, when you think of ananke down there in that hole: imprisoned, immobile, unable to hear the birds singing, to smell the freshly mown grass, the warm hay, to watch the clouds travelling across the sky.

you feel sick. hold on, you want to say, vienna stop, but as soon as you open your mouth you can feel the acidic tickling of the bile in your throat, around the lump, around the egg. you wipe the sweat from your brow and say nothing. i loved ananke, says vienna, i still love ananke, it doesn't just stop, and the thought of this dark, damp

shite of a hole makes me miserable. i know i'm not exaggerating when i say that you, too, loved ananke, that if ananke were still alive you would give anything, anything, to stop ananke from suffering. and so i'm telling you, i'm telling you that there's only one solution. i've thought about it long and hard, and i'm convinced that there's only one solution. if we want to be left in peace we have no other choice but to get ananke out of there. whether you like it or not, we have to free ananke from that shitting grave, and try to do it before... before...