

Ulrike Draesner

# Penetrating Silence

[Die Verwandelten]

Outline + Sample Translation



Literary Fiction

Penguin Verlag, 608 pages, February 2023

## **A moving mother-daughter novel stretching across a century of European history**

A model Nazi mother, who teaches others how to raise their children while refusing to speak of the great loss she has suffered; a cook travelling across Germany in the summer of 1945, who would rather make love women than to her employer; a girl in Munich, who was born in one of the notorious Lebensborn homes; a lawyer and single mother, who unexpectedly inherits a flat in Wrocław following her mother's death, and discovers a hitherto unknown Polish branch of her family – these women are all bound together by a century of war and post-war life, flight, expulsion and violence. What does it mean to live in a state that breeds humans? And how do you write about what happens to women in wartime – the way their voices are taken from them, the way they are changed for ever, and the hidden forces that keep them going?

In *Penetrating Silence*, Ulrike Draesner gives these women their voices back as they reinvent themselves, change language and country, and discover within themselves an unsuspected wellspring of courage, humour and strength. As the meaning of "family" changes, new spaces open up. A devastating novel – moving, unsettling, tender and perceptive.

**Ulrike Draesner**, born in 1962, is a lyricist, novelist and essayist. She studied English, German and philosophy in Munich and in Oxford and has worked as an academic, translator and editor. She has published poetry collections, short story collections, and five novels, and held visiting professor or poetics lectureship posts at Kiel, Birmingham, Bamberg, Wiesbaden, Hildesheim, at the German Institute for Literature in Leipzig, and at the Swiss Literature Institute in Biel. She spent the academic years 2015-16 and 2016-2017 as a Visiting Fellow at New College, Oxford and at the *Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities*. In 2018 Ulrike Draesner took up her post as a professor for German Literature and Creative Writing at the Deutsche Literaturinstitut Leipzig. Ulrike Draesner has received numerous awards for her work.

# Sample Translation

By Sharon Howe

## Tongue nailing

(Reni, April 1945, Czechoslovakia – Breslau)

Her, I mean me, that girl there,

the one lying in a hollow among the firs, half-covered in snow,

the one still

here, the one left,

who can still feel him lying in her arms, Benschi, the little mite, milk froth around his mouth;

the one who wakes up every afternoon reaching for Else, feeling to see if her mother is still with her, if they are safe, and she can open her eyes.

Each day there's a little more light, it's early April, half as cold as in January. Two rucksacks, a blanket strapped to each. A suitcase is no good for a woman fleeing through the forest.

Them, those two there

on their way back to Breslau, the ones who look like Else and Reni, and have another Else and Reni inside them, albeit small, a shrunken Reni, hidden deep below the skin, the way the body pulls blood from the extremities when it grows cold, such a Reni, such an Else, drained down to below the muscles, sucked out of the arms, the legs, between the legs, the breasts; these two, these two Elses and two Renis have learnt a lot. Erna Henrich would get the shock of her smug little life, Reni thinks, as Reni's hand, that's also my hand, feels Else, and I can open my eyes. Dusk, the last watch. *Who can tell the trees to walk?* All too loudly, Macbeth whispers the answer in my head: the enemy, the enemy. We sleep by day and navigate by night. I have become an exemplary fire maker: the League would have been proud of me. We don't light fires here in the forest though. Fires make smoke. We are readers of clues, not leavers of clues. I feel nothing. Feeling is overrated. A feeling is a value judgement as to whether events are likely to benefit the being in question – a being like shrunken-Reni for instance, or at least running-Reni, or maybe

daughter-Reni. It's as simple as that. A step forward or a step back. Forward is Breslau. And back. Simple is dead. Since we started making our way homewards, I have stopped dreaming of snuggling down in my bed in the Ottostraße. Since we started walking, I have stopped sleeping. So much for feeling. By night, we follow the road, preferably a thin, narrow road, a track, a path, a nothing. Towards morning – everything has to be still and dark, but in a safe way, not just because there's a cloud in front of the moon – we hammer on someone's door, if it's a secluded house, and beg for food and lodging. The flames thrum, the horizon burns. Nothing is over, the fires of war are constantly wandering, they have overtaken us many times and migrated westwards; now they are returning. Nothing happens just once here, that much we have learnt. It is April and we are back in the German Reich that will soon be over, *vorbei*.

Most of the time we don't knock anywhere, we hide out in the forest by day. One keeps watch, the other shuts her eyes, the moment we lie down we fall deeply asleep, the moment we are asleep we awake with a start. You can hear the sound of wild boar returning to their dens from a long way off. Mama packs the rucksacks, I eat an apple. Mama eats nothing. I eat the core and all.

We don't go back the way we came. We take a longer route. We are not the same people. We don't need the same route. We are afraid the people we stayed with on the trek won't recognise us. But we don't have to admit that to ourselves. We don't have to think of it like that. We say: we need a way past the fires, past the soldiers, a way through the woods. *Bring me no more reports; let them fly all*. We are not on the same path as in January. We are a twosome, we are light. Shrunken-Reni inside Reni sleeps while Reni puts one foot in front of the other. Else walks behind or in front of her. Shrunken-Else inside Else is still. Visible Else, too, remains wordless.

Above our heads, the occasional flock of small birds whirs its way through the early spring night. Twilight; we hide. If the screech owls are awake, it must be evening. Time to move on. Each of us is on her own flight. Except we take no prey. We have no gun, no time for traps, no strength for death. We stuff stones into our mouths, spitting them out again after a while.

We avoid each other's gaze throughout. We know what we are doing. We are Reni and Else and something else. We have looked after each other all our lives, she me and I her. Else takes the first turn at sleeping in the nest we have found or built, and after two hours we swap. The imprint of her body on the rustling leaves, she covers me over, one blanket for her and one for me, one Czech blanket, one German one; neither keeps us warm. We are back in Hitler's Thousand-Year Reich. We sense it.

As if driven by some ghostly hand,  
we pass a village; the locals are parading in festive garb through the streets of their home, bells are ringing, spring flowers are in bloom, people are celebrating as if all were well. We act as if nothing has befallen us; they give us an Easter loaf for the road. Everyone can see who we are,

what we have been through, the women see it, the men pretend not to know, their eyes don't give them away. Only the women speak with their eyes, the way they avert their gaze, they give us a bit more to eat, or so we want to believe –

we want to feel them reaching out to us.

Primroses, crocuses, forsythia, all yellow light, we hurry onwards, mama's cheek is so swollen she can no longer speak, it's because of her jaw, her crooked jaw, it's because I've bandaged up her mouth to stop her trying to speak, to stop her saying rifle butt, as if I didn't know.

She has four knocked-out teeth, that's how I think of it

*she has,*

not: "*they were* knocked out", and definitely not "*they* knocked them out"; "they" are erased from our minds

she has four knocked-out teeth at the bottom, two broken ones at the top, we tended to those back in Czechoslovakia, fished out the fragments, filed the edges, once you're through the nerve it won't hurt any more, we said, and saw that it wasn't true. Hold still, keep your mouth shut. We are a twosome, we are each other's salvation, mother and daughter and something else, woman and woman. We clean our teeth with pine twigs, I strip off the bark. Mama has a partially fractured jaw, that's what we call it. My fingers are slim, I poke them into her mouth on the good side, we have a fork, but nothing to mash, we have bread, three slices of bacon, some old turnips and apples, I chew the food for her, spit it into my hand and push it through the gap on a flat piece of wood or with my finger.

The wind whistles so cold it makes the snow between the trees as light as chaff. Any German wind can sweep a hillside bare, driving the snow around relentlessly like smoke. Fingernails, we still have you, lips, we still have you. We find an open shed, crawl into the straw. We stop to rest, this time we won't get going until midnight. The stars hang above us, emotionless, glittering like frost. I wolf down the bread and butter the last Czech farmers gave us for the journey. I creep around to keep myself from freezing. Forest nights are too frosty for a furless human. I find a small sugar beet; it too is frozen.

Mama sleeps.

I squat on a tree stump a few metres away from her, the forest is as still as it has every right to be: the occasional crackle, the swish of air around a twig, a wing grazing a trunk. It is alive, breathing, content, perfectly at one with itself, the trees open and close in unison, advancing as one being, one body. I am no longer afraid of them. I know now that I am alone in this world.

I awake to stiff limbs. They are healing, by force of hunching up, perhaps they even want to, hunching willingly into every dream. Occasionally Else too falls asleep on her watch; most of

the time she looks sharp, trying to be a woman without a broken jaw, the strong woman she used to be. The morning tries to be mild. The sun is shining: spring in the German forest. We have been lying under the cover of the trees, though with an eye on the next field, the road, part of the way ahead. Our clothes are dirty, the first blades of grass and moss patches are poking up through the soil. You can eat them; I eat them. The snow is melting today, a godsend, no footprints, that means we can travel in the daytime too. Else lies on her side. She is hot to the touch, hotter than the sun, the right side of her face a balloon, likewise the place where her chin should be. Else is now a woman without a chin.

The tracks curving over the Sand Bridge, the red heart bridge, you love this city, the rails sing, Brassel is calling us, mama, can't you hear?

Else in the moss, on last year's needles. Mama!

Who has ceased to walk, no longer can. Else from the cowshed sludge.

Elsemama, I whisper into her ear, she smells of pus, I don't shake her, I am careful, I've seen enough at the hospital to let her lie and start running, leaving her behind in the forest.

Luck is when you duck, it's ducking and diving, we have ducked through the gaps, been reduced to gaps ourselves, I should know, we are so exhausted we no longer have time for fear. I need luck at the next house, when I knock a child answers, younger than me, a frightened little boy; he says I have nothing, I am nobody, then clamps his mouth shut and refuses to open it again. He is six at most, his hair uncombed for days; I peep past him into the hallway, it all looks normal enough, nothing fishy, I am wide awake all over, with all my senses, I push him aside and he starts yelling, hangs on to me, I shout likewise.

"Need – someone!", I shout, the boy tries to hold me back, when I push open the nearest door there's a man standing at the table by the window pointing a gun at me, the woman next to him has a scythe in her hand, four or five children, older than the little boy, crowd around them. I am relieved, I am shaken, they sent the youngest ahead, as a decoy, as booty, they would have sacrificed him, no wonder he's crying, perhaps being slaughtered first would even have protected him, he wouldn't have had to watch, I know what I'm not afraid of, there is no time for fear.

I smile tentatively; this family is exactly what I need, German folk, they must know not to shoot at someone like me. "Mama needs help", I say, speaking quietly, you can hear every breath in here, every thought is loud. The table, the checked tablecloth, the unticking clock. They are afraid, but I no longer am, that's the difference between us. Meaning no one has been here yet, whereas we've had them all. Meaning I am their first surprise. And a mere bagatelle. If they don't see that, if the fear is too strong, if they think I've been sent ahead to throw them off the scent, if that's what they think, or if they don't think at all, they will kill me.

"Please help us", I say, and they gradually unfreeze. I am still a shadow of their fear, this is the most dangerous moment, I don't move. If I'm unlucky, they'll shoot me dead, even though

a girl like me is not what they were expecting. But their terror is so deep it demands action. The little boy next to me is also frozen to the spot, I tell him to run and join them.

Minutes later I am talking and talking, the farmer and I load mama into the wheelbarrow, the house is less than ten minutes from the forest, we wheel her across the field, sticky with thawed snow. Once indoors, we poke a piece of wood into her mouth, it's the first premolar on the bottom right, luckily not one of the biggest, black and festering. Let's pull it out, like we do with the animals, the farmer says. They have cows and dogs and cats. Else bites on the wood to stop her biting us, and they let me out when the pulling starts; I can still hear her cries though.

Stop my mouth, hold me tight. I throw up in the slush by the door, bury it, we don't want to be a burden on anyone, we don't want to explain and are not asked to, we say "Czechoslovakia", "back", the family nod. They give me something to eat, mama drinks a chamomile tincture, after three days the inflammation goes down, mama drinks broth, broth with chicken bones, we give every pfennig we have, and we know where we are, five days' march from Breslau, or seven perhaps – in our case. We were lucky, I say to Josef, the youngest, they spare us six apples, shrivelled remnants from the winter store, and make a potato mush that Else can swallow, bypassing her shattered teeth, her broken jaw.

We are of sound mind, we have possibilities: we make it through or we perish. Two people, one mind. Clear as a daisy in spring, as Marolf used to say whenever there was an announcement on the radio that seemed to need bellowing to get it across. We leave out the third possibility: we run into soldiers. We don't talk about that, a mind made up of two halves doesn't even consider it.

As to perishing, there are still alternatives, the nicest is simply not waking up one morning, we'll have to hurry up for that though as it will soon be too mild to die peacefully of cold, we want it to be a pleasant death, we saw it on the trek, the bundles by the roadside, the swaddled babies, frozen in their mothers' arms, icy, those little ones, icy as the ground, there was no way you could dig here, nor could the mothers afford to, they had to keep going.

Death by freezing. Else would give in to it herself, but wouldn't let me; I would too, but wouldn't let her, and so we are bound to each other, each to the other's will, and each looks after herself, each driving the other into the land of the living and plodding onward because we are a twosome, mother and daughter, neither of whom can abandon the other.

Or could we?

The road signs say Breslau, 35 kilometres. We've been warned to expect mines. We try to avoid the paths. The place we sneak past is a half-rotted fish, its blackened bones gaping into space. We long for fire, for the fire at home. Instead there's the smell. After so many days and nights: the smell. The body wants to stop breathing. It's cold. The cold is worse than the hunger. Snap, snap. You don't want to move. When we sit, everything goes numb, our bodies go to sleep

but we don't. Facial expressions desert you. You can no longer laugh, only deep down inside. Brassel is called a fortress now, Josef's parents said. They told us how tight the ring around the city has been drawn. Before it, dead bodies lie in ditches or ground into the earth.

Duck and dive to stay alive, we are approaching from the south and need to enter from the north, up there the Russians have been confident of their cause since January and hence more careless, the fighting is in the south, I break it down for Else. I don't mean the plan. We don't have one, we feel our way, going by instinct, we have grown thin, black as the shadows in the forest. I mean our last apple: I chew, I spit, we are disgusting, we are past repugnance, we are Reni and Else from another world.

Mother and daughter, woman and woman.

We watched each other go through it. I knelt on the ground beside her, better view, sweetie, they said. They said it in Russian. What we didn't understand we soon did, mother lay next to me, the rifle butt, eyes closed, then it went dark, remember this, hold me tight, keep my mouth shut, bite my tongue off.

We follow the road eastwards until we can loop round to the northwest, we have the map in our heads, we daren't get it wrong. Breslau looms in the distance: not beckoning, but smoking. Else swallows. Quiet, mama, quiet, with your half-fractured jaw before the fracturing city. Shrunken-Reni lies inside me, quiet as a mouse. When I wake up, Else leans against my side, her face flushed, she turns up the corners of her mouth, flushes deeper because she can open and close her lips again, because she is glad. She feels better, she doesn't need to say so.

Under the fir twigs, in the hollow, it is warm from the stillness. Mama's hand rests on the blanket over my arm. The thing that's beating is my heart, my whole body is beating towards her.

"I was meant to take care of you, I wanted to protect you, and now look ...", she says. Frieda and Gustl carried on, but mama decided to turn back with me, back to Marolf. It wasn't a calculation, but a longing for our previous life, force of habit, a crumb of comfort, perhaps part calculation too. I could see that mama had grown smaller, that she was limping and wanted to return, "I can't lead you any more".

"You did protect me", I tell her, "you're in a worse state than me, isn't that proof enough?"

"Don't you worry", I say, "Shrunken-Reni is curled up inside me like a wintering animal, she is sleeping herself better." Else doesn't believe me, perhaps I don't even believe myself. What is it exactly, this curling thing? No woman bleeds when she's fleeing for her life, not in this cold, under this strain, with so little food; Else isn't either. I decide the only thing that's growing inside me is my bones, my muscles, my brain.

The first light of day begins to shimmer, we are lying at the edge of a field. Shades of green and brown unfurl as far as the eye can see. We awake from a light sleep, even me, who

should be sleeping deeply and growing, the last wisps of dream web fade away, just Else and me in the world, no one else, the scent of pine needles rising from the ground. The sheet of dawn is still stretched taut, glistening with fresh ice crystals over the snow-filled hollows. In our eyes is a faint smile. The smile that comes before fear. Before we go back to being who we are now.

We strap the blankets to the rucksacks. 'Two more days' march?

Scurrying through a former combat zone. There are abandoned tanks in the fields. Animal corpses attract flocks of scavenging birds that rise into the air as we approach. Bombed church towers, an almost familiar sight. The moon shines cold and clear over the roofless rows of houses as we set off.

We will lie by the Oder in the summer, mama, we'll bathe at Sand Island, stride over every bridge, stroll along the quay by the university, the city will be destroyed, but the mellow light of Breslau will greet us,

it will be in flames, Else says

but they will be put out, I say

in ruins, she says

better than nothing, I say

we'll be home again, like in the old days, I say

we'll never be us again, she says

but we'll be home, back in our own nest, I say

we'll remember, she says

it will eat us up, she says

it will build us up, I say.

We have three days' worth of provisions, by then we ought to have rounded the city. We are nimble, mama, I tell her, swift as hares. We share a love of furry creatures, we attract them with noises that only Magda's daughters can make, clicking and chirruping noises, a mixture of Silesian and Polish. The squirrels are spring-quickenened, we follow them, if you reach down you can retrieve a forgotten nut or two, I pocket them, the animals will survive.

My ear for sounds, my talent for voices, that's all I've got from Marolf on the theatrical front. Thank goodness, Else says: that's enough. Actually, she's better at voices than I am, it's her I get it from really. The creatures' attention comforts me, I don't want to talk to humans any more, it's easy with the furry kind, they are our companions, they're not at war.

Grey hills, the remnants of a breached barricade, the jagged edge of an iron pot simmering away, perpetually vaporising water into light – it must be Breslau. There is no moon, there doesn't even seem to be a sky, just isolated noises, placeless, bodiless, dense. Owls cry, claws snatch at their prey in the darkness, metres away from us. Prey that might be pregnant. What am I thinking of. I'm sixteen, and I'm thinking things like: what happened to the mercy of



not knowing? Of not feeling what's inside your body? How I would love to be back at school. I of all people. In the mornings the grass glows a lush green, the liverwort leaves pierce through the soil, the first larks rejoice on the wing. Our desolation amid this scene of burgeoning nature almost tears me apart.

Gangs are roaming the land, death brigades hunting down Germans, we have heard the rumours, echoes line our path. It has taken us an eternity, we are returning from an eternity.

We are in the ring around the city. From the bushes we survey a farmyard nestled in a dip, everything is still, a lean hound sniffs around the drive and settles in a patch of sunlight. I feel like I'm in a fairy tale, asking for soup, for tea. It's a well-kept house, with climbing roses around the entrance; the door is open.

We call, no one answers, the hound is stretched out with its head resting on its front paws, it takes no notice of us, makes no move to defend the place.

The light is on in the wide hallway, and so is the lamp above the round dining table, at which six or seven people are kneeling

I can count them, they're not moving

their heads are bent forwards, they are nailed to the edge of the table by their tongues

the farmer's eyes are gouged out

the farmer's wife's hands hang twisted beside her arms, I can't see any more

the dog is dead too, we realise as we leave, we no longer trust our own eyes, we no longer trust reality, he was moving just now, we saw it, reality has acquired this habit of tipping upside down, it has acquired this habit of mocking us, war means that what you see in broad daylight on a bright spring day can turn into a mirage, a dog alive a moment ago is dead, a family alive a moment ago is nailed to the spot, war means you don't know whether you really are walking on solid ground when you feel you are, whether you are still solid yourself or already a ghost.

Two villages further on, we are directed towards the threshing floor, we close our eyes, that way we can even tolerate a cowshed. But not a pigsty. Cowshed is warmer than forest, as long as there are cows we're not in "Czechoslovakia", we're not in "the" past, we don't have to see anything or relive anything, we reassure each other, say it out loud to one another. We know what to whisper, "don't worry, I can't feel a thing", we know what to inject into a wordless caress of the arm, we lie alongside each other, we fall asleep together, stretching out our limbs. Else is still taller than me, I want to lie beneath her, go back inside her, Jaga, you're well out of it, Jaga, you're lucky, Jaga in the "child evacuation territory", never do I want to hear that phrase again, I feel sick just thinking about it.

When I wake up I stink of animal and nothing else. The night is safely over. Luck, Else says, is a word for chance, for helplessness, for not-being-able-to-make-sense-of-things, a feeling is a judgement, I say, as to whether or not something is to our advantage, luck is the feeling of

having slipped through the cracks, escaped: a gap, nothing more, you grasp at empty air.

We stink of animals, that way we don't stink of us, of the healing crusts of our wounds, our mouths, our fear. Every morning we appreciate the value of empty air. Empty air around your body, no people around your body, plain air that you can breathe.

We reach the ring again. Siege, fortress, stalemate. In the evening we are back at the farm with the cowshed. They give us milk, Else can drink that, we think of Benschi but don't say it, I chew bread for her, spoonfeed her, we wash everything up in hot water, set it on to boil, thanks be to St. Georg, as long as mama isn't fantasising about grandma Magda, God rest her soul, things are only half-bad.

We tied her down to pull the tooth out, farmer Josef gave her something to numb the pain, not schnapps, something they use on animals, they gave me a nip of it too beforehand, we'll pull the next tooth while we're at it, he said, that's what they did with the cows, once they were already in pain the next one didn't hurt as much, I ran out, Else lay as if unconscious for a day, my most important, my only human being in the world.

Attempt number three to enter the city. Where is there no one around, no one on guard? Number four. Breslau lies far below to our right, we have nearly made it round, but need to find the right moment for a sharp turn, a bush, a line of bushes, of trees, we try to recall the villages here in the northwest

we try to guess where the Russians are

we watch and listen

there are wolves, we are not afraid of them

there are no bears

a screech owl high up in the tree swivels its head

a fox, deep red, well-fed, streaks across a meadow in front of us, we follow the animals, when they show themselves the coast is clear, though that can't be true in this case, after all, we are here and they have missed us, and perhaps others besides, but we have to believe in something.

We trudge through sludgy snow. The risk of someone following in the tyre tracks is high; on the other hand, they have clearly been through here already. I'm taking you home, mama says, I'm taking you home, I say; we must melt into the scene, look like shadows, glide like shadows, the pains between our legs have gone, but I am still shaking. The only time it gets better is when I snuggle up to Else and she hugs me to her. Her sleep, like mine, is light, it's nothing.

In the mornings, the birds twitter in that bright April way that jars on the nerves. The Breslau air throbs, the war rumbles on. It shoots out of the ground before us, pops up behind us like a will-o'-the-wisp and peters out again, never wanting to end.

The sky and water are the same shimmering grey, the forest black. We scurry from bush

to bush, blot out all our memories, extinguish, erase, something has changed in our heads since the men exposed themselves to us, their faces, the top one, the bottom one, the one with the beard, the big fat finger and the pain, I don't

remember, my back

arches, twigs whip and scratch, I am stiff when mama stops and pushes me in front of her so I can lean against her and look: Brassel, Breslau, our home, floating before us in the grey light of dawn, as in a watercolour.

The sky is a pale floral yellow, rising wisps of cloud smoulder and glow pink

while the sun shoots first one ray across the Oder, then another, a long-legged insect heaving itself out of its cocoon, the waves flashing out an irregular Morse code, luring us through the veils of fire, we are through, we are creeping through spring grass.

Do you remember how we searched for a hollow at daybreak and hid under the fir trees, covered in rotting twigs, how you piled leaves on top of me, stroked my face, it was sooty, that hadn't helped, my hair short, that hadn't helped either, how we slept, taking it in turns, how you woke up long before the start of your shift, nudged me, took over, and I fell asleep, nestled up against you for warmth, mama, remember?

Only once on our entire flight across the Reich does a lorry give us a lift: *now* of all times, when we're inside the ring.

It's thinning out, the driver says

down to an eighth of its strength, a sixteenth, the Russians are marching on Berlin, the south of the city is in flames, the Nazis themselves are setting fire to the houses, "of course" we say, as if we weren't distraught, how

wise we have become, how light we are now, when we are nearly home Else collapses, she puts one foot in front of the other, but I can feel her splintering inside.

District command Oder North. As of 16 March, all young women between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five are ordered to join the *Wehrmacht*. It's the first warm day of the year. Our house is gone. I mean

gone.

"I must take you back."

"We are back."

I lead Else. It breaks the heart to see Breslau so flat: patch of snow, patch of grass, patch of crater, patch of spring, the burnt-out twin towers of Cathedral Island, the bomb-gutted silhouette; papa squats next to the pile of rubble that was once our house and says, "Where are you so dirty", says: "where?", says

no more, takes us in his arms, both at once.

No one moved, that way we didn't have to look at each other, Marolf was well, Marolf

the *Volksstürmer*, the *Volkssturm* had stuck it out in the city, but our house hadn't, papa clasped us to his chest, pushing our stories back inside us, pushing the whole Reich Protectorate, this huge mistake, down our throats. We swallowed and swallowed, hard as we could, and fell silent, more silent than we were. We tried to reciprocate, squeezing and crushing his ribs; he gasped, "My joy, my life, my child" and hugged back harder.

He was lying. I saw it in his eyes, I wanted it to be different, I saw myself reflected in his pupils, so small, so close, upside down, that was papa and papa's smell and me, and I saw it: he was afraid. It was something silver. Fear and.

He had had a good time of it without us.

The joy of reunion and the shock of our bombed-out home balanced each other out for the first few days, at least for me. Mama lay on the mattress at the Schlüters', they lived three doors down, a house like theirs just three doors down wasn't damaged, unluckily and luckily for us, so the Schlüter family took us in. "Your face is crooked", Adele said to Else on the sofa that didn't belong to us, Adele had returned to Marolf in January, we had barely left, no one made a secret of it any more, and when she thought of Lissl, she did so aloud and said "our child".

Mama, on the strange divan, said nothing. The fact that Adele was living with Marolf was a surprise we could all have done without. Except for Marolf, perhaps. And Adele, maybe. This cohabitation was the silver thing in papa's fear and the glimmer in his eye; it was also a "good thing all-round". He had let himself be caressed while we, in the south, etc. What happened to us bore no relation to what happened to him, had he suffered more, it wouldn't have helped us. Nevertheless, his time in the city, his renewed infidelity, which was perhaps simply his weakness, made our experience worse in retrospect.

Mama was an Else with too few teeth in her mouth, an Else-back-again. She had no words, plenty of eye. And a crooked face.

Adele left.

I sat with my mother, perched on the edge of the Schlüters' divan, holding her hand. The journey back had taken us four weeks, for four weeks I had had her closer to me than ever before, we were

mother and daughter, woman and woman,

I am leading her again, the sun is aglow, the city lies before us, Brassel,

I rub your heart of sand, your brave red heart, it beats in my hand, mama and I duck and dive, we are of good cheer, we hold on tight to each other, again and again we creep through spring grass.