Helene Bukowski
Wer möchte nicht im Leben bleiben (Who Wouldn't Want to Stay Alive)
translated by Jen Calleja
pp. 9-37

Every night, just before falling asleep, I see you walking across a plot of fallow land. You have your back to me. Your hair is ash blonde, jaw-length, your body tall and slender, like in the photos taken shortly before your death.

You never look over your shoulder. Each time, you pause in the middle of the open field. A fox crosses your path right in front of you. You stoop, reach out your hand, want to touch its fur, but the fox leaps, jumps into the shadows, then you too are gone.

I only spot you again at the next intersection. You walk through the cone of light from a streetlamp. It has just come on, like the other lamps throughout the city.

You move away from me with purpose, Christina.

I first heard your name in Neubrandenburg. Over the phone, my grandmother had asked me to meet an acquaintance of hers. Siglinde had recently been sorting through someone's estate and had come across a life story that needed to be told. What did this life have to do with me, why should I be the one to tell it, I wondered. Nevertheless, I went. Perhaps this was also down to being in love with someone at the time who, like my mother, had grown up in Neubrandenburg. I believed that by visiting the city, I could get closer to him.

Siglinde had a large stack of folders, cassettes, and photo albums arranged on the low coffee table in her living room. They were the documents she had obtained about your life. Your mother had kept them. After her death, they had fallen into Siglinde's hands. She briefly told me about you. That was it. Without missing a beat, I took all of it.

Back in Berlin, I began to read, to leaf through, to listen. After only a short time, I saw you walking across the open field. Since then, I've been trying to catch up with you, to overtake you, to grasp you. Did I find you? Or did you find me?

In reality, you never met that fox. It was I who discovered him one night in a fallow field, the air smelling of wet leaves, the sky dark and hazy. Even when I was only half a metre away from the fox, I didn't frighten him. I knelt down in front of him. We looked at each other, breathing. And I thought, if I reach out my hand now, I will be able to touch him.

Leipzig /
Neustrelitz /
Neubrandenburg
(1961-1972)

A few weeks before your birth, your father bought a piano.

Your story must begin with this piano. I put it here at the beginning and help the cursing men carrying it up the stairs to your parents' apartment. It almost slipped from our hands, your father watchful behind us. Then we finally did it. The piano is in its place. Your father counts the money into our hands, takes us to the door. He walks with a limp.

He broke his leg during a performance as first tenor at the Leipzig Opera. A platform collapsed beneath him, he lost his balance, and fell off the stage.

At your birth, on the seventeenth of January, your father was absent. As was common at the time, your mother remained alone with the doctor and the nurses. She was already several weeks past her due date. The placenta was leaking blood into the amniotic fluid. You didn't want to come out.

I stand next to your mother, speaking soft encouragement to her. Again and again, she struggles against the nurses, the imprints of their fingernails are left behind as fine crescents on her arms. The doctor's head moves in front of the harsh light of the lamp, she blinks in his shadow. He orders a caesarean section. Your mother opens her mouth, wants to say something, is powerless against their practiced hand grips. And then she plunges into darkness.

Outside the windows, dusk begins to fall.

The first sound you make is a swallowed cry. Your mother can't hear it, so I hold on to it tightly for her. A nurse cuts the umbilical cord. Instead of being placed on your mother's chest, you are put in a glass box.

Your parents name you Christina. And for a middle name, they give you your mother's.

On his first visit to the hospital your father holds a bouquet of snowdrops in his hand, must remain in the hallway, is only allowed to look at you from a distance, through another pane of glass. He stands there raptly, the scent of the blossoms is so delicate it disappears in the hospital.

Your father will later say he immediately recognised that you were born with the hands of a pianist.

Your mother has to wait longer than he does to see you. She is not allowed to leave the bed. Always the same view of the city outside the window. Only the colour of the sky changes.

I send the nurses to you, have them reach for you, hold you in their muscular arms. They sing old lullabies to you. You feel the vibration of their voices. They hum and puff, shake their curled hair, press you tightly against their starched nurses' uniforms.

I can't find any photos of you as a baby. Maybe they've been lost.

Or your parents gave them away.

Or there never were any.

Perhaps the camera your mother owned before your birth was traded for the piano.

After six weeks, your parents were finally allowed to take you home. I follow them. Your mother carries you, wrapped in a thick blanket, to the apartment, the exact location of which in Leipzig no one can tell me. I imagine a late-nineteenth century building in Schleußig. The two rooms are in poor condition. The toilet is halfway up the stairs, the kitchen is small, but the windows overlook the riverside forest.

Your father has stoked the tiled stove so much that he can walk around in an undershirt, and your mother is unbuttoning her blouse, too. Sweat is collecting under her breasts heavy with milk. It flows away.

Outside, the puddles freeze. The sky is a delicate blue between the bare trees. Your mother is still holding you in her arms. There's the fear that you might slip from her grasp, that you might fall, tumble. The snowdrops have already withered.

On this day, a mere twenty-four years later, you take your own life by jumping out of the window. Your father sees it as a sign. He calls your death a *second homecoming*.

Looking back, he believes he already recognised your end in your beginning.

For me, it remains a coincidence. Nothing was decided at the start.

You were a hungry child. Even as a baby, you were never full.

You lay at your mother's breast, drinking so greedily that you kept choking. Milk stains on your chin, on your mother's clothes, inside which she was increasingly disappearing. You drank everything out of her. She grew thinner and thinner.

In Leipzig, the traces of the war are still clearly visible. Ruins are everywhere, craters gape, houses are missing. When it's windy, rubble dust blows through the streets.

Your body tries to ward off the past, it is turned towards the future, which promises a better age. You drink and drink and can't stop drinking.

Your mother joins the long queues in front of all the shops. She stands in front of empty shelves, empty counters, empty fields, makes apple mush from apples found in a ditch, feeds it to you by the spoonful, and only licks the remnants from the pot. The air is saturated with the sugar of the sweet fruit. You both have heavy heads. I throw open the window, linger briefly with your mother, with the little I know about her.

Your mother loved taking pictures. She already owned a camera when she was a teenager. Later, at the beginning of the fifties, she discovered colour photography. Every year, she treasured the hard-to-obtain rolls of film until autumn.

I go out into the woods with her. She has her eye on the canopy, wants to capture every shade of green, yellow, orange and red, searches for the right angle, the right light, presses the shutter release, keeps moving onwards, gets lost, only starts to get frightened when it begins to get dark. I take her by the hand and lead her safely home.

None of these photographs taken by your mother have survived. They only light up in stories.

Ever since you were born, she has walked through the woods without photographing them. She pushes the pram through snow, past bare trees, dead wood, sleeping animals. A handful of birds in the sky.

Your mother had wanted a child for a long time. Now you lie before her in the pram, smiling, sleeping. She can never get enough of looking at you.

She had you late, very late for that time, at thirty-five.

Your parents met at Leipzig Central Station. It was the end of the 1950s, on an autumn day. They had both missed their train.

They stand on the platform, stranded. I walk over to your mother. A few pigeons take flight. Your father angles his body our way, notices only your mother, then turns to her.

In photos she wears her hair curly, cut short, often with a fine silk scarf around it. On the day they meet, it's a particularly vibrant scarf. I dye it red. Arrange blooming chrysanthemums over it. Your father takes a step towards her, pauses, deliberates, plucks up the courage after all to ask her if she could help him with his suitcase. He's not allowed to carry heavy things. I add: He's had stomach problems since the war.

Your mother doesn't hesitate for a second, they both reach for the suitcase. They match their pace, manoeuvre it down the stairs, and leave it at the luggage storage. It's there that, for the first time, their hands touch.

The next train leaves in three hours. Your father suggests spending the time until the departure together. Your mother smiles, nods.

I put a hint of curiosity in her eyes. Your father is wearing a suit, a tie, has neatly combed back his blond hair.

Side by side they leave the station, buy grapes from a stand on the street, eat them as they walk.

Your mother keeps each grape in her mouth for a long time, moving it back and forth between her teeth, listening to your father, who has taken over the conversation. He talks, explains, suddenly seems younger, is beaming. Your mother bursts a grape between her teeth, chews, swallows, nods at what your father says, and picks up another grape.

Your father stops in front of the still-unfinished opera house. He'll be working here soon, he explains to your mother, puffing out his chest.

Your mother tells your father that she sang in the company choir while she was employed as a stenographer. Your father starts singing, a breeze picks up, *Heigh ho, hitch up the cart*, they sing softly in a round, and your mother likes how their voices fit together and that the other passersby turn to look at them.

During this walk through Leipzig, your mother told your father how much she enjoyed taking colour photographs and that autumn trees were her favorite subject.

The three hours until the train's departure passed quickly. They almost missed the next one.

I rushed back to the station with them. This time, your mother carries the suitcase to the carriage all by herself. Both out of breath, they board and sit in the warm light, your father next to your mother. The train starts moving. It's now raining outside. Water drifts diagonally across the window, blurring the landscape. The other passengers are sleepy, your parents wide awake.

Just before your father has to get off, he leans over to your mother one last time and makes her promise to write him a letter if she finds a tree this autumn whose leaves are ablaze with more than six colours. Your mother looks at him and nods.

Together we watch him as he heaves the suitcase off the train, steps out into the night, and disappears into the rain.

The story of how your parents met sounds like a fairy tale, like a love story with a happy ending. Completely different from your own story.

CHRISTINA – As Told to Our Friends is written on the cover of the chronicle your father wrote six years after your death. 369 single-sided typewritten pages, duplicated and bound in leather. Your father must have dictated it to your mother, as he always dictated everything to her when it came to important writing matters.

The book is so heavy I can't lift it with one hand. It lies on my desk like a large stone. I feel its weight even in my dreams.

This chronicle is my handrail, but I keep noticing how reluctant I am to follow this guiding rail crafted by your father.

Christina could sing before she learned to speak, your father writes in the chronicle.

You are six months old, lying in your crib, listening to the rustling of sheet music and your father's voice. He often practices his opera scores at home.

The light moves across the ceiling. Your hands reach up into the air. Summertime's presence is bright in the room. Outside the window, the trees are now green and heavy. The smell of coal no longer hangs in the air.

Your father breathes in and out, moves his mouth, loosens his tongue. It isn't long before you try to make the same sounds as your father.

He recorded it on tape. I see him beside you, handling the large device.

At some point, he must have transferred everything to the cassette that I am now holding in my hands. *Christina Learns to Sing* is written on the case. The recording hums and hisses, I lean down close to the recorder.

Experiencing Christina's music. *Recordings from 1961 to 1985*, your father says at the beginning, then the background noises change, your voice can be heard, you gurgle, whistle. Your laughter was recorded, too. It fills my study. I sit there silently.

Your father strikes up a note, you do the same, drowning him out.

Soon, your father could no longer practise when you were in the same room with him.

I hand you to your mother. She carries you out, down the stairs, puts you in the pram, pushes you into the riverside forest, seeks the shade of the trees, keeps a close eye on you, walks across bridges. In the past, the rivers often overflowed their banks. They flooded the forest and made the alders stick out of the water. Dark stories were told about the riverside forest. Your mother knows them, defies them, sings. Her voice is heavy with dreams. Your eyelids flutter, you open your mouth one last time, then you slip into sleep.

Your mother doesn't stop singing, doesn't pay attention to the other walkers, sees only you.

With a bright, trilling note, you remind her every evening to sing you a goodnight song. You are showered by roses, your mother shakes a small tree, outside the moon has risen.

When your mother comes home from shopping, she puts records on for you and spins you around across the floorboards until she gets dizzy.

Your father plays you every concert on the radio.

On the cassette are more recordings of you. Your child's voice is bright, clear, covering the hiss on the tape. One time you sing:

Who wouldn't want to keep living,
gazing at the sun and the moon,
drifting about with the winds,
and pausing by the water

Who wouldn't want to keep living,
with humans and with animals
Who would be gladly driven from
this rich and vibrant world

O, let us stay living,
for every day a new day begins.
O, don't drive them away too soon,
all those who are alive.

It's only during the last verse that you make a small mistake. Just before the word *alive* there's a hesitation, as if you had choked.

In the chronicle, your father doesn't only describe your life. He also tells us about his own.

When he was a child, his drunken father, your grandfather, would put him on a table at the inn during celebrations. There, your father sang for those assembled.

I can see his blond curls gleaming in the haze. He sings barefoot, enthroned above everyone, no tremor in his voice. The listeners forget to knock the ash from their cigarettes, it falls silently onto the greasy wooden table, the grimy floor.

Your father also sang in the village church. At weddings, baptisms, confirmations, and funerals.

Your father stands before the packed wooden pews and sings, the light falls obliquely through the stained-glass windows, defying the shadows of the Odenwald mountains.

He moved people to tears, your father writes.

On his way to school, in the churned-up dust, on his bicycle, in the woods, he sang.

I can see him now, wanting to sing on the clay pitch, but the other boys laugh and drag him to the ground. "Are you a girl or something?" they shout. Your father hides his tears, bites his lip, gets up, and shakes his head. From then on, he thinks carefully about where he chooses to sing.

Your mother must have sung as a child, too. Your father, however, leaves her unmentioned in the chronicle.

I gather together the little I know about your mother. I slide the slips of paper bearing my notes between the pages of the chronicle and affix them with tape.

Your mother was the daughter of a butcher's assistant. She never knew hunger in her childhood.

She sits under the kitchen table in her hometown in the central Saxon mountains, fifty kilometres from Dresden. Her curls fall into her face, her father, your grandfather, passes sausage down to her, laughing when she reaches out her greasy hand, asking for another piece.

I imagine an older sister by her side, who braids her hair every morning and in whose bed she crawls at night when she's afraid. In my mind, the sister is the one who teaches your mother to sing. They mostly sing folk songs while sweeping the parlour, boiling the laundry, peeling potatoes.

There is no land, near and far,
more beautiful than ours at this time,
when we gather
under the linden trees
as night falls.

Your mother and her sister help your grandmother, learning housework from her. But also how to keep their heads down, to listen, to be tender.

Life is straightforward.

They rarely leave the small town.

There's enough of everything in your mother's childhood home.

In the chronicle, your father also writes about the war. He had been a messenger. His captain gave him *free rein*. I find no mention of weapons or fighting. Instead, your father writes that he always carried a guitar with him.

I see him sitting by a campfire with the guitar. Sparks fly off into the night. Wild boars move through the undergrowth of the forest, breathing and panting heavily in the bushes. Your father plays and sings. The other men seek his company, suddenly soften, and ask him for another song. Your father sings until morning, until the first light.

The oak trees seem unreal to me in this story, as does the whole scene. The shadows of the trees are missing, as are the dirty faces of the men, their sweat, the smell of cartridge cases on their hands. And what happened before they all set up camp in the forest. Your father isn't at war, your father is sitting on a stage, and everything is fake. Even the guitar is made of cardboard. Behind the trees, a huge hollow space.

I search the chronicle in vain for another story. Your father never wrote down his memories, he only ever describes when it was already late, dark outside, and he was sitting with close confidants.

I follow your father to the front. The Germans are retreating. Your father's unit is also on the march back. *No village left standing*, is the order.

A trail of ash is left behind the men.

With sooty faces, the men move steadily toward home. And sometime during these days, weeks, your father discovers a pit behind a large farmhouse. At the bottom, an entire family is huddled. Dirt in the corners of their mouths. Their eyes wide open. Naked fear in them.

Your father will never forget these faces. Next to a burned-out barn, amidst animal bones, he leaves behind his guitar.

What happened after your father and the other soldiers found the family's hiding place, your father never tells. It's not the only place in his life where a hole opens up. I stand at the edge and look down. It's dark down there, the night is pitch black.

How did your mother experience the war?

Your mother is too old to still be sitting under the table. She's doing her apprenticeship and goes to dance class once a week. There, a boy with wire-rimmed glasses twirls her around the parquet. Her first boyfriend. In the last year of the war, he's drafted, killed.

In the distance, the drone of airplanes. Bombs are falling. At dawn, your mother stands on a hill and sees the sky over Dresden glowing.

The smell of burning lingers in her hometown for weeks. No one gets used to the smell.

From the east, Soviet soldiers approach on foot. Your mother imagines men with red faces, but then they have skin like hers.

I feel a hole opening up at this point. Instead of measuring it, I stack photographs of red leaves in your mother's room, not letting her put the camera down. Breathlessly, she shoots through an entire roll of film.

Or was there a forest where she could hide? I hollow out a beech tree, push your mother inside, give her a coat like the one Thousandfurs wears in the fairytale, and a soot-smeared face, and let her wait there, sit tight, for days.

Around your mother, leaves fall to the ground, as if it were already autumn again. I can see her lips moving, she sings silently:

There is no land, near and far,
more beautiful than ours at this time,
when we gather
under the linden trees
as night falls.

I've never liked singing. Not at school, not at the drama club I was in, not even at karaoke. Instead, I'll give you another image.

I'm a child, lying in bed with my sisters, we're supposed to be asleep. My father turns off the light, but before he leaves our bedroom, he sings to us.

The moon is risen,
the golden stars are gleaming
so brightly in the skies.
The hushed, black woods are dreaming,
The mists, like phantoms seeming,
From meadows magically rise.

There is such tenderness and sadness in my father's voice that it tears me apart inside. Even now, I can't hear the song without feeling like I'm standing in a forest heavy with night, full of love for the world and holding my father's hand.

You always see your father sitting at the piano. He's never owned one of his own. When he plays, he disappears into it. If your mother calls from the kitchen, he doesn't respond. And even if you reach for his trouser leg, pull at the fabric, time passes before your father notices and emerges from the depths.

Like the furniture, your father's piano playing is an integral part of the apartment for you. Sometimes you hear it softly, sometimes loudly. When it falls silent, you know it won't be long before it starts up again. Like your parents' voices. You always crane your neck when you once more hear the piano.

I see your father lifting you onto his lap. You can reach for things now, stretch out your hands, touch the white keys, their smooth surface, lean forward so you can reach the black ones too. You press the keys, and sounds fill the room. If you pull your hands back, they are suddenly gone. If you leave your hands where they are, the sounds gradually become quieter, until they have faded away completely. You can't get enough of it, don't want to leave your father's lap, and now stretch out your arms to him every time he sits down at the piano again.

Once, your father records one of your attempts. *Sonata in A Minor* is written on the tape.

I can see your chubby little hands before me, crashing down on the keys with full force. The rapturous joy on your face, how you can't tear yourself away from the magical wooden box. If you don't touch it, it's silent, but every time you reach for it, it comes to life.

When your father sings and plays, it's as if he's telling a story and painting at the same time. The images flicker and fill the entire room. It gets brighter. Or darker. Suddenly, the trees from the riverside forest reach into the apartment, the water of the White Elster flows past you, wind and rain collect on the ceiling.

Like the voices of your parents, you would recognise the voice of the piano anywhere.

You learn to walk, then to talk. During all this, the piano sits in the apartment, immovable.