*I once found a picture by chance in an archive, one that you had taken and that I had never seen. The photograph showed two young professionals walking along a dug-up street in pouring rain, showily laughing about a joke that I immediately suspected to be utterly tasteless. They could allow themselves the laugh, because not only two but three umbrellas were held over their heads by the anonymous assistants that the two managed to blot out entirely with their large frames. The picture bears a striking resemblance to another two photographs that you took, presumably at the same location, with that torn-up concrete slab road like a sea of ice in the background. The one of the group of children in tracksuits, each holding at least one, some two cans of coke, arguably props, and that one you took at night, of the group of textbook skins arranged in a plane of vertical violence extruding vectors of baseball bats and pulled dog leashes. Back then, you found nothing in being a profiteer, and you gave your clients the stereotypes they would ask for. Until you became one yourself.*

*The letter remained unnoticed for days, and if it wouldn’t have been for the mailwoman, it would have gone unnoticed for much longer. A mailwoman, however, has an eye for mail, for the material qualities of the envelope and the emergence of glassine windows and four-color inkjet prints in the heading. Every day, as she stood in front of the wall mounted mailboxes, the crimson shield printed on the long delivered letter caught her eye, and because she was not only attentive but also conscientious, she knocked on the door that, judging by the nameplates, corresponded to the addressee. Fortunately, you were home at the time, and the lady made you aware of your mail, not without peering into the apartment and inquiring whether you were the tenant. You informed her that her voluntary sideline had ended on January 15th, and closed the door in her face.*

*The envelope was so lush it tore with the feeling of peeling sunburned skin. The letter it contained was sparse in explanations. With due and proper notice you were to leave the apartment that had been repossessed by its Prussian owners.*

*So soll es sein, so soll es sein, so wird es sein. The cafe by the side of the empty river whose bed lay bare and moist like a dirty beached north sea whale blasted Wolf Biermann half-ironically over the speakers hidden in the crawl space, while the omnipresent screens continued to play a silent Beastie Boys video that threw a haphazard compilation of twenty years of missed pop cultural references at you. You nipped at the cocktail - on the house because you looked like sorrow - and waited for Paul, who had promised to be here at two and now it was two twenty, already. He came at thirty-five, when you were already halfway through your second drink, apparently the barkeep preferred you drunk to sad and hadn’t heard of FASD. “Sorry! I’m sorry,” he blared across the room that didn’t give him particular attention because this was a place of blaring, flamboyant people, that didn’t mean their excuses. “This freelancer just wouldn’t let me leave.” The cocktails were mixed with egg-whites that slowed your face. “Desperate leeches.” Paul by contrast was too fast for his own good, presumably not naturally. “For the record: You’re not a freelancer, honey. You’re an artist.” Your smile was delayed but satisfied him. “Now. What do you have for me? What you got? What is happening?” You showed him a couple of prints showing roaming businessmen. “These guys are grody. I like it. Got any more?” You hadn’t, because, frankly, you just needed to talk to someone adult that would understand you. With little more than three weeks until you would need to vacate your apartment, even with your heady poise of independence you reckoned that a word of advice from a grownup would be in order, and Paul was a grownup, and you were under his spell. “Wow. Bummer.” I’m surprised that he was even able to follow your account. “So what are you gonna do?” The luck you had to meet him just the day that he was sober enough to look you in the eyes and hold your gaze, so that you believed him when he said: “You know what? You should come to New York.” He had even stopped ticker-tapping on the hilarious Io-Imparo-Italiano-napkins with his shades. “For real, I’d put you up in my pad, and you’re gonna take SoHo in a week. You have no idea.” His hand clasped your fingers in the cheesiest gesture of encouragement he could come up with, and you misunderstood it as you had misunderstood so many of his overstated expressions as signs of deep affection. “I can get you an advance that’ll pay for the flight alone. And once you’re there, it’s gonna be easy to set you up with another something. People will love you, I’m sure.” Egg white was accumulating in your belly. I sat there, alongside it. “You can fly with it. Not an issue at all.” He was exceptionally alert that he picked up your momentary glimpse down to where I was approximately located. The fact that you largely overruled your bodily signals of exertion and fatigue didn’t mean that you weren’t concerned for my wellbeing. Miscarriage hadn’t made the curriculum back then, therefore for you, pregnancy reliably and inevitably led to childbirth. And one drink can’t hurt. “Know what? I’m gonna take off the rest of the day and I’ll give you the rundown.” He waved to pay and the bartender took his money for your drinks.*

*Raw was his favorite word. Raw was how he liked his cities, juicy, bloody, hard to digest. Anything more than a brief question and he would cut in with another hymn to his native city. In three valuable hours of his fiercely contested attention he managed to subtly maneuver around the specifics, and only when he had already kissed your cheek goodbye, hastily because he was pressed to seek his other dependents, you pressed him for a concrete plan. “Listen, I’ll see to it that I can take you along the next time I go. I’d be surprised if they wouldn’t go for some American-in-Paris-type gig for you, so your flight should be paid for. Hell, I can probably wrap it up tonight.” And then he was off and I hope that you did realize in the sudden silence that he hadn’t even asked you if you wanted to leave. Then again, what objections were there, if the flight was paid, if you could stay at his pad, seeing that you had enough funds to just hop on the next plane back to Europe if you didn’t like it, and that your biggest concern would be getting a passport within three weeks.*

*Paul did keep his word about getting you a transatlantic flight, although he hadn’t yet come up with a job for you. But when your flight was scheduled to depart, he did not show up at the airport. When you called his desk he excused himself and referred you to a friend in terminal A that would put a 15-minute back massage on his tab. He would take a flight the next day, he said, or as soon as he had finished some important business. On the plane, the empty seat was swiftly claimed by the senior on the aisle seat for his impressively coiffured poodle that spent the nine hours motionless like a ribboned sphinx in its portable cage, watching you pityingly as you wriggled about sleepless from tension and discomfort. Paul had assured you that he would arrange for you to be picked up from the airport and you tried to convince yourself of his dependability, but a gnawing premonition of deserted kiss-and-ride parking strips under a threatening night falling deprived you of a much needed nap. It was your first time up in the air, just as it would be for me twenty-eight years later on the same route, same red eyes, same nail biting, same fidgeting on stale-smelling seats. Their odor spelled separation to me, like that of bus seats warmed by the friction of rough cotton, that set the olfactory backdrop to the aimless bus rides I embarked on when there was nothing left to say at home. I wish I had had your plushy guardian next to me, not the mid-forties couple downing one doll-sized whiskey bottle after the other. I cried occasionally, but not because they laughed at my ghostly apparition by the window, head hidden under my summer jacket to block out looks and light. I cried for every mile and for every timezone that I was putting between me and Sergej: the ultimate disintegration of a young family.*

*The little blue book of my second passport has long been the sole proof and only relic of your American venture that was known to me. If I wouldn’t have asked, I guess I wouldn’t have known the secret of my birthplace until my sixteenth birthday, when the possession of a state-issued piece of plastic would suddenly become a vital key to social acceptance. For a long time, I naturally assumed to be born in Rostock, not only because I couldn’t think of any other place beyond the sandy, rusty seaside that we had faced from various paragraph-five-apartments, not only because of your solemn lectures about the recent history of our land and our family’s part in it, but also because we weren’t like the families of those friends who were born elsewhere. If I would have been born elsewhere, people would have called me out for it. I must have been around Sergej’s age when I asked you rather incidentally about my provenance, in a rare moment of you being home, a rare moment of me doing my homework with care, a rare moment of us sitting peacefully alongside each other. You told me without looking up from your reading and I hardly could finish my essay. I already knew about human reproduction in vivid detail, but the vision of a divine hand reaching down from heaven to place the immaculately conceived egg you had given in the center of time square among the dense traffic of skateboards and the thick, sparkling canopy of overblown christmas decorations kept me from framing a straight sentence both in my homework as well as in response to your casual revelation. Soon after, though, my initial elation gave way to bewilderment. Why in the world, I asked you, why were we here and not there? What could you possibly have done that we had to leave? You told me I shouldn’t believe what TV had shown me. That America was an unjust, asocial place. That poor children didn’t get to go to school. I had to think of Robert, who bragged that he was allowed to skip school when his parents needed help cleaning cars that were about to be picked up, but that was a different thing, you said, adding to your mental list of accusations against his family. You told me at length about Rodney King and I thought of Lichtenhagen, but that was something else entirely, you said. I felt as wise as before, but your lecture was enough for you to brush off my subsequent questions. Later that day you tossed an envelope of photos on my desk, to show me a different perspective, as you told me on your way out. Beside my second passport these prints are the only record that I have of your journey to this day.*

*Needless to say, the photos were unordered. I tried to give them an order, both before I left for the US myself as well as after, even trying to retrace your steps in situ. Most of the pictures remain impossible to date for me, however, I’m fairly certain about the first image you took upon arrival. The wait at the luggage belt made you remember your mission, that Paul had defined only vaguely since he hadn’t come up with a real assignment. He had also paid for your ticket out of his own pocket, not that he cared about keeping promises, but he was indifferent to spending either and presumably had amassed an indecent supply of frequent flier miles. Your first picture shows an outstretched arm about to haul an old-fashioned suitcase adorned with travel badges from North American highway curiosities. There’s Lucy, the Elephant, that I encountered once on a road trip that I hoped would lighten my mood, which it didn’t, until I saw Lucy. Lucy, subject of a million stories, with her ridiculous perseverance made me feel less alone. I binged on American dreams on that trip, gladly basking in the squalid birth sites of success stories that gave my own rock bottom a glamourous outlook, and at night, the epics’ Eastmancolor renditions on my phone’s brilliant rectangle in the dark motel rooms had the soothing effect of prayer on me. I doubt that you had heard of Lucy. I doubt that you ever got to see any of the novelty destinations recorded on the suitcase you photographed, although the world’s largest ketchup bottle and the world’s largest roller skate must have been spiritually charged like shrines for visitors from your side of the wall. Judging from your pictures though, you didn’t make it far. But one thing at a time. The fact that the grainy action shot from baggage pick-up remained the only record of your arrival makes me assume that the someone Paul had informed had been more reliable than himself. Perhaps he even got William to come.*

*A single photo captures William, and I only know thanks to the scribbled caption identifying the portrait. You took the picture through the double peep hole of a half-closed door and the narrow space between towering bottles and cans on the kitchen table and the enormous drop-light above it. Catching him unnoticed was the only way you would see his face undisturbed by indignation and jealousy, not to mention that you wouldn’t have dared to ask him whether you could take a picture of him. By the time you arrived, it had been two years since Paul had promised William his exclusivity. It doesn’t surprise me that Paul’s promise turned out to be rather flimsy, and especially since his deployment to Germany, his frequent lapses of faithfulness and/or telephonic availability had caused much distress and suspicion to poor William. It didn’t help that the spontaneously visiting friend Paul had announced turned out to be female. Already before William considered you a nuisance, he considered you a rival in love. At first, when he picked you up at JFK, you construed his standoffish manner as Friesian cordiality, and his terse replies as consideration for your broken English. He held the car door for you, but only that you wouldn’t get the idea of sitting up front with him. You had to be tired, he rather ordered than he observed as he allotted to you the central room in the color-coordinated railroad apartment. The walls were adorned with fascinating hand-drawn landscapes of the old testament, which, however, in the dim light coming through the frosted glass windows bordering the room under the ceiling, or from the single lamp by the headboard, evoked the image of an eternal prisoner preserving her sanity with the sensory feedback of a pencil scratching over plaster. There was no spare key, no tour of the apartment, not even laying down the house rules. William left for somewhere you didn’t understand and if you wouldn’t have been dead tired, indeed, you would have probably figured out right then that you were not welcome there. Your host was out when you woke up, and with no clock around and the sun setting without the sound of a key in the lock you could only estimate at what time he finally appeared in your door frame, in a forced attempt to appear furious, trying to yell at you but merely managing a nagging, annoyed, whine. He herded you to the open fridge to make you understand and you understood, guiltily seeking a piece of the apple’s peel that stuck between your molars. It was clear that he had been hoping for more substantial transgressions on your part, dirty dishes, hair in the sink or at least a chocolate bar gone missing instead of two sad red delicious. Twice, three times he repeated, subject, predicate, object, that you needed to ask for things, not take them. You remembered the word for key and asked him for it, but for reasons that escaped you, spare keys were not an option. You did understand that you would have to hope for someone to be home or ask the owner of the pet supply shop - remarkable how William preserved his indignation barking at you like a dog to make you understand the meaning of the word - that was also the doorlady to open up for you. He brought you bananas and a box of crackers half an hour later, evading your thankful look.*

*I guess it used to be a tacit contract between you and my various temp dads, that they had to at the very least tolerate my occasional accommodation benevolently. Lule was at one end of the spectrum, mothering me like a real father, buying tupperware containers that he else would never have considered to give me thumb-thick-topped bread and fresh fruit. Sometimes I even felt like he was preferring my company to yours, although I suspect that he merely played me in one of your numerous subliminal conflicts. Then there were others less prone to fatherhood, not unwilling but struggling to relate to a child, even though or maybe just because they had been children themselves not too long ago. Only one, a longtime crush but eventually transitional partner of yours, did not respect your silent agreement. I spent a total of six days with him, including two weekends, and after the second I declared that I would rather sleep at the bus stop than crash at his place, that I never wanted to see his face, and that I would forget his name to never pronounce it again, which I did. He lived on a houseboat and was an odd catch for you, because he was rich and silently successful. The boat didn’t look like money, yet I know he had it because one of the few things he said to me - he never talked to me but rather stated sealed phrases to the space in the room - was that I would never have as much money as he did. Not that I had asked, he only asserted it solemnly, as if he wanted to warn me of false ambitions. He took me fishing on the first day I spent on the boat, because that was what he imagined being a stepfather-son activity. I was clueless, so he swiftly set up rod and hook for me and cast the line. Then we settled into our foldable chairs, redundantly, because there was much more comfortable seating all over deck, but fishing is fishing and I guess he hoped that the perfection of the scene itself would overcome all distances. His self-brewed beer, too, was part of that ritual. Could the boat go fast enough to outrun an orca, I asked, but he only shushed me, looking into my eyes for the first time as he pointed at the waves to make me understand. By the time I fell asleep in my cot he had not spoken more than a hundred words to me. Besides an instructional tour of those parts of the boat that would be relevant for me, during which he pointed to different items and appliances, pronouncing their names and functions like in my third grade English lessons - he spoke English only - the only compound of multiple sentences he had uttered had been a brief episode from his childhood. At my age, he told me, he had already been to prison twice - I was eleven when he became my temp dad. He had never learned why he had been arrested, someone had simply picked him up, locked him up in a cell full of compassionate but largely intoxicated inmates, and let him go the day after. Perhaps he had expected an answer, an acknowledgement of some sort, or maybe he didn’t care and it was only the first thing he came up with when he tried to season his bonding scene with a confidentially shared secret. I remained mute, half not to stir the fishes, half because I felt like I hadn’t fully understood the meaning of his words and even if I had had, I was at a loss for a reaction. His bland voice gave no clue whether he was proud or melancholy, and while you had at some point stated the obvious that prison wasn’t an option, there were people I knew, who weren’t so terribly ashamed of their jail time. When I did not respond, he showed neither indignation nor satisfaction, but after another couple of minutes, he disappeared below deck and did not surface for another hour. His absence hardly bothered me, as it gave me the opportunity to inspect my surroundings, the hermetic order of the decommissioned Volksmarine speedboat. If he saw me snooping around, it didn’t disturb him. Only when I started to sing loudly out of boredom and embarrassment, he reappeared with the first portable computer I ever saw, told me that my song would spoil the fishes, and sat back down typing like an eternally deferring officer holding me in my interrogation chair. This became our usual disposition: him on one of his two portable devices, me alongside trying to make the time pass quickly without risking sharp rebuke for violating his two boundary conditions he had declared with counting fingers already before our first dinner together.*

*Nothing happened on his boat. There is no hidden trauma, mom. The word “dad” didn’t make him a father, and I didn’t need a man to be a son. I was bored. I was disappointed. The excitement that his biography had promised to you, and me, too - after you had asked me to be patient with him, explaining that he was slow to build trust, that he was fearing extradition to the United States for some espionage crime that you made sound far more heroic than what I unearthed from the archives a good decade later, that he prayed his boat would outrun orcas and other adversaries on a necessary flight across the baltic - that chance of adventure and inscribing oneself in the history even as a footnote never manifested. However, it wasn’t the dragging time on his boat that rendered him so despicable to me, after all, I was no stranger to boredom. He was the lone rider, the radical individualist that used every excuse to remove himself from the responsibilities of a social being. This trait made him attractive to you, because you, too, had your relapses into misconceived freedom, and it made him contemptible, even threatening to me. As little as I needed you already at eleven, I still feared that you would simply not come back one Sunday night, and not without reason. I doubt that I penetrated my feelings as much at the time, but somehow I understood that with his air of getaway romance he would wind up the spring that could send you across the baltic or only some blocks away, but far enough to lose sight of your son.*

*Only few people noticed my presence until far into the fifth month of your pregnancy. William only realized your condition in the morning light of the fourth day after your arrival, after he’d had an eye-opening glass of the orange juice that he hadn’t offered to share. You had been awake for an hour, standing at the kitchen window, taking a sparing single photo of the street that was so nondescript for its neighborhood that it took me numerous walks to locate it. The view from the window was strangely similar to a scene from an East German city. Much brick, a butcher, a hairdresser, only the foreign lettering of the thai supermarket appeared like a mirage on the window pane across the street. It could have been a disappointment, but after the hostile reception the distant familiarity of the view was reassuring. Your broad back against the doorway hid my showing presence when William came in, but when he had occupied his usual confrontative spot leaning to the corner of the countertop and lowered his gaze with the descending juice bottle, he saw the unmistakable bulge. He lingered and then held out the juice bottle with an inviting wiggle. After that, he left things for you in the fridge and didn’t complain overtly about fruit gone missing, anymore. But if you ever thought that this would be the beginning of a friendship, you were mistaken.*

*Paul did not arrive. Not in the first week at your new home. On Saturday, you strolled around the neighborhood and beyond in a concentric spiral until your feet and I screamed in unison for you to stop. Back at the apartment you were left to stand for another near hour in the pet shop until the owner, inconsolable when she, too, realized your condition at a closer look, had finished tending to the line of last minute customers exchanging hamsters for shy reptiles hiding under the plastic rocks. Out of embarrassment, the lizard lady pinned you at the doorstep with impenetrable anecdotes and long itineraries for your coming days, retaining you standing for another eternity after she had locked up for you. William had already ducked past without a greeting. You couldn’t bring yourself to leave the apartment at all in the following days, and with little in the empty house to take your mind off the matter, you turned your thoughts towards me and it gave you a chill. In the night, when the noises outside lowered to a distant hum, I began communicating with you, and because you had had no opportunity to tire yourself throughout the day, you couldn’t help but listen. Why did you have me in the first place, I asked, innocently, because I couldn’t yet have known the details of my conception. What would await me, I inquired, as you were watching the nightly scenes out on the street. A man carrying a door on his back was glinting with sweat in the moonlight. What did you have to offer - a question posed not as a challenge but merely to establish a basis for me to assess whether it would be worth the wait. Either me or the interrogation weighed heavy on your bowels, William muttered behind the thin wall to the bathroom as you tried to reduce the reverberation of the toilet bowl, but at least I stopped the interrogation as I listened to the twice-muted sounds of the alien language. Once I fell silent you would savor the warm boulder that you were wrapped around. You had always been a side sleeper, anyway.*

*When Fee and I got to know we were pregnant, for the first time in weeks she returned to her own shared apartment for the night, and that could have already told me everything I needed to know about her trust in our parenthood. But I didn’t care, didn’t mind her absence, because now there was Sergej, nameless yet, but fertilized and started. I lived in the upstairs apartment of a family whose multiply handicapped son I wheeled around in the sun in exchange for lodging until he would giggle, and I would become a father. When I told you, the first thing you said was how strange you found it that I was so excited about being a father (being a man, though you didn’t actually say that, I knew it was implied). I hadn’t expected excessive joy in response to my announcement, so I tacitly accepted the unspoken excuse of you inviting me to dine out, which was itself so extraordinary that it did express profuse joy after all.*

*You kept carrying on your Godot lifestyle. William forced some change on you by coming up with a second key, handed to you with the announcement that he would need the apartment to himself and his dance partner for rehearsals nine to five. You rationed your film reserves and thereby compelled yourself to find a local supply by the end of the month, which was supposed to be the first act of settling in without Paul’s help. The rationing divided the day into six snapshots. When I let you walk, these hours passed fast and unnoticed. If I wouldn’t, they lingered and showed their immobile faces. Boredom is the most agonizing consequence of this kind of poverty, I am telling from experience. Every city’s charm suffocates in the sticky wrappers of cheap, filling supermarket food wolfed down seated on a bike rack because all the scenic benches in the park are taken. I came to the US with a work contract but no money I could afford to spend on anything less but the bare necessities. Between the landmarks lay death strips of grimy back spaces that cars dissected speeding blind ahead, spaces that more fortunate pedestrians only entered up to the point that their toss would reach the garbage chute. The wrappers, the soot, the unfamiliar ordering customs, the skin colors (i hate to say it but I want to be honest), the falsely understood fragmentation, the see-to-it-thyself, the unexpected diversity of accents, slangs, and dialects, the resounding confidence of the rich, the resounding confidence of the poor, the expulsion through friendliness in well-patronized cafes offering wifi access with unspoken time limits for coffee purchases, the yet another hour between check-out and check-in times of the hostels each offering the cheapest rate for the respective day, the enticing tourist activities beyond my budget that I probably would have never considered otherwise, the endless dial tone of the supposed landlord, the dubiousness of the second-hand car market. I had left wife and child, as they say, and I was not in the best of moods. I knew that my premonition against private debts was childish, but I guess some part of me must have felt I didn’t deserve better. Jock smell in the three- to eight-beds I spent my rainy days in, chlorine in the laundry rooms I withdrew to if my roommates weren’t out. When it’s sunny, I cannot stay in, even the hole I was in back then wasn’t that dark. When a landlord finally called me back and I signed the lease, it felt like a deal with the devil, not because of his baby-blue eyes or his drawbridge brows, but because my urge of self-flagellation immediately vanished with the drop of the pen. I could afford 194 hours of curbside parking on 42nd Street. I could survive thirty-five days on vending-machine-priced water and bars 280 calories apiece or I could eat a week at one of the more economically priced Michelin-starred restaurants. I could pay for both the grand helicopter tour of the city and the underground adventure experience, escape room included. Four cents a minute with the prepaid plan that I had to buy for the lack of VoIP-stable wifi. The first few tries I kept messing up time zones and Sergej’s schedule. Sometimes I suspected Fee of finding excuses for not letting him answer. In those hours, my solvency was still not enough to fight both boredom as well as solitude. The apartment was empty and I was getting dangerously close to global high scores.*

*A telephone booth in the rain. The windows had fogged up with your breath although you hadn’t even begun to talk. Two telephone cards are in the picture, you had stocked up on minutes for the calls you needed to make, and they were important calls, so you wouldn’t risk being cut off by the rates. Not to your surprise, Paul didn’t answer, not even his office, that had compassionately taken your previous messages and had always passed on his greetings and promise of a speedy arrival on his part. Something inside you was relieved: You were beyond believing his announcements and at least his bad conscience was enough to convince William of letting you stay. The second number on the list you had copied from the rolodex on Paul’s desk, now William’s drawing table, that you had investigated as every inch of the apartment during your period of solitary domestic seclusion. You rested your forehead against the glass to counter your body heat that rose with every new cell of mine, and with your nervousness, too. Subject of your second call was a photographer you had gotten to know in Dresden. Bunim, a Russian, who had stayed in the city after the war and emigrated to the US only weeks before the wall came up. In the deserted building of the future state administration, you and Bunim had met shortly after the elections, when the town halls and offices encapsulated the country’s upheaval on three floors, rooms numbered westwards ascending. In a climate halfway between new year’s eve and Lehman 2008 there was no reason for overzealous competition. Hyperactive new-elects barely older than you took you and Bunim on extensive tours among the grayscale skyline of towering file stacks that waited for the freshly recruited IT crowd to transform them to smaller stacks of floppy disks. In exchange for the prospect of a portrait on national media the young officials eagerly traded views of sites and archives that had been confidential for half a decade. The yuppies were excited, you were excited, paper flew like confetti from a collapsing stack, everything was festive and smelled of future success. Success arrived for Bunim sooner than for you. When you called the number he had given you in Dresden some weeks ago, he had already climbed to a position senior enough that you had to convince his assistant of your call’s urgency. But he was in town, and when you asked him for a job, he immediately gave you a time and a place, although he didn’t seem to have the clearest recollection of who you actually were.*

*With the success of your second call, you had the necessary courage for your third. Your memory of the series of digits was unspoilt, but you had your doubts about whether it still belonged to your parents. In the weeks leading up to your departure you had never called them but rather had gone straight to their house, so that you would simultaneously absolve the weekly visit that earned you your unneeded but nevertheless welcome alimony. And while it was unlikely that your Oma and Opa had moved, numbers and digits had been among the first things to be uprooted, scrambled, after last November. When Opa picked up, you stated your full name, as if he might not recognize you otherwise. There was little surprise in his voice, he must have been advised about the calls origin when he had picked up. Opa asked about your well-being and eventual needs as though you had left for a long-planned summer camp. Calmed by his matter-of-factly opening, you explained briefly and optimistically, euphemistically, your situation, making sure that you subtly underlined that this was not a call for help but merely a kind notice, like you would notice city administration of a move. Only towards the end of your report did your talking accelerate, because an unkempt man with a piercing stare had stopped in front of the telephone booth. Opa replied in his usual direct and undiplomatic fashion that he didn’t deem your situation adequate for you and that you shouldn’t be stubborn and come back. Seemingly unconscious of his audience, the man outside the booth whipped out his penis and the hollow sound of water hitting the window pane resounded, piss streaming down the glass, tinging it a darker yellow than it had already been. His face relaxed like the beer advertisement above it and tucking away his privates he turned to resume staggering towards the subway. You said that you respected Opa’s concern, but that you were lacking nothing for bearing a healthy German-American child. With nothing else but the news to turn to, you said an awkward goodbye, wishing the other a restful evening. You needed to pee, the urge had become gradually less predictable lately.*

*The thing about gradients, though, is that they eventually reduce to a binary state. The day you went to work your first American job was the day after the one marking the future impossibility of hiding your belly. On a melon scale, I was forming a cantaloupe. Orange, juicy, and sweet had been your vomit in the morning. Resigned, you had taken a backpack with your own camera as a counterweight and hadn’t bothered concealing your front-heaviness. A photo commemorates what was supposed to be the start of something, though of what exactly is hard to tell from the picture. The first step in a stellar career, first lucky dime in pocket, first cow, first baby in arm. Bunim greeted you with an “Oh” hollow as the near-empty film studio, a big circular vessel to house his doubt and concern. “I don’t know if this is the right situation for you”, he said with a nod to your belly. The hauling of cast iron light stands and fat, sensitive flashes he had budgeted you for was beyond you. “She can take the babies”, an assistant proposed, “and the cow, ” a fellow European, who, with its diverse colors, looked better on monochrome stock than the local breeds. The ad was for formula and needed a baby besides the cattle. While the cow was basking stoically in the modeling light, the baby would only last for a minute at best, and even though the team was experienced in baby shoots and passed the newborns fast like footballs between backstage and and the searing limelight, it needed eight stand-ins for the satisfied end user of the formula. Eight babies, each not older than four months, whose eight accompanying parents - mothers, exclusively - were availing themselves of the early access to the catering buffet and largely left it to the team, i.e. you, to care for the seven backups in various states of crying. I once had a job in Hamburg, a weekend gig that paid travel, board, and lodging to a group of East German teenagers in exchange for their modest wage expectations. On a seven square meter patch of sod I had to keep a number of lawn mowers and scarifiers running, that would choke on the thick fairground air within seconds. You were scurrying from baby to baby and while the mothery smell rich with hormones that oozed from your pores was quick to silence the crying infants, it only took an instant until the cottony cloud of your odor would be carried away by the constant draft and leave the baby to exclaim its vulnerability. Only the cow was patient and still, its tail steadily swinging up and down like a calcant next to the man-tall fan that propelled the smell of stable and four working stomachs over towards you. It didn’t take long for your own bowels to surrender to the heavy scent. You threw up in a bin between two cots, and because you hadn’t managed to eat anything but a floury apple that morning, everyone presumed the vomit to be but a baby’s burp. You didn’t touch a single rod of cold steel, not a single screen or reflector. The whole day seemed a preview of the coming months of shape-shifting, warm organic matter. At the turn of the fifth hour, your touch started to tell apart the dented rounds of the identical heads of the infants and you began to understand how the mothers managed to aim unerringly at the right cod if you hadn’t managed to lull a baby in time. You should have been angry at the moon-faced models, steaming with spotlight heat in their carriages, for ruining - or at least representing the ruin of - your first American photography job. However, you didn’t need to fight the urge of sinking a finger into the soft zones of baby surface. You didn’t hold them fearfully, with two hands in a maddening control loop between crushing and losing grip like you did with your camera when you first got it, but naturally fit them in the mold between your breasts. Holding them was zen, felt like the look the cow gave you, and you would retrospectively hate the fact that it felt so natural, because although you considered yourself a natural of many things, being a mother wasn’t one of them. After the shoot, the mothers came to you one by one to collect their offsprings, and not a single mom failed to assure you that you would make a great one, too, one day. Only then, bitterness welled up.*

*Bunim never had another job for you. In your seventh month, he wouldn’t trust you with weights, sprints, or appointments. There was never another cow and or baby to supervise, either. However, if your gig hadn’t made you rich, it gave you more confidence in moving around the city. Unfortunately, I was already weighing heavy on your joints at this point. You won back some of your recklessness and tested the patience of jumpy waiters playing the pregnant tourist when they would press you to order. Some of the few places that catered to tourists within the decreasing radius of tolerable walking distance had European newspapers, but the news barely affected you, anymore. Germany was the proverbial tree in the woods, and since you had set foot on the new continent, you were longing only for a compatriot to string up nostalgic visions of places from memory. Whether your country would disintegrate while you were gone, as some anxious voices in the papers predicted, hardly mattered as long as there would be someone to point out the differences between before and after to when you would stroll together through the once-familiar landscapes upon your eventual return. Kohl makes it possible. Even the exoticist ads were closer to your reality. 1 week USA in a family of indians - Peter Stuyvesand pays all expenses. Most alien of all were the occasional group of German tourists that you documented extensively. They barely noticed you in a Mexican standoff of cameras, or through the panorama windows as they synchronously pointed their lenses towards the Brooklyn Bridge in dual file like artillery.*

*It’s not only the photographs that inform my vision of that time. I remember the time that you were working on a forty-five minute essay film destined to dissipate in the early morning program of the regional channel, that looked back at the city’s desolate but auspicious state in the early nineties. You called the piece “Fast Times at Richmond Hill”, because a large part of your source material came from a local resident’s collection of home videos. When you landed the commission, you had just invested the money for a new fridge in video editing software, so that I had to give the fridge door an awkward hug to lift its hinges back in place. I would have preferred less intimacy, both with the fridge door as well as with you working from home. I was already aware of my dual citizenship and its implications at the time you were curating your collection of America’s dullest home videos. Even though you had informed me about my exotic birthplace before, the notion of citizenship and that sort of dutiful sense of fraternity that it demanded, only became apparent to me about a year before, on September 11th: Dutiful, rueful almost, because I felt that I had missed a hugely important appointment, lingering with Robert after school in our own valley of the clueless, while people that I shared a strange administrational bond with were jumping from windows. Robert had used the contents of his fold-out pencil case, that never failed to surprise teachers with its surgical orderliness but not me as I knew the tool rules in his parents’ garage, to stage a demonstration of his guerilla tactics in Age of Empires, an analogue demonstration of necessity because we had both been banned from computer usage, I for making the text-to-speech say abusive things, Robert for racking up the phone bill with online activity that he refused to tell even me about. The fact that made me feel most the importance of the events of that day, was that you were not angry when I returned, only deeply concerned. As a parent, you were not only confident regarding my safety because it suited you, but because you trusted my reasoning at least as far as that it would prevent major harm to me or others. I don’t know whether the towers reminded you of the unreliability of that conclusion, or whether you were concerned for all of us, and that included me merely incidentally. Or maybe you just needed the support of a family for once.*

*I do not remember much of the final cut of your feature, I mainly recall the before and after. After it aired, after you had let two weeks pass for a review to be published, you complained about the ignorance of critics, the futility of trying to appeal to viewers that got their two hours of sleep in front of your feature before insomnia kicked in around one-thirty in the morning, as you always did when a work of yours didn’t receive the attention you believed it merited. I’m sure you did that in my best interest, complaining, to have me understand that everybody had their share of petty nuisances. However, couldn’t you have shown an interest in my troubles beyond that particular issue that I had with my history teacher, who kept teasing me for not knowing the facts that I was supposed to know, seeing that my mother was “fishing in these waters”, which flattered you because an ordinary teacher had heard of your body of work? I guess it is true that our concerns were somehow akin, and both the distraction of the bundesrepublican feuilletons as well as my petty pre-teen worries, that I still shared with you back then, seem insignificant looking back. But it just goes to show how inherently twisted your understanding of supply and demand was, that you were thinking I rather needed yet another example of a troubled person grappling with life more than a silent, compassionate listener.*

*It has been difficult for me to reconstruct the months of your late pregnancy. In part because the pictures you took became more and more nondescript. There are fifteen shots of lights being refracted in the oil stain in front of the kitchen window that continually renewed itself, fed by an unknown source. I could give a fair account of the weather during those months but have to guess as far as your state is concerned, although the series itself testifies to that, too. Nothing, according to the few times we talked about this period, happened, which was true at a calendar’s level of intimacy. Another reason why I still hold Lule dearly as my favorite temp dad is because he helped to shed some light on this stretch of sleepy days and sleepless nights. Everyone would open up to Lule eventually, whether because you trusted him or because you couldn’t stand the unexpecting silence that often set in with him. He was deceleration incarnate, and you applied your regularly recurring relationships with him like a medicine when your running pulse would be in danger of spinning out of control. Unfailing supplies of family money and prescription drugs treating his post-traumatic stress disorder he acquired as a teenage paramedic assured a calmness so profound that even Lule himself would become bored when he thought of himself, so instead he had hours on end to generously dedicate to the petty problems of the Carolingian dynasties he studied, the local artists he counseled on tax issues, and anybody who had the time to sit or stroll with him. Like a sponge he absorbed sorrows and stories, and only rarely would he inadvertently spill a detail that had been confided to him by somebody else previously. Only this spill revealed to me that you had met Paul again once you had returned to Germany. You had been stoking your anger for weeks so you would last while you would wait for him to get back to his desk from one of his work-hard-play-hard appointments. But then he was there at his desk, unexpectedly, and similarly unexpected, he countered your anger with saved up reproaches of his own. He had been busy indeed. He had tried calling in favors, but the limited pay his contacts had offered offended both your talent and Paul himself as the mentor he believed to be to you. You were a girl from a dissipating peripheral country. It had been mere months since you quit a school that ran on anti-imperialist syllabi and left you with barely a grasp of the English language. The untainted perspective that Paul had tried to sell had been deemed dangerously uninformed and naive. Nobody had offered anything more than sympathetic pastime-assignments. No doubt that you would have taken them on, would have enjoyed them. The challenge of overcoming underestimating editors alone would have spurred you more than ample paychecks could have done. Paul, however, had considered the offers an offense not least to him. And the more time had passed, the more Paul’s image of you as an organic body with a voice and a growing midsection had been supplanted by a digital representation of you, a number that he believed to be your market value and that no offer would meet. Besides his own pride, he had had an ulterior motive in asking a certain price for your labor. As you already knew, William had been anything but delighted to host you, and making your own rent in the city would require you to have an adequate income. This was where the balance shifted. Suddenly you were the one in need of explaining. How you had never made an effort to practice your English. How you barely helped out around the house. Why you secluded yourself inside instead of trying to get a job on your own. You had jeopardized Paul and William’s relationship with every day you had been overstaying your visit. Hard work it had been for Paul to convince his boyfriend to wait until your money would run out, while at the same time keeping him from asking money for the rent. Partly lazy to actually deal with a difficult situation, partly wanting to look out for you, to spare you the embarrassment of being asked to leave, wanting you to make your own decisions and experiences, he had stopped calling editors on your behalf and had concentrated on calling William at work to appease him. Sleazy Paul, the dandyish editor with a probable drug problem, had taken the liberty to be a father to you: protective, patronizing, and full of bad decisions. The anger kept down the tears until you were on the train back east. Where was I? In a stroller you had brought along to have me listen to your voice getting shriller as a preview of the discussions between you and my temp dads in the years to come? Or had I already been handed off to the respective momentary father, put to bed in a place that most resembled a cot in his apartment? Sleeping in a folding box, on a blanket among choking-hazard styrofoam peanuts left over from yesterday’s stereo delivery? Was I with Oma and Opa, or had the discord truly been so severe that you had hidden in the baby care room by the luggage carousels until they had finally left Tegel’s welcome bay? If I had been there with you, I could have laughed, I could have cried and screamed. I would have caught your attention, I would have seized you with my marzipan hands to never let go of you again, and you would have forgotten your tears and sighed, and taken the diaper bag to the restroom with a smile. But the seat next to you was empty and the legroom, too. That’s how I stayed the consolation prize.*

*William spent most of the early summer hours outside, practicing in parks, hanging around in front of galleries that extended their culinary attendance upon their exclusive guests to the sidewalk. Paul continued to excuse himself, and lately he had left it to his staff to excuse him, there was an abundance of news to be covered, and with the union on the horizon the silly season had been called off. Some years removed, it must have indeed felt like nothing had been happening in the last weeks before my birth, compared to what was happening in your home country. Your former peers would remember their daily routines of those days in astonishing detail, as subtle customizations of the societal memories eternalized in headlines and slogans, that only reached you garbled, and with several days delay, if they reached you at all. The day the D-Mark came to Eastern Germany was the day before the day before you passed an international newsstand on a walk around the block that you had forced yourself on. Or perhaps it was the day before that, you weren’t sure whether it was still Tuesday.*

*As far as I can remember, any instant of idleness has always been unbearable for you. However, you must have developed this aversion only after my birth, because, if not, how could you have survived several weeks of idleness? Even on your rare sick days you were agonizing more over the idle hours than any physical symptoms. Any passing of time to you meant advancing along the imagined bell curve that expressed your rapidly decreasing chances of achieving some vaguely delineated state of being recognized as an artist. Introspection was a valuable resource in achieving your aspirations, but only in relation to external factors and events. The own body, one’s own identity hadn’t become a hot topic, yet. Therefore the egocentric cosmos of your lonely weeks in Brooklyn, when your thoughts were only turning inward to the forming center of gravity and meaning, remained unaffected by your self-reflective archival work. There was a twofold reluctance to tell me about that time. To you it was significant at most in that it accounted for the final fifteen percent of cell growth that would eventually yield me. And once you would sincerely try to recall your thoughts from those weeks, reality would be pitted against your hopes and plans you had made in your brownstone hermitage.*

*Thankfully, you rarely forced your compulsive restlessness on me, so that I could take my own time to ponder on the few facts that you had shared about the final weeks of my embryonic stage. Maybe those were the last weeks of calm and rest for the both of us. In a city of predictable dangers, in an apartment of a favorable landlord you lived off a fridge that William filled with whatever he saw fit and whatever he would tolerate to share with you, and I lived off that, too. We were a Russian doll of a citizen of a vanishing nation and an unborn stateless, that would grab hold of any soli or sanguinis as soon as he would see the light of day, because who knows when one or the other would come in handy.*

*It came in handy when I needed to leave. Leave quickly, like you did. Like you, I too spend a couple of weeks in isolation, solitary confinement with considerable comforts and conveniences. The company paid for my probation lodging and I lived on the block of a futuristic supermarket that supported my fridge model. The fridge and the store were in a constant dialogue that me and the delivery person weren’t having. I rewarded the silence with generous tips because I had enough to deal with in those introspective times. Emotional pain surprised me with an iron fist to the midriff and when I managed a trip to IKEA, I chose the furniture that would cradle a curled-up posture best. My front was a sandwich board listing my wrongdoings and I needed to fold my remaining surface over it. If I were you, I could say that nothing happened, then. What did I think? I thought nothing. Innocent bystanders imagine this kind of guilt-ridden sadness as an ongoing argument of interior voices accusing each other in well-prepared summations. Truth is, the sadness was weighing much too heavy on my mind to stage this kind of play. Like a flood, like tar the sadness isolated every area of my brain, allowing only a few bare electric pulses to pass through to keep emergency operations running. My perception felt reduced to a feeble lighthouse searching with its needle-head spot in the dark. I found a beanbag, a round table fell in my path, convenience food on crestfallen-eye-level shelves, a central area of pixels lighting up in red-blue-green amalgamations. A single thread of consciousness, that’s what really means nothing: Having to stop dead in place to remember dates and errands, and then running out of capacity to care for them. You were unoccupied, melancholic maybe in the abandoned apartment, but your mind must have been in a bankholidian frenzy of questions and possibilities.*

*When we were pregnant with Sergej, I related to being a father mostly by imagining a relation to a yet fictional person, a person that modeled itself on other people I saw. I chose from four ethnicities and twelve different nose styles to assemble Sergej as a striker for Hansa Rostock. I assured myself that my son could turn out however he wanted but in my mind, too, I merely assembled my image of Sergej from only more of the same templates. When we were pregnant with Sergej I was still running around nights to flick pebbles at the car shuttle train so that their alarms would play a blaring quodlibet as they cut through the city, and up to a certain point of our pregnancy, Fee was joining, too. Still I think she was wiser in that she didn’t anticipate the moment of our son’s birth as the sort of award ceremony that I was imagining, where we would be given the assembly kit we would fashion into something that would come close to the product image. She took it a day at a time, while I counted every baby-burp, every fit of weeping against some imaginary goal. I was making fun of the dads rampaging on the sidelines because they had failed to make their little leaguers live up to their standards but even though I didn’t have a particular profession or end-of-season stat in mind for Sergej, I wasn’t so different from the booming blimp waiting to show junior the ropes of his used-car business. You, on the other hand, seemed to have left all plans and dreams you might have had for me back in the guestroom of William’s apartment. I can excuse this fact with the geopolitical inflection of my conception. Besides, yours wasn’t the generation prone to believe in rigid planning. And even in the moments of frustration, when I mistook your lack of ideas you had for me as disinterest, I still appreciated the absence of any prohibiting parental path-prescribing. You were never short on prejudices, sarcastic remarks when I would come up with a new passion, interest, or life-goal, but you would always reconsider. Late at night, when you prepared my bags for the next day, a mutually hushed-up love service you continued through to my graduation, you would rummage around underneath your premature judgments for a token of appreciation that I would find when I went through my backpack the next day. Your courtesy gifts were always slightly awkward, maybe because it needed to be something you could pick up at the discount supermarket when you would do the daily shopping in a hurry. Bananas meant good luck for the finals, nuts that you believed in my preparations for the physics exam, a USB-powered novelty fan that I had earned my fun.*

*William had helped himself to the old air conditioner of the cafe he worked at, subsidizing his artistic practice. He had looked like an octopus as he carried in the dirty hunk of plastic with its tubes flapping around. You hadn’t managed to slip into your room as you usually did when you heard him fumbling for the keys on the landing. Now he was blocking the corridor with the clunky appliance, and you were too bulky yourself to squeeze past. Exhilarated by his booty, he plugged it in to test it, but instead of a cool breeze, the device only managed to produce thick smoke that rose like thunder clouds to the ceiling. Hectically, he cut the coughing A/C’s life support, and when he removed the appliance’s back panel and only identified what seemed to be the remains of a sandwich among the soot and dust between the nondescript cables and tubes, the last traces of his cheerfulness vanished, too. That was when he gave up on his haul and as of then, the gray box vegetated under the soot stain on the wall, sprawling out its arms across the hall. Intent on making the schlep with the A/C worth his while before temperatures would drop down to tolerable again, William had found a repairman in the neighborhood, Michael, a Pole, who was actually trained as an aircraft mechanic, but for the lack of customers who abided a van bearing CPUSA decals next to their private jets, he had proceeded to plunge his hands in the greasy guts of washing machines, dishwashers, and air conditioners. The heat had been wearing you out to the point that you had taken a stab at fixing the damn thing yourself, but William and Paul’s household was so miserably equipped that you could only remove a handful of screws with the tip of a butter knife before you, too, got stuck. I’ve seen you with faltering household items, it was a matter of principle that you would at least try to fix them, and many times you proved yourself quite talented in figuring out some basic mending, even if it only dragged out the appliances ailment and after another six months I would come back to you bent over the machine’s exposed intestines again. In the case of William’s air conditioner though, you could only give it a final ablution, while continuing to alternate between bearing the heat and bearing the draft of cooler air from the street that gave you nausea with its stench of diesel and frying fats past their expiry date. William had not notified you of the fact that Michael would come by to try his luck on your moribund hallmate. That day, you had woken up with a hurt like period pain, but less pursy than you had felt in the weeks before. Your belly denied you complete obliviousness of my birth getting closer, however you probably weren’t keeping track of the exact due date and waited instead for gushing waterfalls or knee-bending stabs in the underbelly. It’s not like I would interrupt anything, anyway.*

*I didn’t want you in the labor ward, but Fee did. Under the pretense of researching a stalling project you had gained my toleration and a regional ministry’s funding for moving into our town for the final months of Fee’s pregnancy and the first six of your grandchild’s life. Friends, who had been compassionate at first when I told them about my mother’s move, began rolling their eyes at me because I kept complaining, even though you rarely came to visit, never unannounced, and generally minded your own business, not like their own intrusive helicopter parents. However, they missed the point I was making. That you were undermining my role as a father already before I became one. You and Fee took up your weekly conspirative coffee dates and some weeks you would meet even more frequently. Fee was provocatively unsecretive about your get-togethers, which further angered me, because you made it so easy to see through your efforts. Of course you couldn’t deny yourself the self-flattering talk of your work’s progress, steadily painting the picture of the single mother juggling parental responsibility and individual fulfillment. Every time you had met, Fee came back with another story from my childhood that I had never told her about, as she remarked reproachfully. Stories I had withheld, because I wanted to protect you from her judgment, and that you now volunteered with a euphemistic twist or garnished with a winning pinch of self-criticism. It felt like the final weeks before an election, when politicians reminisce about their successes in the past only to suavely withhold that the success was actually another party’s merit, or not a success at all. Fee would come back with details of my birth and your pregnancy that I had never heard about from you, as I would let her know reproachfully. It’s hard to say what annoyed me more: That you thought that one botched maternity had made you the expert of motherhood, or that you valued the point you were desperately trying to make, that a child didn’t necessarily need a father, more than delighting in my paternal pleasures. Did you not believe my joy? Was your imagination running wild, projecting your difference-feminist premonitions onto me. Me running off on the eve of Sergej’s birth, blowing off steam, leaving for drinks and strip shows with the other fathers in the family waiting room. I know the images you had in mind, the tales. You had allocated some of your precious time to talk about them, to set me straight, I suppose, when we were reading Updike in my last year of school. You should have worried about Fee instead, not about me. She was the one, who was considering an abortion when I was as sure as I had never been in my life about anything, that I wanted to have that child. She kept ruining moments by putting the pregnancy into question and dismissing congratulations pointing to the probability of miscarrying during the first x months. However, I remained the sole subject of your doubt, and you continued to pretend that the birth would be something between you women.*

*Does a child need a father? Does a child need a mother? Mother’s milk may be a nutricional miracle, but the popular studies that I encountered throughout my research in the prenatal time of anxiousness and anticipation, studies stressing the vital contribution that n soldierly disciplined breastfeeding months would make to the development of a healthy baby, always had an aftertaste of patriarchal wishfulness to me. I’ve seen many babies being raised on formula - how we craved the sight of a tit when we hung around by the playground across from the bench where the block’s young mothers would meet - and as far as I can tell, they turned out fine, solid average, what you’d expect. Not once I saw a father that would join the group by the bench. Lingering, largely mute and immobile apart from occasional orders yelled across the playground’s dirty dunes, the group persisted like a jellyfish, constantly renewing and exchanging it cells, a new mother, another had moved, another’s children had transgressed the indistinct line between childhood and youth. With a playground and a similar bench at the center of every courtyard, it was only natural for the mothers of the neighborhood to gravitate towards these meeting points. Even you couldn’t resist completely. For single fathers, no similar template existed, and I doubt they exist now or elsewhere. The single father, a man with a baby in his arms, is still such an exotic constellation, that it becomes an example, an allegory almost, a yet to be finished myth that foresees momentous episodes for a child born from these circumstances, as if it would inevitably come back from an effectively feral upbringing by building and/or tyrannizing a city. Being this involuntary paradigm, the single father always stands out, exposed, vulnerable, but always heard, even if only on the playground, where his voice level booms undisturbed by the altos and sopranos from his female peers. His singleness makes for an easy target whenever his child’s behavior needs explaining, but then again what family doesn’t have their share of stigmata? Besides, with no model for the single father’s behavior, public disapproval only affects the single father when actual damage has been done, whereas parents in more customarily assembled families have to defend their anomalous behavior already before its potentially devastating effects have manifested. I would argue that if you would have been a father, the fact that you were pursuing your career, that you raised me to be independent and often alone would have caused less bewilderment. Bewilderment that caused me to question and distrust the independence that you had only just conveyed to me. Having had a father would have solved my distress at explaining the absence of a legal guardian to strangers at the door or the telephone, but with another parent in the house, I doubt I would have had the self-confidence that you inspired me with by letting me manage our place on my own at a young age. Even though I can think of many aspects I would have enjoyed in a father, I suppose that adding a father ex machina to my childhood would have turned out a zero sum game.*

*Sergej came like a Sunday visit. He had announced his birth the day before, with a wave of cramps that had put us on alert and had tired Fee enough to get a good night’s rest before she went into labor after lunch the next day. I had packed a bag of paraphernalia and some snacks to get me through the day as I had learned in our prenatal classes. The retired librarian at the reception had chosen Reich as a musical backdrop for the lobby, to give the industriousness on the corridors a steady pulse to cling to, and even Fee’s contractions seemed to stick to the meter. I hoped you’d be late but it must have been the first appointment you’ve arrived to before me. The head nurse seated us on one side of the surfboard-shaped delivery bed, crammed, so we would push and block each other’s sight like children in front of the television. Whoever chose the garish wallpaper deserved the image of her craft turning into something fat ladies did on reality TV. However, even with the red wall tickling our emotionality, we passed over the prompts that would have usually set us off into an upwards spiral of raising voices. When blood squirts on the floor and screams penetrate entire wings of the building, that’s when you become intrepid, selfless, and understanding. We were holding each other’s hand because each of us thought the other would need it. I saved my irritation at you asking Fee to breathe “as you had discussed” for after the birth. I tolerated that you stood up when the hospital staff came to talk to us, as if you were the family’s gatekeeper. Tied-up pieces of cloth swung like wrecking balls from various points in the ceiling in the airstream of rushing personnel. We took turns massaging Fee, your esoteric, violent but effective holds and my repetitive repertoire from our prenatal classes, until our moves became more aggravating to her than the labor pains. And then, Sergej was born. So much smaller than he had seemed in petite Fee’s absurdly large belly. So much smaller than he had seemed going through her pelvis. A homunculus of tiny features with the outsized hands of his mother on him. Newborn Serge smelt like a fragrance they would use to cover up the smell of blood, natural but somehow related to perfumery, I remember I imagined it to be the scent of whales, perhaps for the water in my eyes and the overall feeling of being part of a universal whole as rendered in those new-agey airbrush scenes of marine life at sunrise. It was this state of rapture that left me standing idly by when you reached out first for the newborn, casting a tender, questioning look at Fee only, who was too exhausted to protest. It didn’t take a minute of Sergej’s life on earth for you to cut me out of the picture. Sergej had been polished bright by the hospital staff but I could have sworn I saw blood on your hands when you cradled Serge back between his mother’s breasts.*

*Michael inspected the insides of the broken air conditioner spread over the kitchen table and you had joined him in a burst of sociability, which would have been unlike you under normal circumstances, but part hormone rush, part loneliness, part gratitude to speak Russian, a language that suddenly felt so effortless to wield, had made you want to play host for the lanky easterner. You must have never had the time to get acquainted with your uterus, a terse lodger, like you were to William. You had been walking up into your late thirties, waddling like a penguin, blessed with ignorance of pregnancy complications and miscarriages. Underneath the memorized schematic drawings and medical terminology from biology class, the womb still felt like an old oven to you. Ingredients went in and something would come out once the time was ripe. You’d poke a pick into the center to see if all was fine. Dascha two doors down from your parents had been born with Down’s syndrome, her mother had done something when she had been carrying her. Or hadn’t done something, it didn’t become clear before the conversation had been shushed for the children’s sake. Life was to be lived breathing through uterine dealings. You breathed through them on the day Michael came for the air conditioner, and elbow deep in dust and refrigeration mechanics, he didn’t ask when you stopped in mid-sentence to let another wave roll past. But the unexpected sound of a language closer to home than he had heard in a long time had made him vigilant, and when your incessant chatter was idling behind clenched teeth for the third time since he had gotten down to work, he understood immediately, and didn’t even ask but pulled you down to his van and drove you straight to Mt. Sinai. Michael had seen two children being born, home births, both of them. He probably would have missed the second if any of his acquaintances had been at the bar he fled to in the birth’s seventh hour for a little respite. Another delivery wasn’t what he had in mind for the rest of the day, but you wouldn’t let another father get away, even if he was merely a temporary one. And so the first temp dad of my life entered the labor ward as family. Family that in the twenty years since he last witnessed childbirth had been charged increasingly with its own set of tasks to mind during delivery. Birth as Michael got to know it had often resembled a sunday buffet, with aunts, uncles, cousins, and the more remote kin strolling in and out of the narrowing focus of the mother. If there had been professional maneuvers to execute, only the midwives knew about it. The hefty nurse at Mt. Sinai took him out to the corridor for a terse dressing-down when he had abandoned the head of the birth bed to catch a breath at the window. And because the nurse wasn’t a shoe-shined private jet owner but a hypertensive matron in orthopedic loafers, and because the labor of the unknown woman had confounded him more than enough, he didn’t even consider contesting his deployment to the far end of the bed. Michael left you his hand to clench, didn’t flinch when you scratched through the callus, and kept repeating the few reassuring sentences in German he’d picked up through the decades. And when you had given textbook birth, as the nurses assured, once I had exhausted myself crying fresh air for the first time, Michael wondered how a love so strong could ever be overruled by other feelings, how it was possible that it hadn’t burst out like some sort of rapturous trauma every time he’d had wished ill on his children in a fight, if even for this newborn perfect stranger he had more love than he had thought to be capable of giving.*

*I spent my first seventy-two hours on earth in a hospital room with the park-facing view only executives’ corner offices and old money maisonettes could compete with. November weighed heavily on the locals’ libido and August was low season for the maternity ward. After the Puerto Rican couple that had substituted words with caring touches and spicy snacks in communicating with you had left, only you and I had remained under the cooling breath of the eager air conditioner. Michael had promised to come visit when he had hugged you goodbye shortly after I had seen the light of day, but then had never materialized. Perhaps he was too embarrassed to sneak through the maternity ward in search of a familiar face that would match the unknown family names of the patients on the door. Or maybe his initial enchantment had indeed worn off so quickly that he could plunge his head into the wombs of washer-dryers without even thinking of me. However, it wasn’t Michael’s absence that bothered you. Whereas the prenatal uneventfulness had put you into a state of narcotic amor fati, uneventfulness with a view now made your head spin with doubts and worries, as if you were a clichéd, cabin-febrile executive’s wife. Although you spent even less of your nest egg while you were hospitalized, at least that was what you thought back then, your savings wouldn’t last much longer, unless William would unexpectedly foot the bills for another tenant’s board, not to mention baby clothes, furniture, and other birth-related acquisitions. On him depended all, a lot at least, how he would react to a baby’s crying interrupting his beauty sleep. You mentally ranked your benefactors by their instability with William topping the list, because besides generosity and noise tolerance it would need his unshaken devotion to Paul, who hadn’t shown his face for more than three months and had rarely called his partner when you overheard it, to have him continue hosting you. Which put Paul second, who was by now only obliged by guilt, not affection, to put up William’s indignation in your interest, to believe anything else would have been absurd. Concerning Paul, a change of mind to side with William, or simply another slip of his insatiable desire for attention that would cause his partner to punish Paul in one or the other way would suffice to pull the rug from under you. You didn’t even consider Bunim or Michael in your list, and that put your own self at number three, because with my birth, your own abilities, that prior you had only questioned during arbitrary fits of teenage insecurity, had become a subject of serious doubt. Not only had the last three months substantially shaken your trust in being able to sustain yourself economically, but also did your complete lack of experience in caring for, even simply handling a child frighten you. You tried to recall the working steps of changing diapers from the single time you had done it until your despair of putting the different maneuvers you remembered in a reasonable order had you hyperventilating, so that the ECG called for a nurse to check on you.*

*At that point, you were still eager to be a mother, despite the fear of not meeting the needs of your child. I wonder when that eagerness got lost. The diapers didn’t break you, and from what I see in the pictures, the pudgy me was fed well and carted around in decent second-hand strollers. What is the missing link between these photographs and my memories of scribbled post-its blown to the entrance by the draft of the window you had forgotten to close, tin-foil trays warming on the electric stove in the chilly kitchen? I keep remembering temp dads that I had long forgotten because there were so many of them. Ronald, the police officer you dated, who had unlearned to speak low, so that I could hear his responses when you talked to him at night on the phone or the fold-out couch as if he was in the room with me. Two, three weeks that fatherhood lasted, although when he caught me jaywalking a couple of months later, he still let it slide. Only because one of the more transient temp dads had roughed up the class bully after he’d given me a hard time, my substituting surrogate fathers did not become a target of more serious mockery. You subsequently gave that temp dad the boot, and although I do understand by now that getting into fights with thirteen-year-olds is a trait that does suffocate romance quite a bit, back then I felt betrayed that you didn’t see how he had stood up for me.*

*Not that other fathers and mothers I got to know seemed particularly keen on parenting. Some were absent like you, some so unloving that their filterless were the only tenderness that came across their lips. Dave’s parents were so inherently parental among their ten children that you wouldn’t even think of them individuals but rather as nuclei in a cloud of brats they steered with much yelling and the incessant bark of their first-born jack russell through the neighborhood. I wouldn’t have demanded nor appreciated the motherliness of brought-up cookie trays and shuttle services, as prominently displayed by one family that, as I later learned from insider sources, were notorious with local police for domestic violence. To understand what kind of parenthood I would have needed from you, let me illustrate the issue by example.*

*When there wasn’t a temp dad available, you usually left me with Robert’s family during principle photography. Half of the knowledge that I have unlearned to this day I gathered in the suburban shed of Robert’s parents, who, bonded by their mutual love for combustion engines in all shapes and sizes, welcomed me to their uncommonly intact family, but put me to work earning my board and lodging. Robert’s father Leonis had started his car trading business exporting West German cars to his home country of Albania. The increasingly difficult markets and export routes of the Balkan throughout the nineties would have brought Leonis’ venture to ruin, had not his wife one day taken his whining challenge seriously, cold-calling car dealerships in sixteen federal states and two cantons until for the first time in years the crocuses broke through the bald-driven soil of the yard that now stood empty. From despairing over the downturn of his business Leonis segued into a deep crisis of emasculation, and while Stefanie ran their business, he found solace in the budding growth of the commercial internet, first gradually in teasingly slow-loading pornography, then in a flashing idea when he discovered the four primary-colored letters of e-commerce. For the first time in weeks, he faced the sun outside of the darkened basement he had inhabited and informed his family in his very own eureka moment, vested but with a sufficiently phallic coke bottle in hand, of the freshly decided future of their family enterprise. They traded primarily in third, fourth, fifth-hand cars just about fixable to become P-plated sets of wheels for children of reckless parents. Stefanie and Leonis didn’t need to sugarcoat their work to lure me and Robert into playful yet efficient child labor, the dirt and tough metal alone were fascinating, and once assembled, they would add up to something that could be driven around the yard, maybe up and down the road if there hadn’t been recent trouble with the local police. My delicate fingers proved perfect for dismantling, cleaning, and lubricating the entrails Leonis heaved on the lower one of the two workbenches. Robert had a similar manual disposition but got bored too soon to reliably reassemble the heavy puzzle, and if there weren’t any brute force tasks like knocking loose rusted-in joints, he dedicated himself with almost sensual caress to bodywork care. Nissan’s Micra was my favorite, the K11, of which there was always at least one around, not to mention the facelifted ninety-seven edition. It appeared tiny from the outside but was spacious enough to host both me and Robert as we discovered one summer night. The Micras meant well for us. When we took one for a joyride while Stefanie and Robert picked up another bargain, we got it to ski a sedan’s length, the suspension yelped as the right thudded back down, but it didn’t tell on us. Later, Robert took a 2000 K11C as his first car.*

*One time, Leonis called you, cordially inviting me to join the family to witness the delivery of a car Leonis had dug up from a mislabeled online ad and purchased under the sustained effort to suppress his and his wife’s excitement to keep down the price. Leonis usually picked up stranded cars with the tow car, itself another bargain found online, but it had become so unreliable recently that he didn’t want to take the sizeable chance of a breakdown with the precious load in the back. We sat on plastic lawn chairs in the sun with the Bundesliga conference playing on the C-battery radio as we waited for the delivery to arrive. The soccer broadcast was our Sunday service, but when the car arrived, nobody pay attention to Hansa’s running counter anymore. Robert and I had been allowed to rearrange the cars in the yard so that the new arrival would take the theft-proof center, and now that it had been unloaded, it seemed like the other cars were crowding around it in awe with us. Stefanie had dug up a pop-up gazebo that we rigged up to shield the bride from eyes and weather. “Beautiful like Paris.” Leonis had never been to France. Stefanie was visibly rummaging around her memory for a French word and finally came up with “Manique”. Before laying hands on the car, the two insisted on a kick-off speech, explaining in great detail the Citroen’s hydropneumatic suspension to an audience that was scheduled to start physics classes next year. But their infectious excitement made up for our lack of understanding. When the sun set, Leonis fetched a set of party torches, and we opened the hood like a treasure chest, oil, grease, and metal was glistening in the shine of the fire. Stefanie lit the barbeque and we grilled toasties and kielbasy, awaiting the next day to get to work on the antique DS. When you came to pick me up you scented the occasion and stayed for a drink, which you never had before. Your small talk with Robert’s parents wasn’t awkward, but knowing you I picked up some tension in your voice. Every time you picked me up, you dressed for the occasion, and I would have bet that on the way over, you were rehearsing the conversations you were about to have while waiting for me to get ready. When I volunteered some news about Leonis’ and Stefanie’s business you admired their industriousness and street wisdom. In conversation your eyes couldn’t help flickering between Stefanie’s face and the dead serious fraktur type on her shirt. Stefanie on her part had told me right out that she couldn’t get over the fact that your previous partner was a Slav. When I asked what a Slav was, she merely told me that we should honor our heritage, which confused me even more, because I thought heritage was a kind of debt that you needed to repay.*

*Stefanie didn’t approve of foreigners coming to her country. People were to be true to their homelands, otherwise all land would remain bare and uncared for, because people would roll on like organic clouds of locusts. Migration to Stefanie was only another symptom of capitalism destroying ties that had grown over generations and centuries in a matter of months. In her anti-globalist foundations she believed firmly, and she would stand her ground in any argument, immovable and unnerving to her opponents. Much feebler was the incorporation of her reasonably consistent anti-capitalism into the folkloristic chauvinism of the scene she was running with. She fit the ruffian, tough-love interactions, I could see her enjoying the dirty, sadistic jokes, the drunk chanting, even a roaring Deutschland über alles if in demand. However, when I asked her outright how your slavic ex-boyfriend was any different from her being with Leonis, her explanation came out unexpectedly piqued compared to her usual calm she displayed when her disdain for the new arrivals had been challenged. There was a certain beauty in the strained explanation she came up with, and I hadn’t known about the uniqueness of the Albanian language in the Indo-European family, which according to Stefanie testified to a people honoring and defending their traditions. Perhaps you would have learned something, too, if you could have looked beyond the catch-cries on Stefanie’s garments.*

*She looked down on you as much as you were disapproving of her, and with every time you picked me up from their bungalow where the different grays of city and country met, you made less of a secret of your mutual disdain. It’s hard to tell if you merely despised her politics or if you sensed that she and Leonis were giving me more than baked feta blocks with salty salad and air mattress bedding that Robert was made to sleep on every other night. They gave me much more than that indeed. I was on the threshold to puberty when you were enjoying a particularly busy and particularly celibate time of your life. By putting me to work, by awarding this work with collegial talk, by trusting my unsupervised dental care they were mitigating the fears of growing up, that other agemates around me were struggling with. I was confident because I did not depend on love outweighing other urges and desires but participated in an exchange of quantifiables that seemed to be at the root of adult behavior. At a time when my pubescent self esteem was particularly prone to be infected by your peaking insecurities, Leonis and Stefanie set an example of a self-affirming bedrock solidity that denied any uncertainty by way of ignorance, repetition, and easy recreation. I would have earned nothing but conceited amusement had I suggested that you and I could become involved with one of the local clubs like Robert’s family was. The social democrats, that studiously withdrew from local festivities just before the first verse of the Deutschlandlied was stricken up, or the worker’s sports club, that administered various teams of different sports that would share in the one supreme discipline of drinking after hours, contributed to a local culture that you refused to call so and I increasingly discovered as a means of teenage rebellion. Initially I had adopted your contempt for these functions. But everytime you came back from one of your own gatherings in the city or the capital, where you iterated over the same topics, the same stories with only names changing, again and again, where you drank only slightly superior beverages than those that were served at the club house, every return only made you more miserable, more frustrated, because you refused to relinquish your belief that your kind of gatherings were only the prelude to something bigger, not the consolation prize. At the club house, true to its socialist history, everyone was a winner. Being there was simultaneously a duty as it was a reward. The moderate fun it offered was valorized by the fact that I rarely had any high expectations going there that could have been disappointed, and the rare outliers of a kiss or a bloody nose to be taken away from it made the club house sufficiently exciting for not seeming boring. From your Berlin circles you took away the reassurance of belonging to some sort of elite. Although that elite was marked by a distinct auto-aggression, an elite constantly at war with its own conceitedness, which, I guess, was part of the game and the fun of belonging to it. If the contemplations on your self-important perspective would have been more serious, you would have made more of an effort to understand why I kept going to spend my time at the sticky pine tables of the club house. I could have explained to you the obvious satisfaction arising from greasy food and shared emotions. Emotions so easily divorced from the admittedly often witless subject matters that gave rise to them. Today I would claim that it would have been your duty to mingle with these locals, whose invitations you would always turn down at the parent-teacher meetings where you couldn’t evade them. One night at the groundskeeper’s fiftieth would have had more of a societal impact than another pre-dawn screening of your award-winning documentaries. But you never went. You listened with raised eyebrows to the stories of names without faces while I still shared them at home. You sang along with the Phil Collins single I had won in the Christmas raffle but you refused me the tenner I needed to buy a present for next year’s edition. Leonis gave Santa, a woolen beard hiding everything but his nose, aglow with the mixture of hard liquor running underneath its surface.*

*You had just returned from two weeks of shooting in Belgrade and the DS was still in repair when we had a fight. I don’t remember the cause, sometimes it didn’t need an obvious trigger to set you off, to set us off. I imagine the full program, you hissing and yelling in frequencies that were likely to be absorbed by the thin walls, me responding always louder, literally pushing you to the verge of domestic violence, so that you were forced to direct your physical urge in another motion, usually taking violent walks before a second round of low volume screaming would ensue. That time I, too, left after you had made your exit. I took a blanket and ducked into the Citroen in the yard I crawled into under a well-known bend in the iron link fence. The inside of one of the cars always felt warm, even when the temperatures dropped into single digits, warm like stray dogs huddling around the shabby house of Robert’s family that shared its head freely through the holes rodents had eaten into its glass wool insulation. They often smelled of dog, too, as dog-stink was a welcome reason for Leonis to drive down the price on acquisition. Cars reeking of wet fur would then be subjected to a week-long fumigation using cartons of Gauloise non-filters, as it had turned out over the years that Stefanie’s most solvent target group smoked hard enough to perceive the world through a retro-colored filter of nicotine residue, that, if it had not yet completely obliterated all olfactoric sensitivity, only invoked the feeling of home sensing the lingering ground fog of tobacco smoke in the footwells. I thought I would ring and ask for a night’s refuge but when I saw the red of the living room’s lava lamp compete with the quick, cold TV reflections, a pang of jealousy hit me, that forbade to admit our dysfunctioning, forbade to have them wonder if I had been crying or smoking pot, which wouldn’t touch for another four years even if supply ran high that season. The comfort of the caramel-colored rear bench raised the question why I even bothered with my home, the sheltered thrill of camping in the yard made me forget already then the reason for our quarrel. The tinted windows left me dozing in an everlasting sunrise until an opening door rudely awoke me.*

*Telling whether Stefanie was seriously angry was never easy, and now, too, she kept chuckling while she pulled me up roughly from the seat and steered me towards the front gate. Dizzy and half asleep I asked if I was too late for breakfast, and when she only laughed out crossly, I thanked her and asserted that I would see myself home. She wouldn’t hear of that. Instead, she put me in her mint metallic RAV4 and drove me over in a silence only interrupted by her muttering to herself how impossible my behavior had been, as if she needed to reassure herself of the fact. I didn’t understand what she made a fuss about, and I was still too tired to care. Only when she parked the car and got out with me did I become uneasy. I had never run away before and it didn’t seem like a big deal when I did it. You had expected me to get by alone with only omnipresent post-its listing emergency numbers and procedures as age-appropriate stabilizers. That I would decide to spend a night out, too, seemed only consequential. But in Stefanie’s indignation I sensed that maybe I had misgauged the matter, and that premonition made me want to involve her in a scene with you even less. It was too early and too much to process to stop her from ringing. The door opened and two arms flew out and around me. With a mixture of worry and reproach you asked me where I had been. Still delayed by my mental gears grinding sleep sand, I didn’t manage to preempt Stefanie’s answer. Only then did you fully realize her presence, and without a further word you moved me over the threshold and closed the door in her face. I was expecting a halfhearted scolding, you needed a rueful conciliation, and both of us were interrupted by the doorbell ringing over repeated knocking. Before you went to open the door you sent me to my room as if you were honestly expecting your voices to stay calm enough not to penetrate the apartment walls. I had no trouble overhearing your conversation. For someone, who fancied herself a pundit of sociocritical commentary, your arguments were surprisingly plain, your insults dull and unimaginative. You fought like you would fight with me, plus a number of words that I hadn’t expected to belong to your vocabulary. Stefanie, too, didn’t hold back on the insults, but none of the words she said had I not heard from her mouth already before. Maybe it was the consistency that had me slowly side with her as I listened to you argumenting, even though it was you that had hugged me and her who had dragged me to your door. Her consistency made her annoyance appear justified, the normal behavior that I should have expected and could expect every time again if I should show up unaccounted for in a car one morning. Her consistency suggested that she was right when she called you uncaring and a harlot. You laughed like crazy at her offense, but with me, it stuck, married to the memory of your hysterical laughter. You were less than consistent. Unreliable, uncontrollable, down, up, kick, left, right, punch, muscle memory played the knockoff controller I got myself as a consolation for not being allowed a whole console. Through the wall came the demolition sounds of you deconstructing the scaffolding that should have shaped me into a mindful weltbürger. How skilful you swung the sledgehammer of hypocrisy. How well-stocked was your arsenal of prejudices against people dealing cars, people lacking educational achievements, people keeping a shelf of the kitchen free for the portable TV set. The discovery of an unknown side of a parent is always a shock, but the animal sounds of you humping some temp dad, or the mannered excitement that you displayed when you bumped into a fellow artist, or the sulky curtness you adopted with Oma and Opa were nothing compared to the frenzy behind the wall. Had I not understood the words, your shrill voice climbing to yet another unheard register would have sufficed to terrorize me. And indeed, it could have remained the only thing to horrify me if you had only enlightened me about failure, that there was the possibility in wanting something, in believing in something and still failing to strive for it, to adhere to it. But you hadn’t taught me about failure, because you didn’t allow yourself to be seen failing either. That’s how every classist slur I overheard in my room, every backstabbing charge of having corrupted me while I had stayed with them only struck me as a revelation of the phony little snob underneath the surface of superficial teachings on tolerance and understanding. I wanted to down-up-punch past the end boss at the door and go back to the car with Stefanie. I needed to get away from your paddle-ball game of protracted hugs and slamming doors. I wanted to join that family of hers where the gravest inconsistency was my sleeping place. She smelled slightly strange, but the hugs she gave were always loose and cursory. When the jingling hangers on the slamming front door had completed your argument with a final chord you yelled from the kitchen that I would never spend another night at that place. The family structure that would have worked for me, for us, I daresay, since the arrangement would never have replaced but merely complemented you, fell victim to your shortsighted vanity and jealousy. Even worse, your decision turned out to be the one thing in which you would be consistent.*

*The day I’m released into the world is the day the hammer comes down, chickens and roost. At the gates to life in full colors, another gatekeeper in drab clothes sits behind his ledger demanding a toll. Googly-eyed I watch your larynx jump. Your heartbeat massages my feet. Watch out not to hit my head as you bend over the counter. Thousands could be hundreds could be all or nothing, to me it makes no difference, I think. The figure they ask for your treatment could mean emergency shelter, could mean ivy league college. Even if the GDP came embossed in my capita, I couldn’t make anything of the number on the bill he hands you. You’re mine, but after all, what do I know about you? I can’t lift my head to see if the drops on my head come from drizzle leftover from the summer storm or your eyes. Your damp chest reflects the neon light of the city gleaming, steaming with anonymous electricity and exhaust conducts, courtesy of Paul Schrader. Ejected by hyperreality. This life is too much Hollywood to not have an ending. Courtesy of my grandparents. I’m so close to you. I put my ear to your chest and you put your ear to the receiver and we listen to Oma laying out the plan that gets us home within a week, just in time for the reunification treaty. Your heart beats sadness and relief and mine beats along to it.*