Spring 2012

The Red Roofs of München

Maggie Maurer
The red roofs of München

That morning we became engaged. Naked, wound so tight around him that his face was my only landscape, I told him yes. *I will marry you*, I said. *My fate is yours. I will never leave you.* He drew back slightly and regarded me. False papers were coming, he promised, taking my chin in his hands. As he turned my face to profile I felt the corners of his eyes turn down. Still, we made love again before he left.

He stole out of my flat before dawn, of course. And on his way out, as always, he picked up the photograph near the door and studied it. It was his favorite, a lead-colored close-up of my Tante Miriam—her face pale in powder and lipstick, her heavy gaze tipped up and far, beyond the cameraman's velvet hood. She had been a dancer in Berlin and rather well known. One of the best people, the worst people: the artists, the firebrands—back in what we were forced to understand as the good old days: the hungriest years, when fifteen million Reichsmark wouldn't get you a bag of birdseed. Before everything began to vanish.

I listened to his footsteps until they disappeared, then made tea from yesterday's leaves. I returned to my article: "Disintegration of the Self." A biologist, Hermann viewed philosophy—and thus, my life's work—with a skepticism one normally reserves for the mystical. But I am as enthralled by empirics as he. And though from time to time I have found my own strength in the faith of the patriarchs, I find that most matters—my forced resignation from the university included—will be solved by the steady application of reason. Reason: it salves the sharp angles of the world. It reveals transcendence for what it is: a human experience.

I wrote in an even hand for one hour, then paused to look out the window. In spite of the cancer eating us all, in München that
morning the snow fell kind upon the city and sat fat as cotton caps upon her red rooftops. I remembered that I was to be married and I glowed deep within. Though we had nowhere to go and no way to live, I felt safe for one single, irrational moment. As though perhaps for once, for just one day out of a lifetime, I could stop striving and simply be still.

The day pinkened around me. When the light was broad I went to the sink, washed my kettle and cup, and set them on a tea towel to dry. Then knocking: one, two, three. Just so. And before I could step to, there they were. Enormous, irresistible, young. Hände hoch, they ordered. I stretched my arms up. Water rolled down the cheeks of the porcelain kettle and seeped like wet, gray clouds into the towel. Sonst jemand im Haus? They asked me over and over. I explained it to them again: schon weg. Brüder, Onkeln—everyone else was already gone.

All German men look alike: tall, fair, with icy eyes and cheekbones that even now make me want to sculpt them like so much clay: my nails tearing through their cheeks and ripping their flesh into thickened meat-strips between my fingers. From down the hall I heard the confused gabbling of my neighbor, Frau Silber. I heard her teenaged son snarl, likely aware that he spoke his last words. He made them count: Ihr seid doch Unmenschen. Ihr gemeine Nazi Ficker.

And then it was dark.

I awoke with my head in another woman’s lap. She was Silesian—her speech was not clear like German, but a heap of z’s and sh’s which she repeated over and over again. Others were packed around us, crowing and clawing like animals in a fire. Dachau is only a few kilometers away and so our journey ended as quickly as it began. People have published long records of memories of trips like this one, full of images, thoughts, smells, fears. I remember

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nothing but this woman's smothered refrain: *Firma nie przejdzie z ojca na syna*: Blood in the ink will run dry.

As soon as we disembarked, I knew. And still behind me, over and over: *Blood in the ink will run dry*. *Halt's Maul, füdin*, a man's voice growled, one second before a shot rang out and the Silesian fell to earth like a stone. No one gasped, no one screamed. All was air.

Her babbling had vexed them, that much was clear. But what I did to distinguish myself I still cannot guess. I felt the gun. Everything compressed into the thinnest slip of time: my clipped tenure at the university; my figure, not yet spoiled by children; all the conversations with God I meant to have one day, just not today. The barrel grunted at the base of my neck between the two tendons there. It felt heavy, foreign—Russian? I wondered, for it weighed heavy as their winters, their language, their lovers. My mind floated up, far and away until I found myself again, face down in the frozen mud. I reached up to the back of my head. I found the hole. It fit my two fingers easily. I felt it only with my hand, though—not with my head or my heart. I stirred my fingers around in it, horrified by its girth, its depth. I felt neither sting nor burn. Nothing.

Two men lifted me off the ground without turning me over and put me into a pile with the Silesian and some others. I looked my fellow traveler in the eye but she was made of glass now and did not respond even to my loudest shouts, the stupid cow. The men went away, never offering a clue as to why, why, why they wasted their bullets on us.

Evening fell. Things slowed and settled, lights glowed yellow at the tops of the wire-wrapped poles. Just beyond stood the Alps, their peaks scraping the crystal-cold stars. Was it still January? There was still snow on the ground, which meant my body was still warm in Hermann's mind. And my spirit? I did not know. I stood up. I began to walk.

I found him in the city, near the fountain. Strong winds
blew debris all around: newspapers, leaves. Nearby a young woman's hat flew off. I watched her slide and wobble as she chased it across the icy Marktplatz. And then I caught sight of Hermann on a bench with a newspaper. *It's cold out*, I told him, for it must have been. *Go inside. Put a hat on, at least.*

München looked bitten-down and stained, her red roofs beaten dull orange, her ragged skies strung with complaining geese. Minutes passed like hours, then days, and then the other way around. I looked to see if the hatless Fräulein had reclaimed her poise, and when I turned back Hermann had grown a beard and a belly. He crossed his legs one over the other. I peered at the date on his newspaper, but I couldn't read anymore. The syllables of the Silesian woman, however, stayed with me: *Blood in the ink will run dry.* He stood, I followed.

I nearly stepped on his heels as I trailed him through the city. *I love you,* I said, comforted by Pascal's wager: I had nothing to lose in my conviction. *My thoughts might yet reach him.* *I will never leave you.* *Husband.*

Hot coffee, razor, necktie. Laboratory, saline, beaker, freezer. Coat, hat, scarf, bakery, hallway. At the top of his stone stairs I grew thick with emotion to find that no one else was home. No warm smells from the kitchen, no fresh linens, no children tumbling to and fro. Each night he waited for the fire to die before retiring. I lay down beside him on top of the blankets. I had to imagine the cool of the blue night on my skin, for I still could feel nothing. For comfort, I reached my fingers around my neck and hooked them in my hole.

We rose from bed the following year, and the years after that. Dutifully I repeated my only message: I will never leave you. Sometimes he would stop while winding his watch or pruning his roses, a pair of shears in his hand. Once he cocked his head as though he had heard me. *Forever,* I repeated. *Forever,* I shouted, bold, though inside I was begging. *Please.* Shaking his head, he
returned to his gardens.

It rained a great deal. München's flowers eventually returned. There were walks through the city. I dared to let hope rise. And then one April the sun began to shine. Franzisca began taking coffee with us in the afternoons. *I will never leave you,* I insisted. But I felt him sliding away. My words sounded pitiful and mean, contrived as they were to lift him from his warm pool of joy. He sipped his coffee. He stared into her eyes.

They were married in the summer. At the wedding I wept but I held my head up. Nothing would ever match our wedding day, which might have been yesterday, might have been in Switzerland, might have been under a linden tree, near a stream, bright ribbons tied to everything in sight. I rested my fingers in my hole, a hole unchanged by time. At the very least it was mine, unlike this day of wine and dancing. Unlike this life they had started without me.

No longer did I walk at Hermann's back as I once had: my lips next to his ear, my breath on his neck, the little woolen strands of his overcoat in my eyes. Now I followed them at a few paces. Easter Sunday came, then another. Passover.

They were both too old for children and so cared for each other. They squeezed hands in the movies and stuffed each others' shoes on St. Nicholas' Day. They raised themselves up. Franzisca was from Leipzig. When they divided East from West she paced, then cursed, then caved in with sobs, unable to send letters to her ailing Mutti. This was on a rainy Thursday. They had lit the fire and I sat across from them in the empty chair. I watched her grieve at the line the world had drawn between this half and that one: invisible, yet no less insurmountable.

Hermann sat down next to her. He pulled her close until her head rested on his chest. "This is not forever," he said. "Nothing is forever. The war wasn't forever, and this will not be forever. You'll see."
From my place in the forsaken chair I laughed out loud. They raised their heads. Their eyes grew wide. And in that moment, I felt the warmth of the fire. I smelled the rain outside. I felt the wind on the other side of the world. I tasted the moon and the stars and so I laughed again, this time as hard as I could. For now they were frightened. **Hermann**, I sneered. **Hermann, my stupid little scientist. What do you know of forever?**

Now I sit farther away. Sometimes I am gone for whole days, sometimes I linger. I spend most days in the courtyard downstairs; there is a linden tree there I like to consider. I try to mark the years, but keeping time is difficult. People look very different now. The girls are all so thin and the boys look like cavemen. They are all very angry, though they don't know why. And so they blow things up. Just last week another homemade bomb. **Hearty greetings from the Red Army**, the message read.

Up in their apartment Franziska and Hermann are dying. Their cigarettes have taken their wind and besides, they are old. Like me, they remember the days when promises lasted: **I will never leave you.** They have lace curtains, talcum dusty flowers and on their sills, a thousand glass animals and the soft-brown photographs of their youth. My youth. **Old-fashioned**, I hear the neighbors call them. But I believe that like all of us, they were only fashioned.

I am their only child, though they will never see me, never know me, never touch my face, even as I place it between theirs at night. Where do they go in their dreams? When they are truly alone, surrounded only by their own darknesses? My chance to ask, to hear, to understand such things is gone. In its place is a hole.

And so I sit in their courtyard under the red roofs of München. My bench is nearly always empty, though from time to time a child will break free from his parents and sit down next to me. And though I cannot explain it, if I put my hands near him his idle kicking stops; his arms relax and his eyes recede into a moment of

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calm as though he has caught sight of something inside himself. I believe he tries to see. Most people call this staring into space. But I know better. I know that in certain moments, we are lucky. I know that sometimes the invisible line dissolves.