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VOM WASSER

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On Water

They were already saying goodbye when she asked him, “and where are you going now?”

“Down to the water.”

“Down to the water?”

“We always return to the water,” he said. And she told me this anecdotally, in an amused way, perhaps still rather angry about what had happened between them, which is something I knew nothing about and still know nothing about. And I still remember precisely how I tried, for her sake, to shake my head and seem amused. But I heard her utter those words and knew straight away that they would never leave me.

I am not particularly religious. I have never been inspired by grand explanations of the world. Someone adamantly trying to convince of something has always been alien to me. I have never even bothered to be a proper atheist. If anything, I have avoided discussing it altogether because I have always believed, and still do today, that first you should take a closer look at the visible world before debating metaphysics. And, in a sense, that is exactly what those words meant. They were not about the power of a god or the work of invisible forces. They were about the power of the water. And, as I now know, that power is a very perceptible, real power.

This book is an attempt to understand that. It is a book by somebody who always returns to the water and is an attempt to understand that. Over the course of this book, whilst writing this book, I will spend many days and nights beside rivers and will look at the water. I will remember the many days and nights that I have spent by the water. And perhaps when I get to the end of this book, I will sit by a river, look at the water, and understand it.

You can smell it. It is often said that water has no smell. But you can smell it. I can remember the smell of different rivers and seas. And even if the smell is of water combining with something else rather than of water itself, the wonderful thing about these reminiscent smells *is* that they are smells of water. I remember what flowing, streaming, vitalising water smells like, just as I remember how stagnant water is the opposite: it smells foul.

Water and smell can combine in a special way. When, after a long period of drought, the rain falls again for the first time and we step out onto the street, the air does not only seem fresher and cleansed. It is full of smells. After that downpour, everything begins to smell again, the rain vaporising on the tarmac, the saturated earth, the grass, the foliage. How clear and fresh we feel after such a downpour is largely down to water bestowing us with the notion of smell again. We appreciate everything in a stronger, deeper, sharper way, not only because the colours are richer, the contrasts less faint, but also because we can smell again. The water has resurrected our ability to smell. And we perceive the world with all five senses again.

And I can smell the water itself, green, wild water flowing in whirls down a great river. Before I even sit down and look, before I have even seen the water, I can smell that crisp freshness, the breath of the water in the spring air. I can smell how the washing of waves over the edges of the riverbed makes the stones release their musty smell, dampened by water, illuminated by a pale spring sun. And then I see how the water creeps into every pore of the stones with a light surge and gives them back their full colour and unique smell, the breath of the water and stones. And I sit on the riverbank and look at the water, flowing spring green in innumerable small budlike swirls, which flow together playfully, well up, and push off, in March, close to Basel, down the Rhine.

And what she told me about the man is on my mind, a painter, whom, as she put it, she had left for me, back then in a completely different city beside entirely different rivers. Those words — all I knew was that he was supposed to have said them — have brought him closer to me, closer than she would ever be. I knew I would return to the water one day. And I knew by the way she told me, amused and a little malicious, that she would not be coming with me.

The smell of water. The houses of my childhood were brimming with the smell of water, of diverse waters, rivers, lakes, and seas. I remember how the Orpe had an almost hazy freshness

and how it smelt of moss. This river came right up to our garden and breathed on us as children when we sat on the terrace, still half asleep, eating breakfast in the summer. It blew its sweet sepulchral breath over us. And, though our mothers and grandmothers warned us so much about it, we knew that this day would belong to the river again, to the black Orpe, which flowed in an eerily dark and gloomy way between mossy and weathered stones.

Between two rivers, between the Orpe and the Diemel, my business-minded great-great-grandfather had bought an estate called 'Misfortune'. At the time, he was not unsettled by this name. He only saw how powerful and useful the water was, the vast amount of water surrounding that land. He understood that this water was money. And he built a paper mill on Misfortune, operated, powered, and cleansed by the water. It was the black water of the Orpe that flowed into the mill and started its subterranean journey, foamed here and there in basins, was pushed and plunged into weirs and then vanished into the systems of tunnels again, shrieked as steam and finally flowed away silently, mysteriously, and black under a mossy, weathered bridge, with a slightly sweet smell, which I remember as a sepulchral smell, but which undoubtedly originated from the starch and paste used in producing paper at the mill.

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[...]

The Diemel flowed on the other side of Misfortune. It flowed, hidden from our young eyes behind bales of scrap paper and workers' barracks and a dyke of around one metre. Nevertheless, the Diemel was there. She was the river full of sounds. Whilst the black Orpe glided along the ravine-like banks before our eyes, calmly and silently like an unexposed film, the Diemel was there through its sounds. It was an endless splash, sputter, and swoosh like the serene restlessness of a water fountain. It flowed silver and bright, tiered in terraces as if down steps. Small stone walls rose up every twenty or thirty metres, hurdles that the water cleared in cascades and that partitioned the river into a series of pools. It was an exposed, open, and free river, almost like an allotment garden made of water, yet from which the liveliness of the water

resonated, gurgled, and splashed. And it combined with the rustling of the high poplar trees standing on the riverbanks, which were as perfectly arranged, planted in rows where their silvery green leaves rustled in the wind. And I remember the smell of the Diemel, which drifted through days when the wind changed direction and we did not play in the garden like we were supposed to but instead played against the rules amongst the bales of paper or in riverbank meadows. It smelt of silver water and poplar leaves, a cool yet strangely empty smell, which left an aftertaste on your tongue, a dull aftertaste, contrasting with the freshness of the wind and water.

In a word, the Diemel was safe — a tamed, domesticated river course. And each pool was like a small lake with a beginning and end, like a safe haven. The pools did not flow and flood ominously, drifting on and on like a river streaming wildly, pulling, and irreversible, losing anybody that fell in. As children, we played beside the Diemel, in the Diemel, in the summer, when the confined water was warmed by the sun and blended again and again with the cooling current, which entangled the layers of water, allowing the warm, stagnant water to gush onto the surface, pushing the cool, fresh water below. It was a river without shallows and danger, a river you could always stand in and whose bed you could always see, and which rushed and rustled in silver grey just like the rows of poplars on its bank.

It is true that the water gets its appearance from the colour of the sky and bright and shining light in the same way that the appearance of water can completely change under the trail of a cloud. Light, friendly water suddenly turns grey and stony. Or dark, threatening water suddenly laughs, glitters and gleams when it comes into contact with a sun beam. Nevertheless, the Orpe and Diemel flowed under one and the same sky, two rivers with contrary appearances, two rivers with contrary smells less than three hundred metres apart, and between them lay Misfortune and the summers of our childhood.

It is impossible to say how often I have thought, how often I have dreamt about these rivers, how many nights I have been drawn to them when moving through sleepy cities, dry, lifeless cities, looking for water, looking for the movement of water. I have often sat until the early hours by a pond or a city moat full of algae, whose water did not flow but knew only one course, that of dying, of seeping away and drying up, water burying itself in the earth. And it is easy for me to

say this now, where the great Rhine divides the land before me, opens up and draws a smooth path into the distance.

We learnt how to swim in the Diemel, the tamed, terraced river course on one end of Misfortune. It was here that we thrust both arms ahead of us for the first time, pulled them apart and presented our naked chests to the water, trusting that it would not grasp our young hearts with its cold hand but instead would surround us in a bright and friendly way, carry us and not snatch us into the depths. Under the silver-grey surface, our skin shimmered white before us in the clear water. Small waves and whirls followed our arms when we pulled them apart and brought them together again. They were our play mates, who, gurgling and splashing, encouraged us to keep going, to not stop, to keep swimming further. These small whirls and wavelets promised us control over the water, showed us and our rowing arms how easy it was to bend the water to our will. Just one arm movement disturbed the crystal clear surface and coated it with ripples, which drifted apart. With a few powerful strokes, we pushed small bow waves before us, which cast out behind us like capes of water, like fabric enshrouding our small bodies. We were overconfident of our power over the water, yet the water itself granted us this overconfidence. It was testament to the water's goodwill and generosity that it allowed our small bodies to be kings, who reigned — splattering, splashing, and spluttering — over the water, whilst under our small kicking and paddling feet, the gentle stream of water followed its own path in a calm and relentless way.

And it was the Diemel, that crystal clear, poplar-scented river that always allowed our feet to rest on the stony, clear bed when they became tired or unsteady or when a slight feeling of uneasiness suddenly came over us, the fear and foreboding that the water had its own unfathomable will. Sometimes we choked on the water and, for a moment, felt the possibility of our lungs being drowned, sensed the harshness and ruthlessness of the water on our breath, suddenly tasting of blood, metallic and not at all like the dull sweetness of the poplars. Sometimes another swimmer's leg, having got too close, would unleash a whirl, which would glide over our skin like an imperceptible and inconceivable creature, nudge us like a fish and, weaving, would dissipate into nothingness again. We were then briefly afraid of what lies unseen in even the clearest waters, of the swarming, murky secrets, concealed by every water under its surface. A sense of depth emerged, bottomless as a fjord, filling entire chasms. After one or two metres of knee-deep water close to the river bank, the depths plunged seven hundred or nine hundred metres into the abyss. But the Diemel was there and held its stony bed out to us, which

we always managed to grip onto after briefly flailing in fear, the riverbed, land, security, which our toes could cling to between the smoothly weathered stones. We stood, the water up to our chests, without having to paddle and flail for survival. And the dark, sudden fear of death under the water disappeared as quickly and as fleetingly as it had arrived.

It is strange that the better I swam, the more my fear of the water grew. The more strokes I learnt, and the more competently and perhaps even more elegantly I mastered them, the greater my fear became. I have swum in countless relays, have spent many years training hard in various disciplines. I have finally specialised in swimming freestyle marathon lengths and have often spent half a day in the water, for so long that the beating rhythm of the striking arm, breathing in and out above and below water, and the leg kicking in four-four time became the ceaseless monotonous musical accompaniment to my life, even on land, where this rhythm pulsed in my ears like a second, superior heartbeat, the heartbeat of a profound being made of water and body and power.

But my fear grew each time, the fear during the last few steps to the edge of the pool, the fear on first glance at the water, which reflected the stands holding rows of spectators wanting to see a competition between the swimmers. But we who scooped up water next to the starting blocks again and doused our faces knew that, for each and every one of us, this would become a competition, a fight for survival against the water alone. We knew that the first plunge into the water would be a leap into great solitude, that nothing and no one could stand by us in the coming kilometres. For the first four or five hundred metres, our gaze may wander to the neighbouring lanes and the competitors being thrashed by water, but then we swam blind, head under water. Arms pumping, legs kicking, with nothing other than water, isolation and breathing left. We became part of a superior being whose exact pulse rate we had to match. Only those who exactly matched, held, and merged in the regular pulse of this element would assume the water as a part of themselves. But the water would not let those through who were too slow or too fast, those who fell outside of the beat with a missed stroke or hurried breath. It hardened its heart, blocked the way, became like a barrier of water, against which you tried to swim but to no avail, sometimes too quickly, sometimes too slowly, angry, desperate, lost in the mercilessness of the water, which left you swimming stationary and banished you to the inscrutable depths.

My nightmare about water was that it might not treat me with mercy, that it might be hard and ruthless towards me, that it would make me feel like a stranger in this element. And every time that we covered the last few metres to the edge of the pool and our hearts were in our throats, every time, the water lay before us once more, smooth and motionless without a trace of its goodwill or mercilessness, as if we had not already spent countless hours in this water, as if we had not been at one with it less than a day before, held as if on a hand made of water and energised by its rhythmic roaring and its swift suppleness. But no, every time we had to bridge the gap between the elements once more, between the stability and the reliability of the tiles, with which our naked feet clashed, between the stability and reliability of the concrete or steel of the starting blocks and the unpredictability of the water, which could be too soft or too hard on us, every time, once more.

Perhaps this fear grows day by day because the water has still never let me fall, because up until now I have always been in the water's favour as it picks me up and holds me on its expansive back. I fear more and more that it could deny me that goodwill today, specifically today, at this competition, in this isolation, in the middle of the wasteland made of water laid out before me.

I have still never encountered the mercilessness of water. But the nature of water is such that I will forever sense the feasibility of this mercilessness. And occasionally it allows the allusions of its caprice to become a reality. Occasionally its consistency alters and, as if suddenly changing from salt to fresh water, it withdraws the hand on which it was holding you for a moment. It lets you feel the weight of your body and pulls on all of your limbs as if they were loaded with lead weights. Everything is in danger of sinking, even your head, behind your angrily beating arms, even your head is in danger of sinking, of forgetting to turn and get air, of simply lolling on your chest, heavy with sleep and death. Then death is the only possible outcome. And the dark pull into the depths subsides and frees your head again, which was already shrouded by thoughts of death, was already sinking. It is suddenly thrown to the side and gasps for air, like a new born, and the lead weights fall away from your limbs. The following metres are infinitely easy, as if you are being held by a warm stream of salt water, by a warm, benevolent hand. The water drifts smoothly past in swirls and whirls: it is friendly and good to those in its favour.

And whilst our stooped bodies perch like featherless crows on the starting blocks, crouched in anticipation of the whistle or starting pistol, whilst our eyes are directed down the lanes before us

and we calculate the number of strokes until we touch and turn, as this short, abrupt moment of silence sets in and time slows and stops, a rush of fear pulses through our bodies. It is an illusion of escape, the illusion of giving up, stopping and being set free from this tension, of standing up and getting down from the starting blocks. You wrap your towel around your shoulders and simply leave in front of dozens of spectators and the other swimmers, who are mocking you out of jealousy, who would have been all too willing to do the same thing at the exact same time but did not give up their courage for cowardice.

But this escape is an illusion because the pull of the water, its unyielding appeal, roots us to the spot. There is no turning back. There is only the escape forwards from fear into fear: we launch, tip and plunge into the other element. We hope it will be good to us and at one with our movements rather than rejecting us, foreign and steadfast. We hope it will take us in rather than cast us aside.

And then we dive, the flattest and most extended plunge possible and become immersed, the first metres under a thin layer of water, which does not feel like water at all but rather dry at the point of impact, gliding over the skin like a gentle nettle sting. Now, the outstretched arms begin to pull, the first real movements in the flow of the water. The arms try to gather it with all their strength as if it were dry land, as if they were doing a pull up, the body following, the legs with outstretched toes keeping time in the flow of the water, like a swelling drum roll, a flourish. And the arms thrust whole swathes of water to one side with their scooping hands and push away again to gather more swathes of water and clear the lane. The chest and pelvis look for their balance in the water surrounding them. A last hope erupts in the anger and aggression of the strokes; we hope that the water will not grasp our hearts with its cold hand, our hearts, which no longer have protective arms outstretched before them, our hearts, which the water washes around, so close to death. May the water softly enshroud and cradle our exposed hearts in our lanes.

Back when I bathed in the Diemel, I was still unaware of this fear. We appeared out of the water, spluttering, splashing and laughing, and climbed on the boulders on the embankment, where we let ourselves dry in the sun. Fin-sized water marks on stones faded by the sun led to our favourite places, where we stretched out our legs before us and rested on our elbows, squinting in the sun. And the stones, on which we left a trail of water, started to release their smell, a faintly brackish smell of dried-up water in the pores of the old stones, which had a greying border

of algae on them, left behind by the changing water levels. And perhaps it was these dried up algae, almost turned into stone, that smelt of brackish water and a salty-sweet lake, and that clung to our skin, grainy and crumbling like poppy seeds, when we turned over in the sun. At night, our skin, dried by the sun, still smelt of water and the stone-like algae. Hours later, when we licked our lips at dinner time, we tasted the dull poplar and sweetly salted taste of water on our skin. And our t-shirts, which we slipped on again the next morning, were still full of this smell, just as the new, dawning day would be.

(pp. 12-21)

[...]

I remember the painter's watercolour paintings, which I saw burning after she had split up with him for me and he was supposed to have said, "we always return to the water." I remember the strange allure of those paintings, which she took off the wall surprisingly carefully considering her anger, taking care to keep the sheets of paper completely intact when throwing them lengthways into the fire, without creasing or folding them. It was as if she did not want to destroy the watercolour paintings but rather just show them to the fire. I remember how luxurious those paintings were, the leisure of the expert eye displayed in them. I remember how difficult it was for me to be indifferent towards them.

I could see from the paintings, which she first showed to me and then to the fire, that he knew a lot about water, about water's silence and its murmurings, about its lingering determination, about the way it moves and remains. And it was like sacrificing a gaze, knowledge turned into a painting, when the fire consumed the marks, which the other, hostile element water had painted in those colours and shapes. And I stood next to her, accepted the glare of fire and stayed silent.

I refused to believe it then, but she violated the integrity of the water, which should not be flippantly violated, for this element is too powerful and we are too dependent on it. And I was not sure if she knew whether it was an expression of how great and grim her anger was or whether she meant only to hurt him, her husband or lover. Yet she violated the integrity of the water, and I noticed how I instinctively changed sides, how I had been on her side out of love but how, from now on, I would take his side and, as a result, returned a step towards the water.

Yet I refused to believe it. I would not admit to myself or to her that the water pulled me in, that I instinctively sided with the water and the painter, who seemed closer to that element than anyone else I knew, perhaps because I knew hardly anything about him. And I also would not admit the horrifying familiarity in everything that I learnt about him, such that I did not dare to ask about him or their history together. I was already afraid, although I refused to believe it then, that his story and mine were perhaps more closely, more inextricably intertwined than her story and I.

It happened on one of those walks that you go on not so much out of desire but because you need to finish the day off and tire your body out as much as your thoughts and mood already are. I walked along a narrow, muddy path beside a fairly unsightly expanse of water, which called itself a river but had a thick, marshy, sludge brown consistency. It was answerable to the tides all the same and followed the moon to the not-so-distant sea, such that the sludgy edges of the riverbed already seeped out into the ebbing water, whilst all kinds of dust and pollen, weary from its flight, drifted along the bulging surface of the water. I had not picked this river out, but it was the only water near the flat I lived in with her back then and, besides, seeing as I just wanted to tire myself out, I did not make the effort to head for more uplifting places.

It was a mild and slightly muggy night, the wind having eased off. A slow dusk spread out on the horizon. Clouds clustered around the edge of the sky, which descended into a deep blue and from which a pale yellow sun withdrew further and further, finally becoming a mere faded reflection. It would not be long before there was complete nightfall. I walked seemingly lost in my thoughts, but ultimately more concerned with walking itself than anything else. I had not heard him coming. I had not seen him coming. I had thought I was alone. Suddenly, I collided with his body. It was as if my own shadow took shape before me, as if it became a physical being so as to position its whole shadowy mass in my way. And I had blindly stumbled into him.

Of course, it could have been somebody who I had simply not noticed. Yet I did not doubt for a second that it was him, the one who came before me, on the way to the water, the man I did not know, who was so oddly familiar to me that I had not even considered him a stranger.

I turned around too late. I tried to identify him — his outline, his gait, his face — too late. He had already disappeared behind the curve of the river, shrouded in darkness, which brought the rising blue of the sunless sky over the meadows and the grassy river banks. He was nothing more than a shadow at nightfall, a part of the darkness itself, which had materialised in him and had gone through me like a deep, inaudibly dark sound.

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[...]

It is getting late; it is almost midnight. In the darkness, the Rhine seems loud, more powerful than by day, an amalgamation of different river sounds, which fade and ring out again in the wide space. The ferry moves halfway between the bridges on the Rhine for the final time and brings the late walkers from the promenade over the river to the cathedral. I board the flat, rectangular bow of the ferry boat and I sit on the bench skirting the side of the boat. The jet-black water of the Rhine flows less than twenty centimetres away from me. It washes and sputters around the buoys on the ferry slip. The remaining passengers have sat down. Nobody goes into the hut-like cabin. They stay close to the water, which reflects the night without stars, and are quieter than they were on land.

The ferryman pushes the wooden boat off the ferry slipway and puts the rudder at an angle. A wire rope is taut over the river, the ferryboat is moored to it with an agile winch, and whilst the tremendous current pushes onto the angled rudder, the boat and the winch move along the side of the rope from one bank to the other. The strength of the water alone, which the ruder tells its

desired direction, pushes the ferryboat over the Rhine, which seems to flow more and more quickly the more we edge towards the middle of the river.

I know very few rivers with such strength. And whilst the only thing separating me from the water is the thin side of the boat, I imagine what it would be like to swim against this river, to revolt with all my strength against the relentless course of the Rhine, until the water carries me off on its wide back and flushes me down the river like a wreckage.

I spent a year with my father by the Upper Missouri river. Back then I was already training very hard for different swimming relays and every morning I jumped into the river, still as cold as the night, rather than the shower. I crawled with fierce strokes against the evergreen water and then let myself drift until I had reached a fallen tree; I hung onto its branches on the bank again. After a quick breakfast, I then ran half a mile to the next main road, where a yellow and black school bus picked me up and took me to high school in the nearby city. My first two school lessons were swimming every day.

Our school's swimming trainers were very ambitious. They enjoyed stepping on our fingers when we clung onto the side of the pool to relax during training sessions. And they were far from satisfied that we swam in our own accustomed way. They had a close eye on the asymmetrical, random and ineffective elements of our swimming strokes. Sloppy kicks, arms doing half strokes or overly limp palms, which did not shovel away a maximum amount of the water lying before us, prompted a shrill whistle on the side of the pool and snappy demonstrations of how it should be done, which they showed us with precise gestures in the air.

We learnt one thing in particular from them: there was a very personal way that we, as children, submitted to the element of water, spluttering and splashing around. It was a bit like an individual tailoring, which each person found for themselves in the water, a lively physiognomy of water, put together with a diverse combination of movements as unique as our handwriting or fingerprints. And we learnt that this way of swimming that we had adopted, shaped by a will to survive, fear and instinct, was worth absolutely nothing when it came down to achieving best swimming times. Our swimming trainers' main task lay in making our combination of movements

as streamlined as possible. We trained with rubber rings around our legs, with weights around our stomachs whilst we were only allowed to come up for air on specific blows of the whistle. We were trained in not giving in to our bodies' reflexes, impulses or fears in the water, or in not losing ourselves in our very own history with this element, which was both unknown and familiar to us. But rather we were trained to try to understand and work with time in the indiscriminate nature of water, the rhythm of time with the striking of our arms and legs, which swung out, strode and struck with the single aim of stopping the ticking time on the clock face when we touched the side of the pool. We swam in time. The stretch of water before us, the masses of water, which we moved out of the way, were merely time for us, ticking time, minutes, seconds, fractions of a second, which we furrowed with our bodies in order to stop it as quickly as possible and to prevent it from elapsing with the last, slapping stroke to the edge of the pool.

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Of course, I did not understand my motives back then, their meaning and their connection to the history of my return to the water. I just did not like swimming short distances. I did not like how sudden and abrupt sprints were. I did not like the fact that it almost came down more to starting and turning than to the few metres of actual swimming with their calculated strokes. The fine meshed web of time resisted me, the seconds that could not be recovered, that everything came down to, the panic-stricken moments between starting and touching the side, which did not allow you to develop a feel for the water, to feel at home in the element, both unknown and familiar. It made me feel uneasy that you could not tell whether it had been hard or soft, unyielding or merciful, when you stopped the time by slapping the side of the pool, because the fight with the water had never really happened but rather just a fight with the elapsing time, with its pure, sudden presence, with its distance composed of broken up periods of time.

I chose long distances as often as possible but did not understand why. Soon, I was signing up for the marathon training session every morning. And I did my lengths as if in a frenzy when,

after five hundred metres, my gaze no longer wandered to the next lane. The idea of the upcoming kilometre of water was long and I stopped thinking about timing of the competition, only the interaction between water and movement was important. Whether you swim two thousand, three thousand or five thousand metres freestyle, there is a dead point, a leaden moment of tiredness, when you realise, with desperation, that your own strength is no longer enough.

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[...]

My father and I often went out in the boat on the Missouri river in the evenings after school and fished. The river was too raging for fly fishing so we usually used spoon lures or spinners, oval metal plates, which were made to spin on an axis when you pulled them through the water and whirred around the treble hooks, which were fixed to the axis. They looked like small fish in the water being attacked by all kinds of predatory fish. In fact, we pulled all kinds of fish out of the raging green Missouri river. There were numerous skipjack shads, a bream-like fish with silver scales known as the weed of the Missouri because it was considered inedible and had vastly increased in number. There were also one or two types of catfish, named after their cat-like whiskers, and occasionally garfish as well, a prehistoric duck bill fish, which was thin as a stick and let itself be pulled through the water like a lifeless object after biting the line and spoon lure. It was only when it came into view that it suddenly rose up and tore our line to pieces with its rock-hard, relentlessly tough blows. We were usually still laying on one of the many sandbanks as the sun went down on the flat planes of the Midwest, which spread out like lonely islands along the course of the wide, meandering riverbed and occasionally even grew their own vegetation.

It was our last evening by the Missouri when we went ashore on one of these island-like sandbanks and found a long lagoon of perhaps thirty metres looking for firewood. Wedge-shaped wave crests pushed through the knee-deep water, warmed by the sun. It took a while for us to notice that a whole shoal of huge carp had got lost in the shallow waters, where they had

idly let themselves get illuminated by the sun, whilst the backwash of the river evaporated, save for a few rivulets. They were trapped in the lagoon and moved around in circles with no escape.

We put our fishing rods to one side and hunted down the large common carp with our bare hands, their golden brown fins already emerging from the water. Holding onto their heavy, largely scaled bodies was barely possible whilst they thrashed their tail fin around them. Sometimes we were able to lug them out of the water with both hands and hurl them onto the land with a powerful throw, onto the white, fine sand of the island ridge, where they wriggled to and fro and rolled around so wearily that we could hold them and kill them. But the largest carp did not let us catch them like that. So we changed our strategy and worked together from opposite banks of the lagoon to push the fish into each other's arms. When the wave crests came towards us over the wide fish dorsa, we threw ourselves onto the huge animals, wrestled them to the ground and put them quite literally in a headlock. The carp then tended to deal us such a heavy blow in the stomach or the side that, after a short wrestling match, we would have to let them go again. But, in the end, our hunt was successful. Eight enormous carp with golden scales and gaping mouths lay on the beach of the sandbank whilst we caught our breath, wet and sandy, in the fresh water of the lagoon. Then we climbed into the boat and crossed the green Missouri for the last time, the tiny glowing sun descending over it. We sat with our hosts by the fire into the night and then said goodbye: we had to leave for the airport early the next morning. We gave them our catch, which we did not eat ourselves according to an old family tradition, as a parting gift.

The ferryman towers above the fast-flowing surface of the jet black Rhine, plants himself on the top of the bow with his legs apart, grips the crossbar protruding from the jetty and pushes the boat towards the landing slipway. The few late travellers leave the ferry via the flat, wide bow and climb the steep stone steps towards the cathedral. I am the last one off the boat. The Rhine shimmers beneath us in a black sheen and reflects the nightly charms of the city behind us. The coolness of the old stones follows us to the cathedral square, and from there we lose ourselves in the city.

(pp 198-200)

[...]

Whilst her photographs were becoming increasingly successful after she had split up from the painter, I had forced myself to stop entering swimming competitions. The reason was not so much that I felt I could not handle the constant pressure to perform: in the end my times were the best I have ever swum and I was quicker than ever before, particularly in my specialism, the five thousand metres freestyle. It was much more to do with that strange fear that the water could deprive me of its incomprehensible mercy. It was so difficult for me to overcome that irrational fear. It tormented me before training sessions, before the start of a competition, whilst I walked on the poolside, when climbing onto the starting blocks, right up until the starting pistol was fired and I plunged headfirst into the element, both unknown and familiar.

In the meantime, her photos were proving so popular that she established her own studio. One evening — I had swum my way through a difficult day again and afterwards had walked a few hundred metres along the brown, ebbing water of the nearby river — she greeted me with champagne and candles. She had been commissioned for a photographic series in the South of France and daydreamed about the bright, vibrant lights of the South, about the way it cut things sharply into light and shade. She spoke of Cézanne's modernity and, as she called it, the self-aware flatness of his paintings; the objects yielded to their shape as if by themselves under the light blue sky of Provence. When she asked me if I would go with her on the trip, I could not take that away from her.

We flew to Marseille and from there drove further inland towards Aix-en-Provence in an open-top Jeep. The heat shimmered on the tarmac before us. Across the road, there were fields of burned grass. The sun was still high and vertical in the sky in the afternoon. Sparse pine forests and a few rows of olive trees rose up out of the aridity, but did not even make shadows long enough to cast one in front of our feet.

We arrived at the apartment complex, which was surrounded by a small, shielded park. Cactus-like plants framed the entrance. There were tufts of grass here and there, which a water sprinkler hissed over. The apartments were cool and comfortable in an unremarkable way. She disappeared into the bathroom straight away to freshen up for her upcoming meeting. I stretched out on the bed and stared at the ceiling whilst listening to the water of the shower, which hailed

down on her tense shoulders, ran lightly over her skin, collected in her arms and palms of her hands, and then crashed in slapping splashes onto the tiles of the shower. I loved that sound.

I had fallen asleep for a moment. The feeling of water droplets falling on my face woke me. I opened my eyes. She stood in front of me with only a towel over her chest and back, and wrung her long, wet hair over me. She bent over me and gave me a long kiss, which tasted of creme and eau de parfum. Then she slipped a short summer dress over her head, adjusted her hair with her fingers, and left for the lounge, where she was already expected.

I had planned to stay in the apartment and have a rest. Yet the pleasant sleepiness had worn away and so I stepped out into the day, which was still glowing and hot. I wandered quickly through the watered and raked park, which looked as if it were only of this sunburnt world thanks to the untiring efforts of a handful of gardeners. Then I made my way through all kinds of bushes and dried wood. I stumbled down a slope and landed in a hollow filled with pebbles and rounded stones, which must have been a riverbed once, revealed like the erosion of the surrounding pebbles. Yet, for months, not a drop of water had flowed there.

I followed the path that the water must have taken and went up the slight slope of the riverbed. After a few twists and turns, the dried-out water way ran through crusty, crumbly earth, which no longer grew anything. The sparse shadows of the embankment released me into the blazing sun, which burnt down on the lifeless land crumbling into dust beneath my feet and swirled in small clouds through the blazing heat.

A plateau made of stone and pulverised sand stretched before me, risen towards the sun. There was no sign of a spring or a large watercourse. It seemed as though the water of long-forgotten rainfalls had collected in the slightly sunken, basin-shaped plateau so as to rush under the riverbed, past withered roots, which reached out for moisture in vain, past cracked and bursting earth, which, like exposed skin, shed and burnt layer for layer.

I had probably walked for around one and a half to two hours. The sun had relented somewhat but the torrid heat had not: it just seemed to take another direction and no longer bored down

vertically onto things in its narrow shadows but moved horizontally over the land like a glowing garden rake and grasped at everything that it rose over. I turned around and went back over the dead river course towards the apartment.

She had left me a message. I found a note on the bed signed with the shape of her lips. Other than a series of affectionate terms, it was mainly about the supposedly fantastic light, which she was excited about. I smelt the paper; its woody, brittle smell revealed a trace of the creamy fragrance I had tasted on our last kiss.

I had no idea how late it was but it must have been after midnight when I heard her fiddling with the key in the lock. She opened the door slightly and slipped into the room through the narrow light. I was awake; I did not draw attention to myself but carried on lying still under the light sheets as if I had fallen asleep with my eyes open. She pulled her dress over her head and pushed the warm shadow of her body under the sheets. She lay her arm on my chest, weightless and cool like a shadowy branch. She still had not realised that I was awake and was observing all of her movements and breathing with thoughts sharpened by the darkness. A brief panic ran over her supple body when I stroked her bare shoulder with the palm of my hand.

The next morning, I was woken up by the familiar sound of pattering water coming from the bathroom. I climbed out of bed and shaved in front of the steamed-up bathroom mirror, which I had wiped a mark from. When she got out of the shower, she looked at me over her shoulder and blew a kiss to my reflection. But I could see that her mind was already on the upcoming day. We dressed in a hurry and said goodbye to one another.

Aix-en-Provence was already very busy in the morning, although it seemed like most of the people bustling on the boulevards were tourists. Sturdy sycamore trees, whose smooth grey-green bark was chipped in places, stuck to the shaded streets. The wide, outstretched treetops protected the shopping streets from the force of the sun, which already stood high and scorching in those early hours. I sat at one of the street cafés which stretched out far onto the pavement with its marquee opened out. In order to get rid of the dust and dirt on the street, the cobbles

were sprayed with water from a garden hose, which now dried on the warm stone slabs, cool and full of the smells of summer.

The hustle and bustle in front of the large shop windows of the boulevard grew as the heat rose. They were all people who did not seem bothered by the absence of water in this area burnt by the sun. I, a fugitive to water in this waterless city, suddenly wished that the power of the water would take possession of my life again. I felt like I was on the extreme outer edge, alienated from the element of my past as much as is possible. And it was like the dead point, which I knew all too well from marathon lengths, the point at which I could no longer continue on my own, such that the only thing left to do was to surrender to the mercy or mercilessness of the water.

(pp211-216)

[...]

Early in the morning, we started en route to Sanary-sur-Mer, a small seaside resort on the French Riviera, which she had explored for her photographs. The coolness of the blurring night and the scant moisture from the morning dew did not remain for long. The sky had been clear since sunrise, a cloudless, plain colour screen, whose brightness dominated the day. I sat with all kinds of equipment on the back seat of the Jeep and, as we went around the bends, I held onto myself and the equipment in turn. She sat on the passenger seat in front of me, her slender arm over the armrest, and the young Frenchman, who was employed as the driver and was au fait with the area, was at the wheel.

The air swirled in dense waves of heat around us and ruffled our hair. The street before us seemed to soften, disintegrate into a shimmering slick, and melt into the dusty ditches and burnt grass of the central reservation. Only the Frenchman at the wheel managed to go the whole journey without sunglasses. He did not even have to squint once. He just looked seriously, almost contemplatively, with lightly arched eyebrows, at the road and in the rear-view mirror, where our eyes met. "French lover," I thought for a moment and I saw them both move slightly closer together, the Frenchman and her, whose slender arm stretched out along the armrest.

We went south directly towards the sea. With each glance, the water seemed to widen under the sandier and sandier hills and indented cliffs. You could literally feel being close to the water, the murmur in a seashell, the sparkling reflection of the blue-grey waves, and the salty freshness of the water. And finally, like a reflection made of air and light at the end of the streets shimmering from the mirage, there was a glistening streak of blue on the horizon.

Blue. It was a completely surreal blue, which kept on changing, interspersed with the darkness of the waterway, bright, almost translucent, where it washed around the curvature of the sandbanks, even and taut like a hide stretching over the depths of the water and then moved in ripples again, breaking, foaming grey, light grey from sea spray. The sea revealed its diversity and its abundance more and more generously. The game between the wind and waves became more and more clear, the shadow cast by the sea, the various colours, currents, and temperaments of the waters, which drifted into one another and flowed together in their inconceivable boundlessness.

We went directly towards the sea for a while. Then we turned off and went along the coast, parallel to the line of the water. Cliffs, bays, and small beaches went past. Individual boats, cutters, and a few large tankers on the hazy blue of the distant horizon followed our path or went in the opposite direction. Seeing buoys, swimmers, and children playing in the waves was a blessing after the stillness of life and objects under the blazing sun of Provence.

“Rotten luck!” The driver suddenly hit the brakes. I thought I had misheard him but he repeated these only two French words, reminiscent of Misfortune. We stopped on a bridge. Under us, beyond the railings, a lagoon reached inland to where a river, dried out by the sun, had joined the sea. The clear, green-blue water was hardly more than a metre deep and a driver, who jumped out of his seat, was pointing downwards. “Rotten luck!” Black, wedge-shaped shadows moved in a geometric pattern through the illuminated water, a whole shoal of impressive fish dorsa, offshoots of the immeasurable life of the sea, which extended into the sun-deprived land.

Soon after, we reached Sanary-sur-Mer, a collection of villas and vegetation, which appeared luxurious, yes, almost artificial in its greenhouse-like opulence. There were pristine, sophisticated gardens, streets shaded by leaves lined with lavish, spacious summer houses, which for the most part looked unoccupied and were probably only used for the occasional holiday or weekends. A lively hustle and bustle took hold further down on the beach promenade. Bars, cafés, and restaurants stretched up to the imposing quay wall, from which a bright, pleasant sandy cove led to the sea, which gently washed over the ankles of the people walking barefoot.

We parted ways here. I wanted to spend the day by the water. I had rolled everything up that I needed in a bath towel, which I held under my arm. She turned towards me and gave me a fleeting kiss with just a trace of her creme-fragranced skin. I wanted to get out of the car then and there when she grabbed me again and kissed the lens of my sunglasses. Her lips left pucker shaped marks on the tinted glass. The young Frenchman watched us in the rear-view mirror. Our eyes met again. He looked away at once and stared out towards the sea. I climbed out of the car, crossed the promenade and waved to them both. I almost wanted to shout to them, “rotten luck!”

I strolled down to the beach, took off my shoes, put the shoe laces together, and let them dangle over my shoulder, whilst my bare toes dug into the fine, white sand. The top layer was so hot that you had to dig down to your instep to stop your feet from burning. Knee-high waves washed up on the shore, threw the lively sand up and disappeared, glistening in whirls of light and ground crystals. The land sank shallowly in the sea and the bay’s light ridge of sand continued to shimmer under the water, which shined clear, colourless and blue at the same time. I looked for a less popular place on the edge of the bay and dived into the pleasantly cool water, which was fresher than the gentle groundswell suggested. I could see my shadow on the sandy white seabed. It glided silently between the moving light spots and wave patterns. The seabed subsided into darkness after around two hundred metres, perhaps it was the dark surface of a stone, but perhaps also the depths of the water, which cast themselves in shadow. One hundred metres later, the arched, gentle edges of the bay released the swimmers into the open sea.

I had seen enough for the time being and swam back to the shore, where I lay down wet in the half shadows of the quay wall, which was partially covered in plants. When I looked up at the sky through my sunglasses, two full lips floated in a perfect blue. It was all still just a game. My return to the water was still like a summer fling.

I do not know how long I dozed away but I suddenly saw the young Frenchman out of the corner of my eye. He walked across the other end of the bay in springy, light steps. I could have sworn it was him. After all, I had seen the back of his head in front of me for the entire car journey, which looked exactly like the walker's head of hair, bobbing up and down. He slowly got further away, disappeared between one or two people walking on the beach, to reappear shortly afterwards in the springy rhythm of his steps.

I took up his trail and made my way through the sand past the ambling couples and the water-shy ditherers, who teetered knee-high into the waves to then seek out dry land again. The washed up sand along the waterline was not as soft and smooth. It was easier to walk on and so I could make up a few metres of my distance from the Frenchman. But then he disappeared into a group of athletic, muscular men in sports shirts and swimming shorts, who had gathered on the other end of the bay. They swarmed around an elderly man with a beard and a captain's hat, who held a folder in his arms, which he registered people in. I wanted to ask him some questions but had to let him know that unfortunately I spoke only German or English, at which point he switched, without hesitation, to broken seaman's English. He explained to me there were almost exactly three and a half kilometres between one end of the bay and the other as the crow flies. I had to follow the boat with the yellow flag as closely as possible: it would navigate the shortest route. Then he asked me for my name and where I lived, put both on his list and gave me a number. I was so confused that only at that point did I ask what type of event this actually was. "A biathlon," he said seriously and looked at me in such a challenging way that I did not dare say the whole thing was a misunderstanding.

I searched the biathletes for the young Frenchman. Yet most of them were already in the starting position and stood shoulder to shoulder, packed closely together. I had to get in the queue as soon as possible so as not to be forced back into the rearmost corner. I saw the yellow flag of the boat between the heads, which swayed in the calm wind. The hustle and bustle and children's cries from the beach suddenly seemed far away. The same solitary concentration that

I knew only too well from my starting block rituals set in, concentration on the distance before me, mixed with fear, surmounting and hope, hope for the mercy of water.

But something was different than at the competitions I had swum before, the sea. I had consider the black edge of the bay, the bottomlessness, which opened up on either side of the bright ridge of sand and were abysses of dark stone or simply just depth, a depth which goes so far into itself that it darkens and no longer lets in any light. A surge went through the swimmers around me. A man with a pistol positioned himself on the boat next to the swaying yellow flag. He lifted his arm in the air; our bodies crouched almost automatically. Then he fired and we jumped.

(pp.241-246)

[...]

Barely any German and only poor English was spoken in the French hospital I now found myself in. Neither the sisters nor even the duty doctor could give me an adequate explanation of what had happened. What initially sounded like they were all talking very animatedly about artwork, “art! art!” eventually turned out to be heart, if you focused particularly closely on the silent French H. I went without the medical details.

I was placed in a bright three bed room. The visitor time was in full swing. Wives, relatives, and children brought the ward to life, whilst elderly men smiled in a weak and mellow way, and allowed their exhausted hands to be squeezed. The commotion died down a little when I received a visit. She greeted me with a wary kiss on the forehead. She had barely sat down when the door to the hospital room opened a crack and a dark head of hair peered in. She registered my disturbed look, shouted something incomprehensible towards the door, and then introduced me to the person who had rescued me, the young Frenchman, our driver. He had noticed that I had lost my bearings whilst swimming, at which point he had followed me and managed to grab me just in time. I asked him about the result of the race, she translated. But he

just shrugged his shoulders, smiling. I thanked him in a series of clichés —how do you thank someone who has saved your life? — and when she no longer held back on translating everything I had not said, I automatically thought, “French lover.”

In order to calm the medic’s conscience, it was considered best to send me back to Germany on the overnight train. She brought me to Marseille with the Jeep and without the driver. Our goodbye was overly rushed, fleeting and strangely informal. But in the end she kissed me on the lips for the first time since my accident.

Once I had returned, I consulted different doctors for more clarity. Getting a clear diagnosis was seemingly impossible. Nobody could tell me when and if I would be able to train again. Instead, I just heard routine pieces of advice everywhere: do not overexert yourself; no meals with too much fat; be careful with cholesterol; everything in moderation, especially sport. When, during one of my last attempts to get some clarity, I reheard the recital about the danger of overexerting myself in any shape or form, I interrupted the doctor. Could *nobody* here understand how much of an exertion it would be for me *not* to swim? I gave up.

In the meantime, her photographs were so successful in Provence that she could continue concentrating on her artistic work. In February, she travelled for the first time to a famous gallery in Basel with a portfolio of test prints. Two days later — I was still waiting for her to let me know she was alive — I received a phone call from my aunt, my mother’s second eldest sister, who was calling around to tell us all that the manor house on Misfortune would start being demolished soon. The company that the paper and cardboard factory was sold to after my grandfather died planned to extend the production lines. One of the central processing routes could only be extended over the plot of the manor house. It stood in the way of the expansion. And we had to treat being made aware of these plans as a gesture from the company’s management. After all, the house did not belong to us anymore. Everything else was nostalgia.

But the company’s management clearly also understood nostalgia and offered us one more visit to the manor house on Misfortune, since the house had been closed in a hurry after my grandfather had died and the employees had moved out. There were still lots of generally useful

things left there because the new management of the company initially took over the rooms, including the furnishings, as accommodation for their most important employees, who settled mainly on the top two floors whilst the rooms on the lower levels — the office, dining room and parlour — remained sealed up until further notice. I decided to make my way to Misfortune the next morning. Without even thinking, I had always hoped that it would stay as it was, perhaps because I believed that, just by existing, it would protect a part of my life from being forgotten, perhaps because of the illusion of being able to return to the past. I now had to say farewell for good to this illusion, to the chance of this type of return.

(pp. 253-255)

[...]

I climb up the bank of the riverside road to a telephone box on a platform surrounded by benches. Rain crashes against the sides of the booth, which steam up with my breath almost as soon as I have stepped inside. On the other end of the line, a man's voice answers. "Who is that?" I ask. The man at the other end says hello several times — does he not have a French accent? Then I hear her voice. Initially, she giggles a bit awkwardly — I am ringing at a bad time — yet she does not make lots of excuses. She says that she has to tell me something and says that whatever we had between us is over. I listen and say yes to everything just so she knows I am listening. Am I still there? "Yes. Yeah, yeah." She wants to say farewell. "Yes," I say.

"And where are you going now?" It is the first question she has asked me and a yes is not enough here.

"Down to the water," I say.

"Down to the water?" I hear her voice for the last time. I nod in silence as if she should long since know: we always return to the water.

(p.284 – the end)