



John von Düffel
DER BRENNENDE SEE
(The Burning Lake)

A Novel, 220 pp.
February 2020

Chapters 1 - 3 (pp.1-24)

Sample translation © Anya Malhotra

Contact: Judith.habermas@dumont.de

DUMONT

*For
Greta and Katja*

"The Bellandur Lake is Bangalore's apocalyptic attraction. The largest water body in the city is so polluted with chemicals and waste that it frequently catches fire. This happened in February, then again in May. For 12 hours the fire blazed and smoke billowed over the city. India's third largest metropolis, better known as the country's Silicon Valley, is living up to its new name: Bangalore, city of burning lakes."

spiegel.de, 10.6.2017, 23:35

DUMONT

Part I

Temperatures will average 18°C, with highs going up to 25°C. Night-time temperatures drop to 8°C with clear, cloudless skies. Very sunny days interspersed with light cloud cover. Weak to moderate wind from a westerly direction. 10% chance of precipitation.

3-day forecast for April 21-24

Travelling light was a habit she had acquired from her father – one of the few she was not ashamed of. Hannah sat in the train, squeezed between passengers, bags and wheelie cases, her rucksack on her knees, awaiting the moment when she would get up and manoeuvre her way to the door. In such situations her father would have been reading. She wasn't reading, instead she looked past the woman sitting next to her and out through the window. Outside, the flat, familiar countryside rolled past, which as a child she had simply accepted, only to hate it later and still later learnt to love in its desolation. What she had previously perceived as an endless wasteland now appeared to be a truth that she understood.

She would only travel here earlier to visit her father, today she was travelling because he was no longer there. There was a lot to settle after his death. A trace of the void she expected in his apartment seemed to resonate in the vastness over the meadows, the distance between the farms, the immense empty space between sky and earth. This time she was visiting no one.

It was no longer the same journey, and probably her last to this side of the country. The green outside the sun-speckled windows appeared less lush and verdant than usual. Dust hovered above the fields in thin wisps, as if the earth was a cloud and the sky solid. Even the ditches that crisscrossed the meadows and pastures like a grid were dry and the colour of cracked clay, or filled with weeds instead of water. Once again, it had not rained for an entire month.

Hannah turned away from the window. She could imagine what her father would have said, but she didn't want to finish her thought. Earlier, it used to embarrass her if she was told that some sentence or other sounded like her father. It used to be enough to silence her. Even if the sentence was perfectly true, it made her feel she had been refuted because its truth appeared as something that was inherited, something she couldn't help. As if she had no truth of her own.

But nowadays she met hardly anyone who remembered her father. He had withdrawn completely in the last years and fallen silent. It had been a long time since

anyone pointed out sentences that sounded like him. But she caught herself at it and found similarities, which she couldn't and didn't want to hide from herself. She was long past being embarrassed; she only got a fright sometimes, ever since he was dead, when she saw him mirrored in her gestures and thoughts.

And yet she travelled light, as he had. She had always liked that about him. Even on lengthy journeys, voyages or long-haul flights he usually carried just his rucksack. There were pictures of him dashing across a gangway or heading towards a terminal, faded black and white photographs, that she used to gaze at often because in them her father looked like a young schoolboy headed into the big, wide world with his schoolbag on his back. There was even a sentence attributed to him, though perhaps he had never actually said it, that for his travels he needed only his swimming trunks and a few apples for provisions. Her father always carried apples. When he returned, the apples would be finished and his swimming trunks wet. From every trip her father would return with less. Even as a child she had thought she understood that this less was part of the lightness of travel, a feat that he had made into a habit. Although it meant that he never brought back anything for her.

Hannah lifted her half-filled rucksack as if testing it and listened to the clattering of the train as it crossed the old canal bridge. The landscape in the windows gave way to parking lots and warehouses of cargo companies, furniture stores, car wash centres, backyards and the backs of buildings along the tracks to the station. She knew the stretch that would come now backwards.

Even before the inevitable announcement over the loudspeaker, a stir rippled through the passengers, as if they suddenly realised how long they had been sitting still. The first few began gathering their belongings and putting on their coats, which though appropriate for the time of year were far too warm and voluminous for the weather. Hannah didn't stir. She had nothing else to put on or carry. She travelled light. But she doubted that she would manage going back lighter and with less than she had come with.

The temperature recorded at 11:45 was 19°C, up 7°C in the past four hours. Max. of 22°C likely between 13:00 and 15:00, followed by a slight drop towards the evening. Cloudless skies.

Daily forecast, April 21, updated at 11:47

The building caretaker was already waiting at the door to the flat. He mentioned in greeting that they had met once before. Hannah nodded hurriedly and without any recollection. She felt uneasy thinking about what awaited her. She would rather not have to see again the things her father had left behind, all that checked-in luggage. She would have preferred if the flat and all that remained were dealt with as a coffin to be shut and buried or cremated.

She placed her rucksack just inside the door and followed the caretaker, keeping behind his back. He didn't take off his shoes and entered the hallway without any hesitation. In the course of his job he had probably seen a lot of messy flats full of rubbish, chaos, dirt and stench. In comparison, this one was in excellent shape. It appeared as if it had been cleared out already, sparingly furnished, just as it had been, containing only what was essential. There was little to indicate that a person had spent the remaining years of his life here.

When the body was laid out two weeks ago, the undertaker had called and asked if there was anything she wanted to give to her father on his last journey. At first she had shaken her head. The question was directed presumably at some item of clothing, a favourite shirt or best suit. But to her ears it had sounded like burial offerings pharaoh style. That wasn't like her father at all. Someone who travelled light didn't take worldly items along to the other world, not even one of his books to identify himself as the writer that he was. So she said no. She had still believed then that the farewell from her father could be as easy as the goodbyes she remembered. A few hours later she called the undertaker back. There was something she would like to give her father to take along on his last journey, if it was possible: an apple.

Her father was cremated with an apple. The urn that was laid to rest contained his ashes and the ashes of the apple. Hannah was sure he would have liked that. But it was the end of the lightness, that much was clear to her now.

The caretaker steered clear of the bedroom, as if he didn't want to be indiscreet, inspected the kitchen and bathroom in passing and led her further into the living room. Hannah was glad that he was with her. His routine manner was calming,

his kindness practiced. Good to know that what had to happen here happened everywhere all the time, that everything was following its normal course.

He opened a window on the side towards the balcony to let in fresh air. Hannah was grateful to him for this too. She stood still in the middle of the room and looked around. She had been here several times in the past months when her father was still alive. This was the first time she was in the flat of the deceased. Suddenly, and with much more force than during the laying out of the body and the funeral at the cemetery, it hit her that her father didn't exist any longer. In the time since her last visit, the dead man had lived here and taken possession of everything. The depression in the seat, the dent in the sofa cushions were made by him. The shadowy oily shine on the seat back was from the back of his head. He had shifted from one chair to the other finding the best spots. The stains on the carpet were his, as were the strands of hair on the headrest of the TV armchair. One could smell him. The odour that drifted across from the bathroom and kitchen was the smell of death, the utensils in the sink were utensils of the dead.

"My mother doesn't want any of it," said Hannah, her voice echoing. "No keepsakes."

The caretaker nodded without a word. He was probably waiting for her to continue, but Hannah had absolutely no idea which of her father's things she should keep, knowing that the dead man had touched them all.

Involuntarily she looked around for a writing desk, a bureau or something of the sort. During the last nights she'd kept thinking whether she should ask a student to sort through and archive her father's estate, in case anyone was interested. But in front of the window there was just a narrow dining table without drawers, and big gaps yawned in the bookshelf. No piles of manuscripts or notebooks, no old laptop or PC. Nothing gave any indication that before his death a writer had lived here.

I never saw him writing in this flat, thought Hannah. But she remembered that even in her parents' house her father never sat at a desk; he used to gravitate from room to room following the sunlight. He liked best to write outside in the garden, on the terrace, on park benches or even bus stops. He was an itinerant without a fixed place, even at home.

"Is there a storeroom or an attic where my father might have kept his papers and the rest of his library?" The few books on the shelves looked worn and dog-eared like those left behind in hotel rooms, not worth the effort of carrying back.

"There is the cellar," the caretaker replied helpfully and pulled out another key. "Would you like to take a look?"

She wasn't left with much of a choice.

As they climbed down the staircase and made their way towards a heavy iron door, she mentally prepared herself for damp packing boxes and mildewed books with warped bindings. But the cellar was as dry and warm as an attic in summer, and the storeroom that the caretaker unlocked was empty. There was just a bicycle leaning against the wall, a toolbox beside it that appeared rusted and ancient, as if her father had placed it there as soon as he moved in, never to touch it again.

"I hope nothing is missing..." The caretaker looked at her half quizzically, half waiting, presumably to find out if there was any danger of a reproach or perhaps even a complaint from her side. Hannah made an effort to remain friendly and uncomplicated. "When he was alive my father associated himself with very few things, and I associate very few things with him."

She smiled, but she felt like crying.

There was something disconcerting about the extent of the emptiness, and she wasn't sure whether in it she could still discern her father and his urge to keep diminishing, becoming more essential. It had bordered on self-erasure, as if his disappearance had set in long before his death. As if his last years had simply been a kind of cessation, coming closer and closer to nothingness.

But when had it begun?

When they left the cellar she turned back to see the bicycle, a red ladies' cycle without a crossbar. Her father had never been choosy about his cycles, had bought them at flea markets, taken whatever he could get. Hannah was merely surprised that unlike the toolbox it looked like it was in use.

"Has anyone besides me been here lately?" She simply could not imagine that her father had ridden around on the cycle until recently. "I mean apart from the cleaning lady and the nursing staff?"

The caretaker, who was two, three steps ahead of her, paused halfway on the stairs and gave an amused look over his shoulder. "Lady visitors?"

"Ladies or men..."

"I'm a caretaker, not a watchman," he said, but it wasn't a sardonic remark at all, just a harmless joke. He must often have to deal with relatives who were more curious than they ought to be.

They didn't go back to the flat. Hannah had seen enough and followed the caretaker to the courtyard, where she held her face up to the sun for a moment. The rays already had warmth, the fresh air felt good after the dust. Hannah took a deep breath, but it didn't help to loosen anything inside. She felt as if she had encountered a question in the emptiness of those rooms for which she still needed to find the right words. And it was clear that no one could help her.

The caretaker handed her the visiting card of a removal company he could recommend. The word "removal company" held her attention for a moment because sometimes it seemed to her that her father wasn't dead but had merely moved without a forwarding address. Then she read the note in smaller print: "Specialists in house clearance and storage".

She could take a few days to think it over, the rent for the month was already paid, she heard the caretaker say. "Including heating," he added and handed her the keys. The keys to the apartment of the deceased.

Because she didn't know what to say, Hannah asked if he knew of any hotel nearby, not too drab, not too expensive. He gave her two or three names, but it was clear the caretaker thought she might as well spend the night here – an idea that felt absolutely alien to her.

"It'll pass," said the man, as if he knew. Or maybe he was just in a hurry for his next appointment. Life goes on.

He had already said goodbye when she remembered another question. "Has the swimming pool opened already? The outdoor pool behind the football fields?"

She didn't really plan on going for a swim now. It was just something that her father would have done, his set habit whenever he arrived anywhere. The first thing he did every time and anywhere after a journey was to get in the water.

The caretaker blinked against the sun and a little at her, as if he knew that she was just delaying him so that she wouldn't be alone with the emptiness behind the door.

"Your father always went to the lake any time of year," he replied and briefly raised his hand a second time in farewell. But he had given himself away. Clearly, he knew her father better than a caretaker needed to know a tenant. Perhaps even better than she did.

Warning for persons with allergies: high levels of birch and grass pollen. Due to the high UV index persons with sensitive skin are advised to avoid over-exposure to the sun or to take necessary precautions.

Pollen forecast on April 21, updated at 12:31

The tyres could have done with more air. The chain made alarming grinding sounds every time she stepped hard on the pedals, but she got ahead. Hannah hadn't entered the flat again. In the cellar she'd hunted unsuccessfully for a bicycle pump and then decided – in flea market fashion – to take the cycle as it was. She, too, didn't want to be choosy, she wanted to go to the lake.

Unlike her father, Hannah hadn't brought her swimsuit along. Before this trip it wouldn't have occurred to her that she might need it. But after the emptiness and anonymity of his flat, her father's favourite lake seemed to her the only place, and swimming the only way to be close to him. She couldn't go back to the bereaved rooms.

The sun was shining warmly, almost like summer. It didn't matter how cold the water would be, Hannah would get warm and dry quickly after the swim, even without a towel.

She had soon passed the rows of houses and reached the edge of the town. Over the last years she had occasionally come here on walks with her father so she knew the area, which was the same as everywhere else. Meadows, fences, ditches, small, scattered patches of woodland, then more ditches, fences, meadows. The grass bent silvery, almost white under the sun. The ditches were overflowing with nettles and thistles bearing purple flowers. The few trees had already come into leaf and appeared exhausted. Here too, the soil was obviously very dry. From across the meadows came the smell of hay.

The lake wasn't immediately visible. As one got closer, for a long time it appeared that one was moving towards another thicket of trees further away, a little larger and sparser perhaps. But the way the trees were placed somehow resembled a backdrop, something superimposed, like a forest without depth. Even the poplars standing in line didn't fit in the picture. And then at some point the trees no longer obscured the water, its vague grey-blue expanse shining between the trunks and reflecting the sky.

Her father had loved it. On their walks, his steps would become palpably faster on this path of sandy, compacted subsoil, even when he was barely able to

any longer. Everything within him rushed towards the water. He had loved this lake and rushed all his life. In this love there had always been a kind of urgency, till the end. Whenever Hannah thought of him, she saw her father rushing down this path to the lake, as if he needed to reassure himself that the water had not withdrawn, that it was still there and waiting for him as it did every day.

Now the sun shone without him.

Across the embankment Hannah could see the sand shimmering in the far distance, the sand hills and steep drops on the other side. The far shore appeared much brighter than in her memories, as if the sand had been growing higher and whiter. Her father's favourite lake was a nameless pit filled with water. At some point, apparently, there used to be a wheat field at this spot, and later a potato field, neither very fertile it was said. Then people came and started quarrying for sand, and after the sand came the water. The gash torn into the landscape started filling up and turned into a grey-blue lake. The barren soil around it became overgrown and wooded, creating the rough shore that both concealed and revealed the lake. Hannah pushed the cycle up the slope to the edge. Ahead of her the water unfurled, smooth and untouched, as if it had every right to do so. Hard to imagine that it hadn't always been like this and wouldn't always remain so.

It had never been a picture postcard lake. The uneven embankment along the shore was overgrown with scrub and crisscrossed by beaten paths. There was no beach or sandy cove on this side of the lake opposite the gravel works, only a handful of bathing spots about the size of a picnic blanket beside the soot marks of campfires made by wild campers. The circles of ash marking the extinguished fire sites and last summer's plastic trash were the only intrusion in the lush, flowerless green. What sounded like wind in the trees was the noise from the nearby autobahn, to whose construction the gravel plant owed its existence. For her father all this was inconsequential, all of it didn't exist when he stood, as she now did, at the top of the embankment. He had eyes only for the lake and loved it, not because it was beautiful but because it was there.

And because it was the deepest lake with the clearest water, as he would always say, ground water.

Hannah believed she could see the depth like a shadow that stretched over the water and dropped down into the bottomless deep. Even on a bright day like this, the lake was dark on top, resembling not so much a flat surface as an arch, bent like the back of something enormous. Whatever it was, it took in the entire lake, burying every sandbar beneath it, pulling all that was shallow down until there was nothing left, only the shadows of water on water. Hannah knew that beyond one, maybe two metres she would no longer find any hold for her feet, her toes, and would step into nothingness.

She left the bicycle at the top of the slope not wanting to get a thorn in the practically flat tyres. The cycle stand, at least, worked, but there was no key in the ring lock. The lock seemed to have been broken open at some point. It was only now in the sunlight that Hannah realised how impossibly red the cycle was. On the frame, a hand's width below the saddle, a scratched F was visible. She had no clue what it could mean. There was no F in her father's name. It probably had something to do with the previous owner.

She pushed her way through blackberry bushes and nettles to her father's bathing spot. If memory served her right, it was not the nearest hollow but the flat stone further down at the edge. Hannah hadn't been here in ages and it had been even longer since she had swum here. But the more seriously she contemplated getting in the water, the more unwelcoming the lake seemed to become. As she approached, she could feel the coolness rising from its depths, as if it came from a kind of night. Hannah knew it well from her father, his hands, his skin. Each time they embraced in greeting it was this coolness that she felt. Invariably, whenever he came back from his trips, he would first go to the lake and bring the smell of the lake back home with him. For a while she had actually been jealous of this lake that seemed to come first for him.

She had never understood it, and even now she didn't really understand, but she was determined to do the same.

Hannah stepped on the stone, nudged off the charred foil of a barbecue takeaway with her foot and undid her bra under her T-shirt. She took a quick look around to make sure, but she couldn't spot anyone, no one out for a walk, no one crouched between the bushes along the shore with a fishing line and certainly no one out for a swim. The nights were still too cold and the water too deep. Probably that was why her father had loved this lake, not despite but because of it being cool and unapproachable.

She undressed quickly, ignoring the shivers coursing through her body as she laid her clothes down in a heap: shoes, belt, trousers, T-shirt. The stone under her bare feet felt as cold as the lake would be. She tried not to think of the multiple needle pricks as hostile but as a prickling sensation reminiscent of warmth. Then she took the first step. Immediately, the water was up to her navel. Reflexively her arms shot up, as if escaping an embrace, offering the least space for its assault, the minimum amount of skin. But the steep shore left her with no choice. Hannah pushed herself off and laughed. Laughed away the burning cold and struck out crawling, with her head above the water at first. Then she dived below and opened her eyes underwater. It was as if she could see in the dark.

Nevertheless, she did not swim out far but in an arc parallel to the shore so that she could save herself if she got a cramp. She kept her eyes on the red bicycle, it served as her reference point. She was barely 100 metres out when a woman

appeared on the embankment. A youngish, perhaps even a young woman with medium length, medium blonde hair. For a moment she stood there looking around. Hannah could not recognise her face because of the water blurring her eyes. She stopped mid stroke and blinked several times but still couldn't focus. The woman, on the other hand, must already have spotted Hannah in the water but did not look her way. Instead, she briefly crouched before the cycle, gently passed her hand over the saddle, mounted and rode off.

"Hey," yelled Hannah, "Hey!"

But the woman didn't even turn her head. Her face, its somehow girlish profile was covered by the medium length, medium blonde hair.

"Hey," yelled Hannah again as loudly as she could and smacked her palm flat on the water. But that did not bother the bicycle thief in the slightest. She continued to pedal at a provocatively leisurely pace along the embankment, as if it was the most natural thing in the world and she wasn't in the slightest hurry to get away.

Hannah swam a few strokes in pursuit – a hopeless endeavour. The fastest swimmer in the world would not be able to keep up with a cyclist. Even if she had swum the shortest way back to the shore, she would have had to run after her across the embankment, through the bushes and thorns completely naked.

"Stealing from a swimmer is the absolute pits," Hannah yelled after her. "You low-life thief! Gutless coward!"

But that wasn't what was really making her mad. What absolutely infuriated her was how the other woman acted as if she didn't even exist.

And then she was gone.