

TOM WHALEN

REPORTS FROM STUTTGART-WEST

ON STALKING

Have you, by chance or design, also often walked down the street where *he* or *she* lives? But stalking as something unwelcome or criminal or even musical is not what I want to discuss today. This morning bees are stalking me as if I were a flower. I am sitting on a bench under the linden trees that line Bismarckstrasse in the west of Stuttgart. The weather is warm, the air hums all around me. The sky, the sun, the shadows of leaves, my own shadow have been stalking me for decades, when I wasn't stalking them. Music stalks us, of course. Memories, too. One morning at Charlottenplatz I arrived at school early so I might ask my teacher a question before class about the general subjunctive. I wondered if this was a proper act but was afraid to add it to the list of questions I would have liked to ask if I had the grammar and not been, in my ignorance, so shy. Every day on average fifteen emails from different addresses request that I respond to questions I have no intention of answering but answer anyway. Didn't the same black car with darkened windows pass a moment ago? That our speech may be warm while our hearts are cold is more a matter of ethics than aesthetics. The summer heat roils with so many interrogatives. Three toddlers in plastic cars pedal past on the sidewalk, one behind the other, their legs pumping up a storm, their cars clattering, the children intent only on their goal of catching the one in the lead, and the one in the lead refusing to let that happen. Not a cloud in the sky to prevent the sun from finding every plant, animal, and insect—no matter how well-hidden. The minute hand stalks the hour hand, who waits patiently. "Your ID, sir." "But officer, I'm only sitting on this bench minding no one's business, not even my own." "And these shadows at your feet?" "Those aren't shadows, they're my feet. If they could speak, they would say as much themselves." "In that case, *Schönen Tag*, I wish you a pleasant day." Are you stalking me as you read this, and I you as

I write it? Shredded leaves, twine, moss, rat droppings, a beer bottle, a dead beetle with crimped wings, plastic bits, slivers of tin foil, the arm of a doll, a faded leaflet advertising a roofer, burnt matches, cigarette butts, a page torn from a book in Russian, a photograph of fiery Mount Etna, a fragment from Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* ("Tom's first concern was to open the folding doors to the landscape..."), and a whistle, among other items, lay beneath the bench and occupied my thoughts for an unspecifiable amount of time, during which, I confess, I may have dozed a bit. "It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* they exist" (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.44). A thoroughly unstalkerish sentence, don't you agree? I sit on this bench listening to a blackbird praying full throatily atop the Pauluskirche's cupola in a style he hopes will be successful. Why is it that only male birds sing when for humans all genders may be heard? The cat stalks the rat, the rat stalks its shadow, and the shadow pretends it knows nothing of this. And look: the beetle's not dead after all. It's climbed up the stalk of a bluebottle that now bends down to the ground like a page before his queen.

ON TRANSLATING

When I try to understand someone, fully understand, with all my albeit limited abilities—so limited they distort if not pervert what we loosely call reality—I take heart in its impossibility. No, not heart, but wings, like the sweeps I observe from my balcony chittering and diving into my neighbours' eaves with a speed and grace far beyond the Olympian. For example, if I say that what I'm writing is meant as a direct appeal to one person alone whose soul I would examine, preferably behind glass, peering at its every chamber and system, peak and crevice, shame and beauty, blush and despair (if this sounds foolish in the extreme, I won't disagree), I wonder what the day will bring. Will I paint freely? Will ghosts call? Do admirers sink or swoon at the feet of a porcelain figurine? Swoon, if one can swoon without fainting, and I'm not sure I can. But the main question is this: How is it, in this brutal, chaotic, and uncaring age, that I still find comfort, like an old coat as soothed to be worn as I am to wear it, when I walk down to Schlossplatz for a cappuccino and croissant? What warms us in the dead of winter more than irrelevance? What cools us in summer's oven more than uselessness? There's someone at the door, but I'm far too busy to enter these souls' es-

chatological fantasies—an abyss above, an abyss below, that kind of thing. The one I love, amongst thousands I've a fondness for, travels in her soul to regions beyond my ken. I would follow her like Orpheus did Eurydice, if it weren't that we live in different centuries. *Here* it's absolutely bluer than blue, and my mind is equally clear; *there* I can't say because I'm busy translating the city noise outside my windows and have no time for travels through the interstitial dark without a guide. Should I say *thus* or *so*? In this context, *thus*. Should I say *apprehensive* or *fearful*? In this context, *apprehensive*. Translating implies many things others might find unseemly, as might I if I had time to consider them. *No, no, I am not at home, I am at work, let me be*. The silhouette behind the hatched glass in my door must take my *Nein, ich habe keine Zeit* at its letter. The glass in the door glows pearl gray in the late afternoon northern light. The figure's shadow on the stairs is the last to leave the building. It's not easy to spin simultaneously in so many times and places. For a moment I thought I was a waif in 1943, bereft of her family, cowering in the ruins near a paper mill along the Neckar. She knows even the air can be treacherous and belligerent. Nothing out of the ordinary occurs when I am in this state of mind. No one seizes my shoulder and turns me around for a good, hard look. Old doormen doze in clumsy chairs. My heart's blood runs on illusion, on dream, in cabs stuffed with nightingales. The literature of this century wastes no time on its own, but sings to the next, as does the previous one to ours. Zigzag lines, black ants, white sheets of paper, grandeur, wagonettes, sharpened pencils, a carafe of coffee, hesitant roses, tangled coats, mornings without commands or noblemen, poppy-seed rolls, theatrical endeavours, velvet slippers, the gaping beaks of birds. This is the world described by quantum mechanics amidst the dragons' splendid ruins. (The same thing might be said about language, and many times has been.) Erudite prose pieces flew from her fingers faster than time could record. Stage figures raised their heads, shed their helmets, spoke in mindful whispers. In the time it takes to move from one line to the next, I encounter chronic snoring, local conifers, a bridge, a dog, an occasion to recall autumn's virtuosity, even birds. "Have you considered moving into other rooms?" "Never." For six years I sat in Stuttgart cafés, dictionary in hand, reading only in German. What creates the mirror? What facilitates difference? Exquisite things: a snow-filled landscape, candlesticks, featherbeds drawn from the warehouses of boredom, etc. In one such warehouse I memorized "The Egyptian Stamp," in a dream, as it were. If I write *scalding*

rain showers, am I translating or dreaming? One night a child with no arms, only hands at her shoulders, led me up the stairs and into the attic whose one small window looked up at the stars. She told me her mother was a fish, her father a raging storm. The hand she asked me to hold was cold. She wore the skirts of an old woman stranded on a cliff. "I am the whole thing alone," she said. "I don't ask questions, have no curiosity. My cat's name is Mirror." Then she released my hand, and I could see the moon black through it, as if held by my fingerbones.

THE SUPPLICANT

One must assist him again? Who would have thought it? This arises from pure observation of him sitting in various cafés throughout the city, as if he had nothing better to do than to sprawl about at an outdoor table, reading and drinking mostly coffee all day. What should we do with him? How can we countenance his aubade or abulia, if that's what it is? His position cannot be denied. To stare at the back of his neck day after day, as we do, watching him pore over some bookish trifle for hours at a stretch. No, no, how can we take this on? The responsibility is too immense. I'm not sure if anyone should even be in the same room with him when he gets like this. We know all too well his terrors and our own. This point cannot be overemphasized: Decades have devoured him and now know him best. This should serve as sufficient warning. Do not proceed past this line unless you think you can understand us. It's the dog days, the morning air without breath, half of the city vacationing in all directions. Trams are less crowded, barking dogs louder, or rather easier to hear. Cafés not on vacation become harder to find. His search extends into Altdorf, Sillenbuch, Esslingen.... Though it's only mid-August, Schlossplatz is as empty as if it were the dead of winter. Already you can sense that the sun is tracking closer to the mountains, the air is cool as if before a rain, and it does in fact rain and people are caught in it—even those who linger at outdoor cafés. But on other days, like today, it's still the dog days, the sun ablaze as if this were Portugal. He would spend all day in used bookstores if any used bookstores still existed. For hours he sits absorbed in small pieces of writing. What is he doing? Is he blind? If not, then why does he lean over like that? He'll break his spine if he doesn't straighten up. Yes, always thin, always dark. We have that in common, though we'd rather not. In his notebook he writes:

The trains are yellow, the subways red, buses are covered with advertisements for trips to Italy or the Wilhelma Zoo. Is it easier to invent or record the world? From my seat in a café on Kleiner Schlossplatz at twilight I see the snow steadily falling on plastic chairs chained to tables.

On the trams the stops are announced by a woman's recorded voice. *Schwab-Bebelstrasse*, she sings. *For the 42 bus, please transfer.* I would gladly accede to her every suggestion. Water pools behind the car's reliable doors, which have allowed salt, mud, pebbles, and snow in, along with shoes, overcoats, dripping packages, and scarves. We passengers sit stock still, hardly breathing, unless we're coughing or blowing our respective noses. It's not right to sneeze vociferously in a crowded vehicle or café, and it is unwise to kiss cheeks or—grave error—shake hands. Reason knows far more about everyday life than some poets assume, even if we on the tram would all gladly vanish, as long as we knew we would reappear, preferably at our destination.

I have to tell you this, since it's the real point of this entry: Yesterday yet another decades-long friend told me that she would be out of touch forever now, that where she was going she must go alone—no friends, family, or anyone. I, too, am thinking of moving away (not of dying), back to my homeland. It would be a poor country that didn't possess beggars. I mean that only pictorially. Will I really leave, or did I only say that to terrorize myself, which my doctors tell me might edify someone in my condition? Here in Germany the word is *gemütlich*, comfortable, bourgeois, *gutbürgerlich*. Why would I want to leave a country where I can take timely, efficient trams to cafés about the city without fear of being shot or mugged? Which isn't to say I can't be a victim of a so-called terrorist act or confronted by life-threatening acts of injustice. On this tram none of us are cozy, nor all of us healthy, but we are warm—even in the cold light of our digital devices—while outside the car, the street, and tram lights film the falling snow.

I will miss them, my love, the ones who are dying, the ones who are dead, but I will miss you more. No one will I ever miss more than you, except for the you who does not exist because she was never born—not even in memory. On days like this I have no desire or means to be eloquent, but at times I think myself as elegant and eloquent as, say, a falling leaf, and I am tongue-tied to account for this.