

To think backwards even while some dark force pushes me forward. To ally myself with time and make it into my accomplice. To make peace with the time that's past, and conclude a pact with the time that remains.

To act as if all clocks in this world were defecting to my side. As if I had enough time left to understand my road to this room. A child's first step in my direction. To make approaches toward the one who sits on the couch thinking about himself. To control the corrupt detective in me and prevent him from reducing me to a simple formula. To string together banalities with practiced agility in order to reconstruct a so-called logic. To locate guilty individuals behind whom I can hide myself and my defeats. Some scapegoat or other to whom I can present my bill. "We have to pay for everything" was another sentence with which my mother opened the first chapters of my story. What kind of a sense of "guilt" do I need in order to feed my insatiable hunger for suffering? What account do I want to settle?

"Stop thinking about yourself and your messed-up life, as if there were a secret somewhere that you

have to uncover. Come on, gays always end up tragically. Everybody knows that,” whisper the apparitions, and I sit on the couch and issue indictments. Against life in general, and my own life in particular. Against death even while still alive, and against the death that takes a person’s life before it’s ever occurred. I accuse the unimaginative dramaturgy of my story, which caters to and confirms all picture-book prejudices.

What a kitschy idea, to place the illegitimate Volker in a group home for the first three years of his life, just because even at the age of forty his fearful mother obeys her own mother, who won’t tolerate the bastard in their shared apartment. After the authoritarian grandmother’s death, Volker comes to live with his mother, who spoils him rotten and rears him to be a precocious mama’s boy. Of course, the mama’s boy turns into a class clown and outsider, and of course—we can rely on the law of consequences—at the age of sixteen Volker discovers that he’s gay. The furtive glances of the sixteen-year-old in the schoolyard, his secret desire betrayed in his eyes. Everything fits into the picture—the haunted look, that suspicious lack of self-confidence. What’s going on here are obviously not just harmless adolescent conflicts. This torture unmasks something strange and ominous. Why is it that everyone feels so inhibited in his presence? While his classmates, the same age as he, take their first

girlfriends for walks, Volker stalks across the schoolyard all alone. Strange, his walk! Thus walks someone who has something to hide. Poor outsider!

In German class they read authors whose books deal with healthy problems and normal conflicts. No room in the syllabus for exotic topics like homosexuality. There's a generally approved dearth of gay role models with whom one might identify.

Shaken by his dilemma, the sixteen-year-old stages a suicide attempt and temporarily ends up in the juvenile psychiatric ward. The onlooker isn't mistaken in his suspicion that he's seen this film before. Entire TV series are woven this way. The good homemade food should appeal to as many tastes as possible. The heroes are baked in such a fashion that nobody gets an upset stomach, or what would be worse, develops an appetite for something new. The stage managers of my biography seem to desire most urgently to give culinary satisfaction to the expectations of the conservative gourmet. The plot neither irritates nor creates confusion. After all, we're dealing here with a homosexual story, which knows what it owes to itself and others. We can lean back and keep our handkerchiefs close at hand. Inexhaustible is the repertoire of homosexual disaster.

Gays are appreciated as hairdressers (even if they aren't called Antoine) and as delightful ballet dancers,

but they're entitled to their success only as long as they earn it honestly in the sweat of their disaster. Bouts of depression and alcohol problems are the least we're permitted to expect. To imagine a homosexual who'd be successful and happy is unthinkable. Even the tolerant minority couldn't pardon such a provocation. As long as a politician can be blackmailed because of his homosexuality, the world is in order. Even the liberal public demands a goodly measure of problems, but above all secrecy. The gay cab drivers and the gay attorneys, the gay bankers and the gay teachers, the gay politicians and the gay industrialists know all this. The gay pillars of society know it and remain invisible. As a reward our dedicated, token gays are allowed to sing gay songs and speak about themselves on talk shows, but only as long as their otherness is worth a headline, a spicy rumor, a small scandal. We're ready to integrate them as shrill birds and entertainers, but the willingness to sire children remains the measure of all things. Whoever is different must pay the price, and from time to time throw himself in front of a subway train. Disaster or self-denial is the price that has to be paid. The poker-party hetero loudly applauds the gay star, which doesn't prevent him from sinking his fist into the mug of the rouged drag queen on another occasion.

Camera on the chain-smoker Mario who sits

on the couch and casts his mind back to Volker. Grand flashback to the past with appropriate music. Perhaps something from the *Symphonie Pathétique* by Tchaikovsky, who was able to transform his being different into such somber-sweet music. Isn't there a rumor that he deliberately drank polluted water, which quenched his thirst for death? "Come on, gays always end tragically," the voices in his head whisper to the thirty-four-year-old, who now thinks back out of his nocturnal jail to the iron bars of the sixteen-year-old boy.

They've got me caged. The white birds. Go ahead and stare at me with your academic eyes. Your raspberry-candy smile doesn't get to me. I'm your prisoner, but I won't say a thing. Not a word that you could analyze just in order to confine me in your tailor-made images. Go ahead, gawk at me and get high on the ridiculous assumptions you make about me. The unsuccessful suicide, who now stands by the window counting the iron bars that wish to do him no harm. Your gentle psychologists' glances bounce off me. Inspect the sixteen-year-old problem-creature in his cage. I won't roar. Won't hiss and won't scream. Are you waiting for me to growl and bare my fangs? A small solo performance by a disturbed adolescent for the benefit

of the socially correct cream-of-the-crop, who know on which side their bread is buttered. Sorry. You can count me out. Or would you prefer it if I wagged my tail and gratefully rushed to lap up the dog food that you've placed before me? I'm the one who cooked my own soup, so I'm the one who has to eat it. That's not my logic. Take your vitamin-rich din-din and feed it to some other bow-wow. To some rabid cur that, with your help, will turn into an obedient little lapdog.

I'm sitting in the trap, but I won't permit you to tame me like an animal. I don't want to be in your zoo. No circus tricks for the audience, which is so proud of its normality. Esteemed spectators! Witness the sensational show! A sixteen-year-old boy who only yesterday wanted to do away with himself will today do a somersault for you. Forwards and backwards. Applause for a sixteen-year-old whom we've managed to convert. Standing ovation for one who's cured, and who after successful therapy wishes nothing more fervently than to be like everyone else. Look elsewhere for your success stories. I shit on your banalities and your smug statistics. Eighty percent of disturbed adolescents are curable. Respond to therapy. To analysis. Can be catalogued. Interpreted. Labeled. Tamed and normalized. Go ahead and rattle the big keys in your pockets. I'm scared, but won't show that to you. You lock the doors behind me, and I put a

lock on my thoughts right in front of you. I feel sorry for you that you spent so many semesters studying psychology for nothing. Tame yourselves. I won't say a thing. Not even to Sven, who slinks across the corridor with his Registered-Male-Nurse smile and tries to buddy up to me. "Hi, I'm Sven," he says to me on the first day, and shakes my hand as if he wanted to uproot a tree. Winks at me and smiles his dazzling confidence into my eyes. He can shove his optimism somewhere else. His stupid "Chin up." I won't fall for his bluff. Sven, like all the other white vultures, is an accomplice of the psychologists. His affability is an old trick. I won't let them piss in my brain. Not anyone. "We want to help you." For all their understanding they can hardly see what's in front of their eyes. They get a heart attack from excitement whenever someone says something that they can encapsulate in their jargon. Entomb yourselves with your fat professional books. Nobody will miss you and your cemetery of psycho-babble.

"Would you like a cigarette?" asks Dr. Brahm, and makes a hearty man-to-man face. Looks like a pencil vendor playing cowboys-and-Indians. Drives a herd of Texas cattle through the treatment room, which annoys my eyes with abstract art. Colorful circles and triangles and question marks. Something pretending to be in good taste for a flipped-out adolescent with actual taste.

The associations make roaring noises like an inner ear infection. “That circle is my fat mommy, and I’m the triangle. Can you help me doctor? When I was three, my mother read our mortgage contract to me. Since then I’ve thought that I’m a black briefcase. My mother’s a brick and my father’s a bedside lamp.” The red question mark on black background represents the disturbed childhood of a tiepin. “Every person needs a vice,” Dr. Brahm intones melodiously and lights a cigarette. With white hands that jack off to the accompaniment of Mozart and candlelight. The Texas longhorns die laughing, and the cowboy is swallowed by the yellow mommy circle. Cowboy-mothers are merciless.

“I’d rather have a chocolate cookie,” I say in the weak falsetto voice of a small child, and look in another direction. Nevertheless, I smell the indulgent uncle-doctor smile that is spreading through the room like cheap perfume. He stinks, that fat ass. Thinks he can hook me with cigarette bait. I don’t come that cheap. Now we both try to out-silence each other. Consider yourself very smart, don’t you, Mr. Soul-Investigator. Crackerjack. With your routine for dealing with rebellious adolescents. We’ll make that obstinate little brat talk, you think. If not with a cigarette, then with patience and indulgence. There you crouch like a fat spider watching the fly that wandered into your web.

How many sixteen-year-old boys have sat in front of you like that? With shoulders tucked in and the face turned away. You smoke, and your smile is as gentle and sweet as rosehip tea. You think of the many cases you've solved. You deadbeat Sherlock Holmes of the soul. Maybe I look like a stupid, pimply, small-town kid, but I'm a precocious monster. "Horribly mature for his age," as our neighbor always used to say. Mrs. Brandt with the shrill voice and the red spots on her neck. Hysterical female who's relaxed only when there's a scandal. A miscarriage in the neighborhood, a spicy abortion, or a delicious suicide attempt. Is probably on the phone right now spreading the good news. "Have you heard? That son of Mrs. Wirz tried to kill himself. Yeah, exactly. That Volker. I always said there was something not right about him. No wonder, when someone grows up without a father. Things like that often happen with illegitimate children. I read that in the newspaper. Poor Mrs. Wirz. To get a child at the age of forty—that can't end well. And unmarried, too. She let Volker get away with everything. Deckerd him out like a little lord, and then didn't have enough money left to go to the hairdresser. I feel so sorry for that woman. Now he's in a mental institution, or something like that. I don't think such a thing is curable. Once crazy, always crazy."

Dr. Brahm hands me a Kleenex. What does he think he is, that soul-catcher? Go jack off by yourself. Got everything in store, prepared for everything. A guy like that won't leave the house without taking his umbrella. A guy like that puts even the impossible into his calculation. With patience and indulgence. The gentle approach promises maximum success. If someone screams too loud or rips the abstract question mark off the wall, he gets a bit of a tra-la-la injection or a little hippity-hop pill. Got everything in store. But I'm just a harmless silent type who now rewards the animal tamer's efforts with a crocodile tear. "I got some smoke in my eye," I say, and blow my nose into his stupid Kleenex that irks me. But I don't like the snot to run out of my nose while that cowboy in his white coat throws his questions out after at me like a lasso.

"Don't you want to go into the day-room, to be with the others?" asks Jürgen, and looks at me like a pesky insect. As usual, I'm standing around in the corridor. In front of my favorite window. In front of my favorite iron bars. The managers of the facility know what the poor insane need. A bit of nature outside the window. With some sky and a tree, and that kind of stuff. Nurse's Aide Jürgen doesn't like guys who loiter. Who so ineffectually keep to themselves. Nurse's Aide Jürgen is a psychology student and is picking up experience here. He prefers an

honest-to-goodness temper tantrum. That's something he can classify scientifically. I like that bespectacled, fat, chief physician's face of his, his muscular arms that hold me in my dreams at night. But I don't reveal anything about myself. The others reveal themselves round the clock. I can see through someone like Jürgen at once. Ambition is oozing out of all his pores. Can't wait for everyone to call him Doctor. He's suffering from the fact that he doesn't have any authority yet. That a licensed nurse like Sven is his superior.

How they all bore me. Agile little Sven with his palsy-walsy approach and his chewing-gum grin. Overweight Jürgen with his careerist eyes. Dr. Brahm with his Kleenex empathy. Am myself to blame for having fallen into their trap.

Suicide with sleeping pills. Ridiculous. Cowardly, and fussy, and totally dilettantish. Half a death for amateurs. A hobby suicide attempt. Why didn't I jump in front of the train like Gerlinde's cancerous mother? A single, tired autumn leaf drops from the tree. Doesn't participate in the great collective drop. Drops all by itself. Got to watch that I really don't go crazy here. I'd hate to see them enjoy that triumph. "No, I don't want to go into the day-room to be with the others," I say, and am furious that my voice is still tear-choked. Can only hope that my facial expression betrays nothing of

my nocturnal dreams. “As you wish,” is Nurse’s Aide Jürgen’s well-articulated reply, every letter a hypodermic injection. Then he walks down the corridor. With heavy, chief-physician steps. I watch him disappear and sit on his broad fatherly shoulders. “Let me ride piggyback, Daddy,” a dark voice cackles inside me, and pushes me off the swing.

I land back on my couch in Neukölln. Between rebellion and repression. To prevent the nocturnal detective from weaving an explanation that, in retrospect, fits my story like a glove. A brand-new answer for old questions that I’m only now asking myself.

Why does the sixteen-year-old Volker reveal nothing about his real problem? I keep silent about my gay dreams and anxieties and grow a thick skin. Hide behind distrust and coldness, which protects me like steel plate against the psychologists’ slick diagnoses. I climb into my armor and play the confused adolescent so they can paste their label on me. That way, everything will be properly classified. That way, everyone else will be satisfied and let me disappear in some file drawer. That way, they can wrap me in some technical jargon and let me pack my bags. With my alarm-cry suicide attempt I’ve offered up my feelings for interpretation for the last time. From now on I’ll reveal nothing of

what torments me. Here am I, and there are the others. The others are in the majority. “I’ve got to be on my guard. Mustn’t show any weakness. Must camouflage myself,” thinks the sixteen-year-old and adjusts to his image of a hostile world. “The career of an emotional cripple, does it begin after your suicide attempt?” asks Mario. Volker doesn’t answer.

I learn the art of dissembling and feel contempt for Dr. Brahm because he doesn’t see through me. “After all, you’re an intelligent young man,” says my cowboy shrink, as if my suicide attempt had anything to do with my IQ. I smile on his level and am on my guard. Even in front of the others, who observe me in order to collect material for their diligent reports. I don’t even trust the cleaning woman an inch. Maybe she, too, gets asked: “Well, what do you think of that lanky beanpole?” I play the comedian and engage in “social” and “communicative” behavior. I forbid myself the practice of staring out of the window for hours on end, and pretend to like company. Play board games with the others, and laugh loud and benignly as soon as one of the white birds is nearby. Stuff their greedy beaks with the vocabulary of an entirely normal high school kid who’s committed a pubescent stupidity. I sing the song of the white birds and warble a healthy, dynamic “hello” in order to escape from their cage.

At night, however, I color their limited horizon with their blood. I sharpen knives and gouge out the blind eyes they fixate on me. Observe and classify. Judge and evaluate. At night, I stick my knife into the fat belly of their self-satisfied normalcy. I dance in their blood and jack off while I punish the masturbators. Dr. Brahm, and the Not-yet-Dr. Jürgen, whom I yearn for.

I take revenge on my athletic coach and my Christian guardian from the youth agency who smears the holy oil of his mediocrity into my soul. I let F. die, and I also don't spare Uwe, of whom I dream. Refreshed by the nocturnal bloodbath, I climb back into my costume in the morning and recite the text they want to hear.

My night. My room. Archive of my collected bouts of fatigue and powerlessness. Stage setting for my alibis and resignations. Landscape for a fruitful lament. My room gasps for air. Every nook and cranny wheezes in stuffed-up discomfort. The do-it-yourself shelves stand on their spindly legs and bear the load of alien sentences. My room. My unspoken sentences. My refusals to tell. My un-lived life. The cobwebs on the ceiling don't indicate my lack of orderliness, but my chronic aloofness. I've installed myself neither in my story nor in my apartment. This isn't the abode of a "slob," but of someone who despite all insomnias still sleeps. No longer any imaginary knives, what remains

are but blunt swords with which Don Quixote-Mario battled against windmills for a while until he became too weak for that, too. To sit, and smoke, and stare. Stammering in my head, and my attempt to recognize in those fragments something whole, a sympathetic congruity that will help me invent myself. I grew a thick hide, which my fear of death now grimly pulls over my head in order to set me on my couch, thin-skinned. The suit of armor I've acquired is no longer suitable for my war. I'm an emotional cripple without a protective shield in which to hide from myself. Without a costume that matches my new text. Helpless and a bit envious, Mario looks at the Volker who danced with the knives. This angry sixteen-year-old may be the invention of the thirty-four-year-old who's seen all the James Dean movies, but let's permit him the illusion that his reminiscences are meant no less sincerely than is his wish to get to know himself a little better before his death.