

Translated excerpt

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Kaleb Erdmann
The Emergency School

Translated by Rob Myatt



I've been thinking.

A good metaphor for old memories, as in, potentially painful memories, ones that you've maybe been blocking out to a certain degree, right?

Right, says Hatice.

A nice metaphor for dealing with those kinds of buried memories would be an infusion.

An infusion, says Hatice, peering into the grey water, before asking, Like in a sauna?

No, not like a sauna, I say. More, like, tea. You have this thing, this dry stuff, all shrivelled up and dead, yeah?

Yeah.

It's lying there at the bottom and then you pour hot water over it and suddenly things start to happen. It all has colour and smell and taste again. I thought it was pretty good. It's what it felt like to me, during my research, I mean. And then I thought to myself, maybe that would work for the characters in the book as well, as a metaphor. But it just, kind of, falls short, because an infusion obviously has this element of enjoyment to it. But what I'm getting at is more—

A nutria emerges from the river.

More, like, painful, I say. And difficult.

Well, but you can't stand tea, she says. So maybe actually it does work.

True, I say. Maybe.

The nutria sits up on its hind legs and holds out one of its paws. I give it a piece of bread. The nutria takes the bread and holds out its other paw.

No, one's plenty, I say, before giving in and handing it another morsel, my last piece. Standing there, with a chunk of bread in each paw, the nutria looks rather lost and its gaze wanders.

The first time I saw a nutria on this bridge, I found myself completely awestruck. I knelt down slowly and watched its furry back in the water. A beaver, I thought, in the middle of Frankfurt, impossible. There are some steps next to the end of the bridge and you can walk down to the riverside. The nutria climbed out of the water and made a beeline for me, sitting itself down right in front of me. It had a rat tail instead of that broad paddle, so immediately I

knew: not a beaver. At the time, that was all I knew, but a magical moment all the same. It wasn't long, however, before I learnt that these animals have absolutely zero self-respect and will hop about obligingly in front of any old visitor, best case collecting a few scraps of food. The bridge is a major attraction in the summer, with flocks of children offering the little critter the last soggy remnants of their ice cream cones.

There's something masochistic about drinking tea, I've always thought that, I say. It's boiling hot water, you're funnelling this boiling hot water down your throat. And it has to be just hot enough that it doesn't burn your mouth, although pain is quite clearly part of the ritual, enduring the pain is a fundamental part of the tea experience.

I know, replies Hatice. There's hardly a day goes by that you don't tell me that.

Sorry, I say. But it's true.

The nutria smiles, using its endearing charm to draw attention to itself. We both look down at the pretentious little creature, at a loss. I bring the conversation back to the topic of infusions.

I had a bit of a play around with it anyway, this image of the infusion, I say. Really expanded on it, actually, pages and pages' worth. And then I went back over everything I already had and inserted this bit everywhere, like: The impact of the events struck him like hot steam, or: The memory bloomed and unleashed its scent, something along those lines, that sort of thing, all the way through, on and on. And then I thought to myself, Christ that's flowery, that's too much, it's way too flowery, I don't know.

Too flowery, she says.

Yeah. Way too flowery. So I cut it all out again, the whole infusion bit. I think there's only a single section left where someone says something like: As if pouring over hot water.

Pouring it over what?

I don't remember exactly. Something.

Okay.

I don't think it's coming across the way I mean it.

Okay.

Yeah. Meeting's tomorrow.

It'll work out. It's a good piece.

Now the nutria turns to Hatice.

I haven't got any more either, she says.

A beautiful image like that, once you've found one, it keeps you going for a few days, I say. But no more than that. More like a Big Mac, the second you finish, you're already hungry again.

A child hops down the concrete steps next to us. His face is crusty and smeared, a glob of ice cream cone in one hand, his little mouth slightly ajar. The nutria and the child stare at each other.

Cat, he says.

Mm, I say.

The child holds out the hand with the glob of cone in it to the nutria. The nutria seems uninterested. It turns around, slides into the water and swims off, keeping its nose just above the surface.

Cat, the child repeats.

Yeah, I say.

Here, you write—

Suddenly, my exposé is sitting on the table – where was he hiding that – dazzling as a neon strip light, the text illuminated with felt tip marks. Mr Mertens places his finger on one.

Here, you write that your book seeks to address the crime and its impact on the author's younger self. Now, there's nothing wrong with that per se, but I'm wondering – and sorry for asking – but I'm wondering if that's something that a wider readership would be interested in?

His finger remains rooted to the spot. Written above the highlight in permanent chicken scrawl is something I can't quite make out, either Hah!, Huh? or Heh?

It's a theme, obviously, of course it is. It's certainly a theme. But as a theme, I feel, or rather I worry, that it's, well, a bit small. Because of course it's also about other, more run-of-the-mill issues. There's the bit about growing up in East Germany as a young lad from the Western provinces – also quite a narrow focus, bit of a silent affair.

Mr Mertens yanks the paper sheath off his chopsticks with purpose and rips them apart, raining down splinters. I gaze down into my gigantic bowl of soup and wonder which side I should start eating from.

Are you familiar with Joachim Meyerhoff? he asks.

Sure, I lie.

He's absolutely brilliant is Joachim.

He plunges the point of his chopsticks into the teriyaki, unsticking a piece from the glistening brown mass.

His magnum opus is called *This Awful*, um, *Awful Hole Unspeak*, no *Unspeakable Abyss*, no, *The Terrible*—

He lifts the brown bite into his mouth delicately. I dip my spoon into my gigantic soup tentatively. There is an egg resting on top. I pick it up and bite into it; it is the same temperature as a hot lump of coal. The remainder of the egg plops back into the soup like a small, wet sack, the yolk vanishing into the broth.

Oh, This Unspeakable Hollow! That's what it's called. It's about a childhood. The author tells this story of a childhood, but actually it's kind of messed up, the main character grows up on the grounds of a psychiatric facility, only it's all very run-of-the-mill, really well written and with this twist, constant action, never a dull moment, and this nonchalance. Really great stuff. Really, really great.

I smile politely. Cool, I say. Sounds really interesting, I add.

Now, the chopsticks find themselves deposited by Mr Mertens on a napkin where they leave brown streaks. He reaches for his glass of wine.

If your novel was like that, if your novel had a bit of Meyerhoff's, of Joachim Meyerhoff's—

The empty wine glass comes to a rest.
style.

Mr Mertens looks around for the waiter, almost impotently. The waiter arrives and does a double-take, wondering where the wine he brought only minutes ago has gone.

I'm a fast drinker, says Mr Mertens.

The waiter takes down a second order of wine.

If your novel was, sort of, Meyerhoffian, then that would be interesting too and, how to put this without being offensive, it wouldn't be quite so inflexible, you see, not so inflexible, yes. I feel like, for a text written by a young man—

He traces my young, noodle-soup-eating silhouette with his hand.

it has quite a serious, almost academic tone that makes the whole thing feel a bit tame, if I might be so bold.

The wine arrives.

I read your debut, says Mr Mertens, lifting the glass to his mouth. It's good.

Thanks, I say.

It's very good, says Mr Mertens.

Thank you, I say.

I was even more surprised by this text that, sort of...

He doesn't finish his thought.

Don't get me wrong, he says instead.

Of course not, I reply.

If I might offer a bit of advice.

Absolutely, I say.

I think you need to decide whether you want to write a serious literary text or more of a zeitgeisty novel. At the moment, it's still a bit caught in two minds. Especially since, if I understand correctly, you weren't really traumatised by the shooting yourself. You saw the shooter, but you didn't see any bodies. All I'm trying to say is, and I can only hope you understand what I'm getting at here but, despite what you went through, your personal story is actually very—

He picks up his chopsticks again.

ordinary.

Mr Mertens turns his attention back to the now cold brown blob.

So the only option that leaves is to tell this ordinary story in a very extraordinary way, like Joachim Meyerhoff does, for example. Your text certainly hints here and there at the comedy in the everyday, but it all feels oddly scattered, stranded almost, if I may.

It feels as if I haven't even scratched the surface of my bowl of soup. Whenever I haul something up from one corner, two new, surprising ingredients float to the surface at the other end – a Narutomaki fish cake, a slice of pork belly, a cluster of enoki mushrooms, a leaf of pak choi. I stir and stir and stir. Swimming.

Okay, I say. That's a shame. But I understand what you mean, I think. It shouldn't exactly be observational comedy either, more sort of—

A prawn materialises between two green shoots of asparagus.

meditative, maybe? I ask the prawn.

Mr Mertens looks at me straight on, waiting to see if I want to expand on my point, but I'm done.

Then he addresses me by my surname, adding a Mr before it, followed by:

The other problem is, I'm more the entertainment guru at Sailstorff. If you'd told me you've got a crime novel up your sleeve – great. If you'd told me you've got a crime novel set in Germany up your sleeve – even better. But I don't think I'm the right guy for your project, unfortunately. I'd be happy to refer you to a colleague, though.

That would be great, I say. Thank you.

I'm at the Cathedral, I hiss.

What's that now? my mother replies.

The Cathedral, I'm at the Cathedral, I hiss louder.

It's a bad line, says my mother, really bad.

I'm at the Cathedral, I raise my voice above a whisper, drawing a venomous glower from a kneeling elderly lady.

The Cathedral. Well then I won't keep you any longer, says my mother.

I'll call you back once I'm outside, I say and hang up.

I'd initially figured the fresh air and the climb up Cathedral Hill might sober me up a bit, but here, in this stillness, the beers are sloshing around in my head again. It smells of stone and the air feels good, like a cool, clean plunge pool.

I drift through the nave, trying to spy the Bamberg Horseman between the pillars. It takes me quite a while to find him because he's not the monumental colossus you'd expect, more a dainty statuette, no bigger than a house plant. The Horseman is spindly, he has one hand raised in a cautious, defensive pose and is playing nervously with his cloak. He looks twitchy, as if he wants nothing more than to take flight and gallop away.

I take a few photos, read a sign saying that the Horseman is made of sandstone, obviously, then climb down a narrow staircase into the crypt where relics and devotional objects rest behind dull panes of glass. I pause for a while in front of the thighbone of the venerable Bishop Otto, staring at the adorned tinplate ferrule and the small fragment of bone in the middle.

I wonder whether I haven't just found another piece of the puzzle in this priestly thighbone, whether it isn't perhaps connected to these thoughts wrestling in my head with the local beer of choice. Maybe that thighbone holds part of the answer to the question which, for me, this entire house of cards is built on, the question which the very existence of the text I want to write hinges on: is there a single good reason to turn catastrophe into art?

I'm jealous of the playwright. I'm amazed by the way, in which he tackled Erfurt with such deft professionalism and made a moving piece of art out of it, how he condensed our meandering conversations into something that can get three groups of schoolkids to sit still in a dark room for an entire hour. Compared to the playwright, I feel like Mickey Mouse.

I'm scared of waking up one day and realising I'm groping around in this story without rhyme or reason, playing the true crime podcaster who builds up the horror formulaically, all for the cheap kick you get when a push notification lights up your lock screen with the words *plane crash*.

When I was studying at the Institute for Literature, a lecturer gave me an essay by Julian Barnes which supposedly addressed the question of how and why one makes art from catastrophe. The essay was about the painter, Géricault, and his work *The Raft of the Medusa* which depicts the moment when a knot of bony shipwreck survivors on a floating shack spot the ship that will rescue them on the horizon.

The frigate *Méduse* ran aground off the coast of West Africa in 1816. 157 men and one woman managed to find safety on a raft and set a course for the nearby coast, but the currents at low tide dragged them back out to the open ocean. A week later, with rations of water and rusk running low, the shipwrecked began to kill and consume one another. Others committed suicide, or died of exhaustion or thirst. Two weeks later, just fifteen sailors were rescued, many of them disfigured, blinded by seawater.

I went into the essay with quite high expectations – and one eye on Erfurt – and came out rather disappointed. Barnes claims that the painting, the artwork, has become removed from actual events; it has slipped *history's anchor* and become something bigger which the viewer can hitch their own thoughts, feelings and experiences to:

Are we not all lost at sea, washed between hope and despair, hailing something that may never come to rescue us?

I didn't like that one bit. These sailors consumed one another. They strangled, dissected and ate each other. And the feeling that's supposed to accompany that is *Well we've all been there?* I find that unsatisfactory, insufficient. It feels like a mockery of those sailors. Ultimately, that's precisely what I'm worried about: that in writing about the shooting, I will cast history's anchor overboard and end up just producing some sort of *maxim*:

Do we not all at times find ourselves underneath a desk, cowering from a gunman, fearing for our lives?

Barnes writes that time dissolves the story into form, colour, emotion. He lists what Géricault's concerns were not: political, symbolic, theatrical, shocking, thrilling, sentimental, documentational, or unambiguous. His concern was *truth to art*.

While today *The Raft of the Medusa* might bear the cracked, musty patina of an oil painting (the bitumen which once rendered the shadows a glossy black is chemically unstable), when Géricault began working on the painting in 1818, the disaster was just two years removed.

Géricault spoke with the survivors and, with their help, built a small model of the raft. He procured a severed head and other body parts from a hospital so that he could study the process of decomposition. He shaved his head and spent eight months cloistered in his workshop like a monk, the model of the raft and the body parts like sacred objects.

In other words, when I look at *The Raft of the Medusa* today, either in the Louvre or on my phone, I am viewing it at a distance of two-hundred years and it is hard for me to fully comprehend the true violence, the suffering, that is depicted there. But I don't like the idea that Géricault was actually attempting to chip away at everything that was real about the shipwreck, to dissolve it until all that remained was a calendar quote, a timeless adage.

Peter Weiss wrote something quite different about *The Raft of the Medusa* in *The Aesthetics of Resistance*. Because Peter Weiss was a communist, and to a hammer everything looks like a nail, Géricault is, in his eyes, a rebel, challenging the conservative, post-Napoleonic ruling class with a shocking and accusatory work of art on the *Méduse*, an incident which was highly embarrassing for the French authorities:

Géricault, son of the fourteenth of July, was familiar with the forces that needed to be directed against ruin, against disintegration; the revolution had been inscribed in him, like a scar; he had striven for the ability to be able to contribute to the establishment of a dominion of the common good, yet he possessed nothing but his artistic language.

And, of course, that too is far too heavy-handed, far too kitsch. I cannot imagine Géricault humming the Marseillaise as he worked. He simply did the work that needed to be done. He had this awful story gnawing away at him; he had read about the *Méduse* in the newspaper and from that moment on was haunted, worked like one possessed, so as to put a little bit of distance between him and it.

That's how I picture it.

I'm not sure it's imperative that someone write a book about the Erfurt shooting twenty years later, opening up wounds, stirring a pot that perhaps ought to be left well alone. I can't think what plausible reason there might be to do so. What I do know is that today, in the third decade of the twenty-first century, whenever I get too close to Erfurt, my limbs grow numb and my airways close up. I know that at an Apfelwein shop last year, a construction worker from Thuringia stood up for Robert Steinhäuser, breaking my nose in the process, and that any time I think back to that day my body becomes heavier, my neck stiffens and, obviously, my nose hurts. Half a year of writing and I am still none the wiser about my own motivations. What I do know, however, is that I don't want to *learn* anything from the shooting because it's not a textbook or a diagram or a mnemonic device; I don't want to *mould* it into anything because

it's not a lump of clay or papier-mâché, it's a real event and seventeen people lost their lives as a result.

I take a deep breath of cool church air.

Then I take a photo of the thighbone and move in close to the dull, tarnished glass. Wrapped around the bone is a bright paper band with a border of heavy, patterned brocade; the material is dotted with dull precious stones, each as big as a thumb.

I climb back up the stairs to the nave, leave the Cathedral and call my mother.

My desk is awash with cold, gritty books.

Give a Boy a Gun by Morton Rhue, *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote, *The Hunger Angel* by Herta Müller, *Lullaby* by Leïla Slimani, *The Adversary* and *Other Lives But Mine* by Emmanuel Carrère, *That's Enough for Today* by Ines Geipel. Books that deal with violence, incidents of real violence. They have virtually nothing in common other than a reason, a pretext to address this violence. I try to untangle these reasons and the problems these books encounter in their efforts. I read reviews.

The Hunger Angel was accused of being too nice. Of using language that is too nice to describe violence.

In Cold Blood was accused of the exact opposite: that it's too detached, that you can't use the cold tone of a crime novel to discuss the real-life murder of four people.

Emmanuel Carrère has been branded a voyeur who possesses an unsavoury fascination with cruelty.

Ines Geipel also came in for her fair share of criticism for *That's Enough for Today*, which came out in 2004, two years after the shooting. To this day, it remains the only serious work of literature addressing Erfurt and its fallout. Currently a Professor of Versification at the Ernst Busch University of Theatre Arts Berlin, Ines Geipel spent a whole year in Erfurt researching, absorbing the atmosphere in the city and documenting the survivors' fight for a full enquiry. *That's Enough for Today* is an engaged, political book which seeks to incite a reckoning, a work which calls out the failure to come to terms with the incident with enormous confidence and conviction, a brash, insistent text which takes its title from a Steinhäuser quote and has on its cover a single bullet casing lying on the tarmac.

That's enough for today, those are the words Robert Steinhäuser said to Rainer Heise, the *hero of Erfurt*, as the press dubbed him, at least for a few days. Steinhäuser comes across

Heise on the first floor of the Gutenberg-Gymnasium high school, having fired off seventy of his seventy-one rounds. He is holding his balaclava in his hand, having taken it off to reveal his face, damp with sweat.

According to the Gasser Report, that Steinhäuser was wearing gloves and a face covering during the shooting indicates that he did not fully grasp the reality of his actions, that perhaps a part of him assumed that it would be possible to *cross back over into the real world*. A theory further supported by the fact that he had arranged to go the cinema on 30 April, i.e. four days after the shooting, and that he met up with his friend B. the night before, leaving him with the words, *See you tomorrow*.

But now, seventy shots later, he comes across his old history teacher, Rainer Heise, in front of Room III on the first floor and simply removes his mask and takes off his gloves. Crossing back over into the real world, the one that still existed just twenty minutes earlier, no longer seems like an option. The world, in which he murdered sixteen people, has become reality, he has made that world a reality.

Heise recognises him and addresses him by his first name, asking: Did you pull the trigger, Robert?

Yes, Steinhäuser says, I did. Now, Heise puts his hands to his chest, looks Steinhäuser in the face and says: You can shoot me now as well. But you have to look me in the eyes as you do it.

There is only a single source for this exchange, Rainer Heise himself who, in the days that followed, spoke to the press at length and let every single one of the journalists camped out in his front garden into his home. He spoke about his encounter with Steinhäuser again and again, eloquently and articulately, in that open, affable manner of his. The press gorged themselves on his loquaciousness; in the days after the shooting, he was one of the few people willing to talk, while other survivors and their families remained steadfastly mute. Rainer Heise spoke about 26 April, but he also spoke about his previous relationship with Steinhäuser. He was one of the teachers Steinhäuser had held the most contempt for during his time at school. And Heise had indeed treated him incredibly harshly. According to the Gasser Report, Steinhäuser had said to his friends (including Matze, presumably, I say to myself) multiple times that *Heise needs a bullet in the head*.

Except, when he does come face to face with his enemy, Rainer Heise, hands on his chest, almost offering him his life, he doesn't pull the trigger.

Instead, he says, *No, Mr Heise, that's enough for today*.