Translated excerpt

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The Year of Limestone

Translated by Imogen Taylor



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THE YEAR OF LIME

A Novel

By Laura Vogt

Sample Translation by Imogen Taylor

Traces of water – of rain – mixed with traces of reproduction: a yellowish film of pollen, dried in a pattern of drops, clings to the windowpane in front of me, the window in front of my desk.

They are traces of an attempt to live on, an attempt to stay in the world.

They are traces of futility: the pollen on my window has failed to pollinate anything; instead, it's been blurring my view for months.

I can't see it from here, but I know it's there: in the same street as this building where I have my study, there are five other residential buildings and beyond them, the cantonal hospital. I don't know exactly where Per is, in which of the many blocks, which room, which number, but I know he's there, has been since yesterday.

And outside, despite the scorching August sun, everything is lush and growing, while I sit inside, in my self-imposed isolation, next to this nine-foot ficus. I sit here in this vacuum and something is creeping up and down my spine. Grief.

The ficus is growing again too. After most of the leaves turned yellow earlier this year and dropped to the floor, some of the branches have recently put out tiny little shoots. I had thought it was dying. Like Per, I had thought, slowly and inexorably – first the leaves, then the branches, the trunk and eventually the roots. Is that how a ficus dies? Or is it the other way round, starting at the roots?

I've only had the tree here since the beginning of the winter. I dragged it halfway across town on a sack truck, because it couldn't stay where it was, in my therapist's

consulting room. The ficus, she said, after one of my first sessions, when I happened to mention how much I liked it, was too tall and spreading for the room she was about to move into. ‘Would you like to have it?’ she asked.

There is only one window in my study, but it’s a big one. Big and dirty. Through the raindrop pattern, I look out onto the street below at the outdoor gym. Two young, topless men are working out, pulling themselves up on bars of different heights and easing themselves down again – up and down, their muscles vibrating. They defy gravity as they strengthen their bodies. They defy weakness of any kind. Potential disease. The transience of life.

A loud beeping sound drifts up to me – change of position. Beyond the outdoor gym is the beach volleyball pitch, and beyond that is the main road that leads to the motorway. To the right of the main road is the cantonal hospital, where Per is lying.

Per is ill and Per is my uncle. My godfather. Per has the same voice as my father. But unlike my father, Per came to see me on my eleventh birthday and on my twelfth and thirteenth and fourteenth. Not long after my fifteenth birthday, he took me to London for a few days.

At the weekends, Per would put me up on a mattress next to his bed in his one-bed flat. He’d rub my back at night before I went to sleep – and I would rub his.

Per and I would go hiking together, high in the mountains, long after my father had cut all ties to his past life and gone away.

Per and I would stand at the top of the mountain together, ten thousand feet above sea level, staring out into the distance.

The diagnosis came a year ago. He has a year of chemotherapy behind him, a year of retreat and struggle. But also a year of softening.

Yesterday was his sixtieth birthday. But age no longer matters. What matters are the days he has left to live – or perhaps it will be weeks. Per wishes it were years.

‘I wish I could stay,’ he said, on my last visit but one. He was sitting on the sofa in the flat where he lives with his wife Ingrid, an unusually open expression on his face. My tears made dark spots on my top, but some of them stuck in my throat and made a lump there. I tried to look Per in the eye again, but it was no good. He’d composed himself again and was blowing his nose. I just managed to squeeze out two words in reply: ‘I know.’

Now I know little more than that Per is somewhere in the cantonal hospital, in one of the rooms, on one of the floors, in one of the blocks, while in my throat there is still this hard lump that’s making it hard to breathe. Ingrid drove him to A & E yesterday, when he couldn’t manage even a bite of his birthday cake. He hadn’t eaten for days. The pain was worse, Ingrid wrote to my mum, and my mum told me and my siblings.

Even a week ago, on my last visit, I’d noticed that Per was weaker. No tears, no open expression. It wouldn’t be long now. Afterwards, when I got the bus back to town as usual, I realised how quickly it might go. And I knew I had to see him again. To say goodbye to ‘one of the last of our clan’, as he sometimes called himself, with a touch of irony.

I want to say goodbye. Not like with my father, who left us, but was still there, physically. As a teacher at my school, he was constantly in and out of the classroom next to mine; for years he walked past me as though I didn’t exist.

May I come and see you again soon? I wrote to Per two days after my last visit. He replied soon afterwards, saying that he thought of me a lot, but was too weak for visitors. *Can we wait a bit? I’ll be in touch.*

Yesterday morning he wrote to thank me for my birthday message and said how much he missed the lime tree at the edge of the village – the tree he had walked to every day for the last months.

And I sit here with clammy arms and legs, while the wind ruffles the leaves of the tall lime tree outside my building. Under the tree, bodies are exercised, as though it were a guarantee that they won’t just die one day, like Per.

What remains?

I write this question at the top of a blank page in my notebook, put the pencil between the pages, close the book, prop my elbows on the desk and shake out my hands. I shake them until I feel my wrists loosen up and my fingers begin to relax. Then I open my laptop.

How do ficuses die?

The search engine spits out four hundred thousand results. I can't immediately spot any that give me a detailed account of the dying process of a ficus – just websites telling me what might cause a ficus to die. Under the rubric *Ask the Plant Doctor*, it says: 'Compared with other houseplants, Ficus needs an extra helping of calcium. This enhances the durability of the leaves. If Ficus is lacking calcium and has recently been moved to a new location, it will immediately drop its leaves.'

'Ficus' was in my therapist's consulting room for twenty-five years. She had never repotted it, never staked it and gave it one glass of water every week. I saw her sporadically in her new consulting room, which was half the size of the old one. The work on my third novel was almost finished; I would have liked to relax. But Per's illness had unsettled me. During my last session three weeks ago, I had mentioned the morning numbness in my limbs and mind which had recently worsened – a feeling I knew all too well from the time after my father had left.

'What's helped you in such situations in the past?' my therapist asked.

'Writing,' I said. 'But I'm almost finished with the text I'm working on. I need something new. A new idea to stop me losing myself.'

'That's understandable,' my therapist replied. 'But don't put pressure on yourself. Take your time. Follow up on things that interest you, but give yourself breaks. And next session, if you like, we can talk about a method that I think could be helpful in your case.'

Here, in my study, the ficus reaches almost to the ceiling. Even with so many leaves missing, it has a wild shape to it: one half – the side that faced the window in the consulting room – is more spreading and quite a bit taller than the other, which faced into the dimly lit interior.

Ficus belongs to the mulberry family – a family that is extremely diverse. As a subtropical and tropical tree that grows in clearings and on the edges of forests, Ficus, whose full name is *Ficus benjamina*, needs warmth and humidity.

I haven't given it any calcium so far – just a little tap water whenever I got back from seeing Per. Afterwards, I would sit down in front of the tree and stare uneasily at its yellow leaves and scant branches; I would make myself keep looking until I felt calmer.

One day I spotted the barely visible pointy leaf buds that had started to grow, and I knew the tree would recover.

I suddenly felt more hopeful for Ficus.

Calcium for plants –

Images of various products fan out on the screen in front of me: Calcium Plus, a liquid fertiliser to encourage faster growth and combat blossom end rot and bitter pit; Calcium Kick to regulate the pH of the soil – and an image of a packet with a picture of an English lawn and flowers and the words 'Lime – Granulated. Chaux – Granulée. Calce – Granulata'. I scroll down and discover that it's a product to correct acidification, stimulate root and plant growth and increase the biological activity in the soil.

The search engine also offers me Calcium Shots. I click on it, surprised. The product is designed not for plants but for humans: vegetarian sticks for direct consumption, with calcium, magnesium, zinc, vitamin D3 and vitamin C. Sweetened with xylitol, which occurs naturally in birch trees, it promises strong bones, powerful muscles and resilient nerves.

What do you give a human to keep them alive? Food and medicine. And maybe Calcium Shots. What does Per need?

I lean over to Ficus and poke a finger into the earth. It is soft and damp. And warm, like my bed this morning, where my daughter lay facing me. Her three-and-a-half-year-old body was hidden under the duvet; only her head was peeking out. She looked at me inquiringly from under her sticking-up fringe and said, 'Do you love me?'

'Yes,' I replied. 'I love you more than I can say.'

She pulled her right arm out from under the duvet, placed her hand gently on my face and stroked my cheeks. I stroked her too: her pale forehead, her freckled nose, her unblemished body. Her living body.

Later she walked down the hall singing, her hands in the air, her fingers full of strength. She has a way of moving all her own, every inch of her body alive, so passionate that I can't stop looking at her and marvelling.

Taxonomically, my daughter belongs to the family of great apes, like her brother and me and Per. And like my father. We too belong to an extremely diverse family.

That unmistakable way Per has of moving. His swift, purposeful gait, the hand-knitted hat on his head that stops above his ears. He was never one to ramble, always came straight to the point, was clear and forthright. (I'm already saying: *He was*.)

I wipe my earthy finger on my trousers and open the window. Everyone's still there: the men at the outdoor gym and the people on the volleyball pitch. The ball is served: receive, pass, hit; receive, pass, hit.

A living body. Per opposite me on the sofa in his sitting room a few weeks ago, his hair white, his cheeks red. He tells me about the previous day's chemo and how exhausting it all is. He tells me he's hopeful. And I catch myself seeing more in him than is visible. I see him. But I also see my grandfather with his round face and my father with his aquiline nose. And all at once I want to see what this thing is – this life in Per. I want to see what this thing called life is. And I see Per move his lips and speak, but for a brief moment I also see him lying down, his nose more prominent, his jaw slightly sunken, his skin already waxen, and I think, soon he really will be lying there like that, his body still there, but no longer moving.

And I shudder at myself for thinking this, if only for a split second, while Per sits there, one hand under his head, the other on his aching belly. 'A good read,' he says of the crime novel on the coffee table in front of him. 'Real page-turner.' Then he takes a few pumpkin seeds from the dish next to the book, puts them in his mouth and sits up a bit straighter. It's the same body that once belonged to a three-year-old child in his mother's bed. A body that was once youthful. That played the violin. Went bobsleighing. It is Per, who used to go hiking for hours and days on end, sometimes with his brother, my father, Klas.

I know that Per will stick his head out of the window when I leave and wave after me. Goodbye, he'll call, goodbye, and he'll go on waving and I'll call back and then I'll turn the corner and walk down the main road to the bus stop and the bus will be four minutes late.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Add two packets of Calcium Kick to the shopping basket. Click on *Buy Now*. If I'd known about the effects of calcium, I'd have helped Ficus earlier. I order a pack of Calcium Shots too. Who for – for me?

I try to sit up straight. Posture makes a massive difference, my therapist once told me. There's a twinge in my lower back, an ache in my shoulders, a tightness in my throat. I get up and stretch my back, arms braced against the desk. Per is still there. In front of me. Close enough to reach out and touch. But he is changing, his nose and hair getting longer, his eyes so dark I can't tell iris from pupil; there is only white and black, staring out at me – 'Father'.

I straighten up. The pain shoots through my body, radiating from head to toes; a harsh light flashes and fades. I am standing in my study. Outside, it is day. And in here, time is all mixed up.

‘Calcium’ or ‘Kalzium?’ –

Both are correct, I read. *Even the* Duden *says so.*

And: calcium is a mineral, a metal, the fifth most common element on Earth. In its pure form, shiny and silvery in colour, it exists only in laboratories. In nature, calcium always forms compounds with other chemical elements, often becoming calcium carbonate, $CaCO_3$ – limestone, marble, chalk.

Processed into lime, limestone has long played an important part in human life. Even in the earliest settlements, limestone was fired and slaked with water to make mortar or limewash.

Ancient tribes from the area that is present-day Jordan made plaster from lime and finely crushed limestone to reinforce and decorate the walls and floors and cooking areas in their houses.

The ancient Egyptians painted their skin and tanned their hides with lime and built the Great Pyramid of Giza from blocks of limestone. The core masonry of the pyramids consisted – and consists to this day – of nummulite limestone, whereas the cladding was made of the finer, white Tura limestone, most of which was removed in the Middle Ages and used elsewhere, because it was so sought-after.

The Celts used lime as a fertiliser.

In antiquity, lime was considered a medicine.

Lime paints were used for Greek and Roman frescoes.

The lime that was used to reinforce the Great Wall of China continues to stabilise the ground to this day.

Lime is one of the best binders – the Romans knew that. They used it as a building material on an almost industrial scale. Built countless lime kilns. Enriched the burnt lime with volcanic earth. Spread the technique throughout the Roman Empire. Invented the trade of lime burner, *magister calcariarum.*

I get up from my desk and walk across my study and into the wide hall. At the weekend, the children were here playing ball in their pyjamas. Now the little one will be at playgroup and her big brother at school, while their dad works at home, in what you might call our family house share in the country.

Tomasz's door is ajar. His empty muesli bowl – the bowl he ate out of before leaving for his short break – is still in the kitchen. Next to it is a note saying: *See you soon! Lots of kisses!*

I fill the espresso pot at the tap, spoon in ground coffee and put it on the stove. Even inside you can hear the endless noise of the cars – and there's a creaking on the stairs that is getting louder. I go back into the hall and open the front door. Our neighbour is standing in front of me, bent by his almost ninety years.

'Would you help me carry up my shopping?' he asks, far too loudly, pointing down the stairs behind him. He probably doesn't have his hearing aid in.

I hurry downstairs and pick up the scantily filled bag in the entranceway. On my way back, I notice the pot plants on the hall windowsill – plants this neighbour looks after. Every one of them is green and healthy with shiny, fleshy leaves. One is even in flower.

'I didn't want to bother you!' the neighbour shouts.

'Do you give the plants calcium?' I ask in a loud voice.

'What?'

'I was wondering if you use a lime fertiliser,' I say, pointing at the pots. He waves this aside. 'My ashes on 'em!'

'Excuse me?'

He gives me a roguish look and raps his knuckles on his knee. 'These here, my bones. They'll soon be under the earth. Calcium for the flowers!'

'What do you mean?' I ask.

'Recycling. And now up with those tins!'

He turns and goes on his way up the stairs.

‘Bloody knee,’ he says, when he reaches his flat, one floor above ours. ‘Playing up again today.’

He takes the bag from me, thanks me and disappears through the door.

Back in the kitchen, the coffee is bubbling in the pot. I take it off the stove. How dark it is in here.

I mustn’t think of Per. Mustn’t think of his body or imagine it laid out, in a coffin.

Maybe I should put my swimsuit on and go down to the art nouveau pool in my dressing gown. Do some lengths, get some exercise and limber up my spine, while the music from the aquafit group blares across the water. But I can’t go anywhere, don’t want to see anyone, don’t even want to see my legs, my skin. The old trembling is coming back – I knew it would. It’s trying to take possession of my body from the inside, squeezing the last breath from my lungs.

I focus on the clock. The second hand, ticking away. As though in slow motion, I pick up my phone and call my therapist. The silence between the ring tones is longer than usual. My breath is coming back. I reach her voicemail, hang up and write her an email asking for an appointment ‘ASAP’.

I concentrate on my hands: cup out of the cupboard, spoon out of the drawer, coffee into the cup. Stir in some sugar. Open the fridge, grab the oat milk.

As I’m pouring it into the cup, my eye is caught by a slogan that I must have read hundreds of times without ever really taking it in: ‘Source of calcium. Be part of the plant revolution!’

I fill the cup to the brim.

Back at my desk, the screensaver shows a photo of my children. They are snuggled up close on a bench by the mountain lake, laughing past the camera as though there’s something funny going on behind, their cheeks shiny from sausages and halloumi.

I hope they can feel it. I hope that somewhere in their cells they sense that we look after them as best we can, their dad and I, even if we're not in a romantic relationship anymore. We dry their tears, change their beds, shake out their duvets. We build caves for them in the sitting room and find places for them to hide. I'd build them whole rooms and houses and palaces if I could – places where milk wells up from the ground, giving them with a reliable supply of calcium.

The picture changes. Now it's me on the screen with a friend. We're sitting at a table, raising our glasses of Aperol spritz to the camera.

Saying goodbye –

Mourning, I read, comes in phases. It goes on for months, sometimes years. The stage of not-wanting-to-accept is followed by that of exploding emotions: anger, rage, pain, guilt.

I run my finger to the top right-hand corner of my touchpad. The screen goes black, reflecting my face. The corners of my mouth are turned down, the furrow between my eyebrows is deep. A strand of hair has escaped from my hairclip and is hanging indecisively over my ear.

Will I have come to terms with my pain before the colour has vanished from my head, one hair at a time? Or will my children see the same grief in me that is sometimes visible in Per – the same grief that was part of my father in the years when I was growing up and his hair was slowly turning grey?

Sometimes he showed us his grief openly.

He'd bring us back to Mum's after a weekend at his and say in a choked voice in the car how lucky we were to be in the old flat, the family flat. That he missed us already.

Or he'd start to cry quietly at the scene at the end of *Dances with Wolves*, where Lieutenant John Dunbar is slowly riding off, going away forever from the Sioux tribe that has become his family, and Wind in His Hair appears on horseback on a snowy rock ledge and calls out to him: 'Do you see that I am your friend? Can you see that I will always be your friend?'

But over time, Father tried to hide his grief more and more. One day, his hair was suddenly black, his expression closed.

By then he had met the woman he would later marry, the woman who advised him to dress in black and told him to shave off his beard because it concealed his true self. Who urged him to break with his old self and his three children.

I see my daughter. I see her hugging me this morning, clinging to me. She cried when I said I had to go, when I asked if she'd wave to me from the window. But she agreed, as

always. With her dad's help, she opened the casement wide and waved goodbye. Something inside me flinched as I rode off on my bike; guilt and shame choked me.

But I would never disappear like Klas did.

Nor would I dye my hair black. If anything, I would dye it bright red, with lime. Like the women of Ancient Rome, I would mix a paste from lead oxide and slaked lime and rub it into my hair, and the sulphur in the hair's proteins would combine with the lead to make nanocrystals and transform the white bits.

And if Per gave me his room number and a time when I could visit, I would go and sit quietly by his bed to say goodbye. I would l look at his white hair and touch my hand to the rough skin of his cheeks – the cheeks that he brushes with foam every day and shaves with a silver razor and the careful motions of someone doing something he's always done.

I look up. My gaze wanders down the one-way street towards the hospital, past the outdoor gym, the parked cars and the signposts.

But I don't get far; there's no way through.

I close my eyes and wait. I see a Roman lime kiln. A round stone building with a vaulted roof. Only the uppermost part of the kiln is visible – the rest reaches far down beneath the Earth.