ISLANDS OF LIGHT

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Sample translation by Alexandra Roesch

1.

When I emerge, the weather has turned. The water in the turquoise-tiled pool, which had previously been still, is now stirred by a cool breeze, which also ruffles the palm leaves so that they make a harsh, scraping sound.

In my wet swimsuit, holding my goggles in my hand, I step up to the railing that surrounds the hotel's rooftop terrace. Twenty years ago, Mother left this place with me, but the sea is still the same, as are the sky and the air.

Four days have passed since her death, and since then my sense of time has been different. My memory of the last few days is not linear; there are only scenes that appear like lights on a moving surface. Suddenly and without seeming to have any connection to me. The night train from Berlin to Bordeaux, dark stations, dark places passing by my window, my body shaken by the hold of the tracks and wheels beneath me. My phone in the dark that lights up with messages from Ari, the sudden awakening when a carriage is coupled or uncoupled, the semi-conscious haze, the incomprehension about where I am, and above all, the startled thoughts about Mother, the moments in which I think she is still alive, the jolt through my body, when did she last drink, then the recollection. Mother doesn't need me any more, and I have no notion of what has happened to her since the undertaker came to collect her.

I picture her. Mother, in some anonymous darkness, the hem of her dress, her fingernails dusted with a thin layer of ice crystals. The little twig that had stood on her bedside table, a final token of remembrance of our shared life, is in her hands on her chest, its blooms and leaves frozen stiff.

She is no longer here, and I am standing on the roof of the hotel looking down at the sea. There is a photograph of Oda and me on this beach, our bare feet encircled by white foam. The light, pale and violet over the Atlantic; that endless water between the continents.

When I think of Oda, Mother’s pain lies like a filter between me and my memories. Her gaze would grow vacant and slip away; I knew which hours it was focused on: the campsite, my sister’s small, warm body between us.

We didn’t speak of her. But I often heard my mother at night when I lay in the other room. I heard her muttering, heard her open questions, heard her through the thin wall.

Two men below on the beach are taking down the green flag, the signal for safe swimming, and in its place hoisting a large red triangle, which flaps around the mast. The beach patrol vehicle leaves deep tracks at the water’s edge as it drives back and forth. A lifeguard stands in the loading area. He’s wearing one of those long towelling ponchos like the ones sold in surf shops, his long hair flowing, bleached by the sun.

A modern-day Christ, I think, as he uses his megaphone to guide the small group still drifting on their surfboards in the sea. He calls out across the water, switching between English and French, telling them to come back to land. The mood on the beach has shifted abruptly. There is suddenly danger in the air, a sense of urgency. The water merges darkly with the sky on the horizon.

Through my window earlier, I had observed the lethargy of this summer day, the children on their way to school in the morning, their long shadows in the cool morning sun, then the elderly, pulling their shopping trolleys into town for the market and back again later, then the children again. People on the beach lying in the sun like lizards, still and warm. All of that has given way to something else while I was doing my lengths. As I swam, my mental image of my surroundings had been completely wrong. The entire time, I had believed the daily afternoon beach routine to be intact, with its details of fruit in Tupperware, warm water bottles and children’s sandy bodies. How could I have missed the fact that the light reflections on the bottom of the pool had disappeared? How could I not have noticed the change in temperature, the shadows every time I lifted my face to take a breath?

I perceived it later than everyone else, this shift, and from it grows the feeling that I am not really part of this place. I am alone, here at the railing and earlier at the window. I am a stranger. I come from a life that no one in this place knows.

The rooftop flat in Berlin, my mother’s death. Three years in which everything else gradually gave way to these things. I think of Tracey Emin. The hours I spent working on my master's thesis on her and her art, initially at my desk, while my mother slept or watched TV in the next room. The pile of books and art catalogues by the bed.

Strangeland.
Detail of Love.
Tracey Emin: 2007 – 2027.

When did I stop going to exhibitions? When did I stop writing? When did I stop reading?

I think of Tracey Emin's naked, curved back on the jetty of Åsgårdstrand in a video that I once saw at the Albertina in Vienna. The light that surrounds her on the sea, flickering with the waves, and then, suddenly, her scream that never seems to end.

You can only truly understand Tracey Emin's work if you know about her fascination for Edvard Munch and see her biographical suffering alongside his. I read that Tracey Emin once said she would have liked to be a mother to Munch because he lost his at the age of five and shortly afterwards his older sister, who might have been something like a second mother.

Tracey Emin and my mother were born on the same day, on the third of July, but Tracey Emin is still alive, I follow her on Instagram. I see her there almost every day. Tracey painting, Tracey swimming in the sea, Tracey battling her cancer, Tracey who has lost so much.

For decades, Munch painted and printed the same silent scream over and over again, the head, the open mouth, surrounded by the sea and the sky, lying in burning waves. He based this motif on a panic attack he had experienced, and Tracey Emin filmed her work there, on the same jetty where this fear of the world broke over him. Her body surrounded by glistening white water, her scream over the North Sea. This scream is a hand reaching out to him, to Munch, trying to grasp him through space and time, him and all those who have lost something.

I pick up the towel that a gust of wind has deposited on the ground from the sunbed, wrap it around myself, and head over to the lift. Black clouds are reflected in the glass façade of the neighbouring hotel, and I can see a white figure in them. A woman, on a balcony, in a white shirt and a large white sun hat. She looks down over me, and I lift my hand to wave.

2.

When I come out of the bathroom after my shower, I can hear a commotion outside, several voices calling out in confusion. From the window of my room, I can look over the dune and I see the lifeguard's vehicle driving away, while a small group of surfers stay behind looking perplexed. Their boards are scattered across the beach; the lifeguard with the megaphone stands a short distance away from them. The wet sand beside him is carved up into holes and footprints as if a scuffle had taken place there. His white poncho is dirty and wet now, and his hand is raised as he repeats over and over: "Tout est okay" into the megaphone. "Tout est okay."

A poem by Sophie Robinson comes to mind, "Edward Scissorhands":

Dadbod Jesus bloated on the beach
Dadbod Jesus watching over me,

and I wished there was some form of spirituality in my life, an image of my mother in paradise, whatever that would be for her. I wished someone would welcome her there, in a nest of perfect white clouds and light. I wished someone would treat her caution, her aloofness, with warmth and tell her, it's over now, tout est okay. From now on, everything is easy for you.

Everything would always have been easier if we had believed in something. In fate, in something that would have made more of our lives. But there was nothing like that in us - no faith in God and no routines except that of the television programmes. I wish I had a ritual for her death, I wish there were others here who would miss her, who would sit with me, would eat with me, would remember her with me. But I am alone, like Edward, who cut everything that he loved. *A hole in my chest, like a punched wall. Monster shame.*

No dadbod Jesus to tuck me in, to hold my scissor hands. Just a father whom I barely know. There is no one else who loved Mother but me.

The sea is empty now, all the surfers have followed the calls to land. The waves form deep trenches; the rain approaches like a wall towards the land. Whatever happened down on the beach, it's the second upheaval I have missed within a short space of time.

I watch as the surfers peel the wet neoprene from their bodies and, as I do so, I notice three people crouched far down in the wet sand, in a completely different world. A woman with her two children. While the beach empties, they are digging holes that are quickly flooded and filled by the fast-moving waves. They dig, dig, dig, and when the water comes, they

jump back. I hear the children laugh; they run into the black water and back out again. They look silvery in it, small and shiny in the light.

I close the window and call Father; wait for his face to appear on my screen. This is the commitment that he gives me: he is always reachable. I have barely any idea about his life and I only know his wife two-dimensionally; she appears behind him to greet me, then disappears into the depths of their shared flat, into rooms that I have never seen, nothing but fragmented walls, a fragmented kitchenette, shelves with books that surround his head.

"Zoey!" he says. "It's not a good time right now."

I ask him if he knows yet when he will get here.

"It's all complicated," he says and holds the phone in a way that I see his face from below, his black nostrils, the upper lip, the shirt collar. My father is always clean-shaven, and he wears white shirts that are neatly ironed. I have no details about that either, no idea how he shaves, whether electric or wet, whether he does his own ironing or sends everything to the dry cleaners, or whether his wife takes on these chores for him. He too is only made up of fragments, of individual facts, what he says about himself or what I have Googled. Lawyer. Married. Lives in Budapest. I don't know whether his appearance - his smooth skin, his short white hair, the shirt - is important to him or just acquired. I just remember how once, when we met in Berlin, he put his right foot on the edge of a planter to wipe a spot off the smooth leather with a handkerchief.

I want to tell him that I can't scatter Mother's ashes alone. But I know him well enough to know that my desire for his help is excessive, demanding that he fulfil an obligation that he is not bound to in any way.

I picture us on the beach, the imprints of his shoes, a clearly defined trail marking our path to the edge of the water. His glance at the silver wristwatch, then later the cleaning of the leather with a handkerchief, damp brown sand on white cloth, and I no longer know which fantasy made me invite him to come here as if saying goodbye to Mother was a Sofia Coppola film, pastel-coloured scenes in which a father and a daughter meet again years later in the south of France, a silent affection, my face in close-up, his hand on my shoulder, stroked by strands of my hair. The ashes that rise from our hands like a swarm of light-grey butterflies that turn softly with the wind, finally becoming sky.

The reality is that my father has no interest in such an encounter with me and that he finds this entire plan, the cremation of my mother in France, the scattering of her ashes here, in this place where she hasn't been for twenty years, pointless and excessive. To him, Mother and I were a bizarre

duo, and it seems to me that he is afraid I might now want to overly trespass on his life.

To relieve him of this fear, I take on a busy tone that I learned from him: "Ari is taking care of the international death certificate so that the body can be brought here. It will then be cremated somewhere nearby, and then I can collect the ashes."

I am pretty sure that my father doesn't remember who Ari is, even though she was my first girlfriend, even though I sent him pictures from the one short holiday we took as a couple. Ari and I at the Lido, the sea behind us, and a banana in my hand. He doesn't care who she is to me, but he says he's very pleased that someone has taken care of all this, and I suspect that by 'all this' he doesn't just mean the death certificate, transport and cremation, but also me.

He's not looking at me any more. While we talk, he moves and puts me down; I don't see him any more, I see his white ceiling, his designer lamp.

I hear him speaking English and wait; I hear his wife answering. Then the screen goes black. For a while, I leave my phone lying next to me on the hotel bed. The black screen, the pocket sounds, the pocket darkness of my father who has clearly gone somewhere.

I was part of a bizarre duo, and now I am a bizarre single unit. Alone, in this room by the Atlantic, in the blueish light, while outside the rain falls on the sand. I am waiting for the transport of Mother, and thoughts of her lie within me like a pool, into which I dive as soon as there is no distraction.

Mother in her bed, her body beneath the covers because she was cold, even though the flat was so warm that the linoleum floor felt warm and yielding beneath my feet.

Mother, who in her confusion had suddenly returned to this place, to the sea, the beach, the caravan, even though our life here lay many years in the past. Oda, who suddenly became a presence in our flat, even though we had never spoken of her. From her bed, Mother asked me if there was still gas in the bottle, if the roof still had the leak, told me to remember to put a bucket underneath in case a storm came during the night, and if Oda was asleep. Oda, forever a child, and Mother, like one herself.

My stomach clenches when I think of how angry these questions made me, how I couldn't stop badgering her about the way she had returned to this time, how I couldn't concede to her this peace. "Just stop it now, it's annoying." The rejection in my voice still lingers in my mouth, cold and bitter. My harshness and her bewildered look, I can't get rid of either of them. Edward Scissorhands.

Of course she wanted to come back here, to the time and place when our life had still been intact - a remote French idyll.

The three of us on the beach, her chasing Oda and me with a towel. And us, wet and laughing, zigzagging in different directions so that she has to decide left or right, Oda or me.

I can't remember when the idea came to me to have her body cremated and to scatter her ashes here; I can't remember how the research went - booking my ticket, finding a suitable funeral home. I presume that Ari took care of the logistics for me. Had she made the calls, had she Googled while my mother's body was still in the bed in the warm flat, and I was clearing up all the time, taking the empty plastic bottles to the yellow container in the courtyard, sorting the creams, the documents, my mother's shoes, chasing away the flies with a red flyswatter? Ari, who knew me well enough to let me do all of this.

I, who couldn't leave Mother in peace when her life was ending, who kept reminding her, stern and unyielding: the time at the campsite is long past, your life has consisted of these two rooms for twenty years, of me, the television and the crossroads below the window. I would not let her succumb to this comforting delirium, I harassed her with contradiction and liquid nourishment, and I didn't stop bothering her until she died. Father may think that the plan to scatter her ashes here is further nonsense, he may laugh about it, dry and joyless, but Mother's story always began with Oda and me at the campsite. She never visited any graves, of parents or other relatives. She never spoke of her life before we came along. Where else was I supposed to bury her?

I lie in my room, waiting for it to get dark outside. I scroll through the few channels, scroll through my phone, and listen to the rain. I still have mineral water, crackers and cheese, cornflakes, baguette and grapes, but at half-past-six, I get dressed and go down in the lift. Perhaps it's because I went swimming, because I have already left the room once today. Perhaps it's because of the unrest on the beach that my curiosity wins over my lethargy.

In the dining room, I sit by the open terrace door. It's pouring out on the street, out on the beach. Marlène, the staff member who picked me up from the station when I arrived and brought me to the hotel, comes to my table.

I'm glad she doesn't comment on the fact that we haven't seen each other since that short drive in the car, glad she doesn't ask where I have been since then. She smiles at me, and I ask in English if she can

recommend anything. She advises me to try the seafood, in particular a dish of small fried pieces of squid with garlic and white bread.

When she returns with a carafe of water, I ask her if she knows what happened on the beach, and she says there was a seagull attack on one of the surfers. She relates how the bird suddenly appeared from the clouds and her relish for the spectacle makes me feel like maybe this place is otherwise too boring for her. She raises her hands, which she has kept crossed behind her back, and makes a rapid downward movement in the air. She had witnessed it all; she was in the water at the time. "He raised his feet," she said. "Like he was ready for a fight. And then, boom, he attacked with his beak." She forms a pointed beak shape with her fingers and hacks into the air.

Then she has to go before I can find out more, because other guests have entered the dining room. She apologises but continues to chuckle about the mishap on the beach. I like her laughter, the messy strands of her long hair, and the way that she moves quickly between the tables and greets everyone here in the same unpretentious way. I like her use of "he", even though the French word for seagull, *mouette,* is feminine like in German. For one moment, I had interpreted 'ready for a fight' as being about the surfer.

When Marlène brings me the food shortly afterwards, the other tables have also filled up and we can't continue our conversation, but when I pass the bar later on, she is standing there alone.

"Did you like the squid?"

I nod. Something about the tender white meat, swimming in oily spices and garlic, seemed extremely decadent to me, while at the same time it didn't seem like a complicated meal, perhaps something others regularly order or cook.

"Very much." I smile at her, not telling her that while I was eating, I had tried to remember when I had last eaten something warm and freshly cooked, and I couldn't remember. I also don't tell her that I had never eaten anything from the sea except salmon.

"Is the surfer all right?" I ask instead. "The one with the seagull?"

She laughs again. "Oh, sure. He's fine. Just a scratch." She runs her hand over her head and raises her thumb in the air as if we were on the high seas together, dependent on communicating via hand signals. I wonder whether this is a habit that many surfers have, or whether it is because we are both communicating in a language that is not our native tongue. Then she supports herself on her forearms and leans towards me as if she wants to tell me a secret. "They get hostile towards humans."

“The seagulls?” I want to know more, but she just vaguely tilts her head, and I am unsure whether the whole thing is perhaps a joke.

She shrugs her shoulders and says that movement is a language and that you can understand more about the environment through it than through words. “I am a dancer. Maybe that is why it’s like this for me.”

She grins at me, and I wonder what I have already communicated to her without knowing it.

1. I am waiting for my mother’s ashes.
2. I am not waiting for my father to arrive.
3. I have never eaten squid before.

When she asks me what I do for a living, I tell her that I am studying art history and writing my master's thesis. Both are true, but both are not up to date; both have been marginalised in the last three years by caring for my mother.

“She only just died.”

I am gripped by something as I say it. Instability. Marlène stands quietly opposite me, briefly reaches out her hand, and touches my shoulder.

“I’m sorry.” She says that her father died two years ago. “Do you know the theory about the stages of grief? For me they weren’t phases, they were more like waves, waves of grief. They keep coming back, but over time, the distance gets bigger, and you have more time to breathe. It’s like surfing or dancing. You get better at it.”

When I am lying on my bed shortly afterwards, it has stopped raining. I Google “stages of grief” and write them down, in blue ink on white paper. Below, a list of all the things that make Mother’s death more bearable. A sequence of steps, slowly, slowly out of the constriction that squeezes me when I think of her empty bed. Of the ridges of her fingernails. Of her voice through the thin wall.

Showering
Jogging
Swimming
Eating

These are small gaps, and I can’t imagine the distances getting larger. One website says: “Grief is love with nowhere to go.” And that feels true.

I can hear the sea through the open window, and I think about where I am, floating in these waves of denial, anger, depression, negotiation and acceptance, but the only thing I can grasp is the memory of the feeling of emerging from the pool and finding everything changed. Everything I had thought glistening and clear, suddenly in darkness.

I am the sister of a ghost.

I am the daughter of a ghost and a two-dimensional screen-man.

I translate my thoughts as if someone were listening, as if Marlène were lying next to me in the dark.

I wonder what movements she would choose for people who have disappeared.