

Barbara Neuwirth

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VERTUMNUS

translated by Kika Bomer

My pockets were empty and only one comfort remained: I could stay at my cousin's. I hurried there through the misty night between the cement-gray houses, led by the colors of a taxi coach. I crossed a track littered with cigarette butts and ashes. Further ahead a small, older man ducked greedily between trash cans, touching and exploring their depths.

A large dog blocked my way. A mutt, but almost a Doberman. He snarled and his growl was full of violence and warning. Overcome with fear I avoided him and stumbled across the street, feeling cold in my center again, so that my skin became moist like a glass pane with one side in the heat, the other in frost.

The dog slowly pursued me; he silently set one paw in front of the other and didn't let me out of his sight until I broke the peacefulness of the night and yelled, "Go away, get!" The dog hesitated, and intimidated by my resistance he froze with his paws stretched forward. Above us window wings moved in soft slow motion, while pale sleeping faces bent over towards us. They damned me for my vitality and wished something else for me, but the dog let me go, turned around, defeated, and I could keep hurrying to visit a friend of happier days, who forgave my pathetic introversion of the last years, the way one translated a lover's coquettishness for graciousness.

I smiled at the blank windows, which threw back to me my profile. The city reminded me of the face of a young girl who I once was: the tears that welled out of her eyes were at the same time plugs against the opening outwards.

The gate was open. I switched on the light in order to find the way to the elevator. It looked shabbier than ever I'd used it every day—and as I slammed the door, it waggled back and forth. Hesitantly it obeyed the push of the button and struggled upwards. I had to climb the last stairway up to my cousin's apartment on the roof. There was junk lying on the stairs, old furniture that almost blocked the way. I tripped. The entrance to Michael's apartment was filthy, the door warped as if unoccupied rooms were behind it. The door opened with a delicate push of my hand and I felt around for a light switch. Light. Blank walls under the ceiling, the tiles laying on rough rafters. Thick layers of dust covered the floorboards and whirled up under my feet, turned pirouettes and sunk heavily down.

This was not what I expected or was looking for.

My life had become unhinged, and I'd hoped to seize one piece of it at Michael's, but he'd also disappeared, and the horror I'd tried like a blind person to ignore in the last few days came over me in this emptiness.

Under the slope of the ceiling I discovered the old, small box, which had stood in the living room of Michael's apartment. I found trashy literature, dime novels he'd collected with boyish enthusiasm. They gave me no clue about his disappearance and fell out of my hands in scraps of yellow, rough paper.

Sweat ran down my forehead again. I became nauseous and vomited in a dark corner of the room.

I'd traversed the city through the underworld of the metro's opened shafts in vain. Everyone I sought had disappeared, only I remained, despairing. For the first time it occurred to me that the only thing the disappeared had in common was the fact that I had given to them a part of myself. I could be the one that brought to them destruction, although I didn't know why.

I walked to the stairwell. I wasn't alone anymore. My thighs and arms started to tremble. The elevator opened. I tip-toed between piles of junk. The elevator and I reached the fourth floor at the same time, I was sneaking down and it creaked upwards.

I crouched and ran. The noise I made surrounded me. The person who stepped out of the elevator looked at me. For a moment I saw the shadows of green-uniformed figures. I saw red eyes in bloodless faces; I saw how they aimed weapons at me; I saw them rush after me with movements like sleepwalkers. A small fat man wearing a light trench coat

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climbed towards Michael's apartment without noticing them or me. I was on the run again.

I scurried out the gate and ran down the street to the nearest intersection to Albert Street. The steps of boots drummed behind me, and they yelled words I couldn't understand. I stumbled on the tracks between the taxis. A car next to me burst into flames. With an absurd feeling of detachment, I realized that they were trying to kill me. A group of loud drunk black students stood on the intersection. I pushed through them, shoving one after another to the side. They protested. Then I stepped into a taxi and ordered the driver to get going. Behind me the uniformed soldiers shoved at the uniformed students and started a riot. The taxi took off.

I had no credit card. I thought feverishly what I could offer the driver as compensation. I didn't own anything of value. My watch was cheap, nothing someone would take as payment.

"Where to?" he asked.

"To Karlsplatz", I replied.

I slid behind the driver's seat to the central locked door and opened the window. As we stopped at a streetlight near Karlsplatz, I tumbled out of the window in a kind of somersault before the taxi driver could react and sprang away into the darkness.

The cold city pulled me again into its center. I was hungry and sought something to eat. I discovered a heap of cardboard boxes the baker used to deliver his goods. I broke open a box and stuffed my pockets full of rolls.

I didn't know where to go. Suddenly I belonged to the thousand transients who led a disgusting dirty existence in the shadows of the city. A desperate thought bristled up in me: that I needed to steal a credit card in order to establish a new identity. I went to the Danube Fountain and washed my face. In the light of a sulfuric-yellow sunrise I painted my cheeks with rouge, which I found like a grotesque relic of my secure past in my skirt pocket. My knee-high hose had acquired holes from my escape from the taxi. I pulled them off and used them to shine my patent leather shoes, then threw them under one of the parked taxis. My appearance needed to be presentable if I wanted to get close enough to someone to steal their credit-identification.

As the city awoke, I was ready.

I never would have thought that it could be so difficult to steal. I was on my feet all day, smiling and mingling in crowds and feeling like I stuck out too much. I almost got a purse, but failed. My desperation grew. At one point I saw two street police staring at me with curious attention, as if they sought to order and categorize me in their brains.

I snuck into the second district of the city. I wandered without a destination between the shabby buildings of the previous century and loitered in the courtyards until catching the attention of the block guards. A young woman with a twin stroller asked me if I was ill. I hadn't felt it until that moment. Now I was nauseous.

"You're pregnant, aren't you?" she asked me, while trying to support me and push the stroller at the same time.

"Yes", I said, in order to inspire her sympathy.

She spoke incessantly while serving me tea.

"I was also so sick during my pregnancy that I could barely keep up with house chores. You have to take it easy. Now it's over with the twins. I'm actually glad that I had to experience all the discomfort only once because I'd have no desire to go through a second pregnancy, and now I have two children! You know, the birth was the most beautiful experience of my life, there's nothing in life a woman can compare it to ... Is this your first child?"

I nodded.

"With the twins it's also practical that their development runs parallel. They're both teething now. How they scream at night! But when it's over, it's over with. My husband complains often that he can't stand it anymore. You know these old walls here, you can hear a person clear his throat from the third floor to the cellar. But it's an official

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residence and costs nothing, well, almost nothing. Where do you live?"

When she mentioned her husband, Rudolf's image spread before me like a wave of pain. I wanted to cry out in despair.

"You're so pale! Are you sick again? Why don't you lie down a bit on the sofa."

She led me to the couch in the living room. I looked into her peaceful face while sitting down. She was powerless against what I had to say.

"I don't live anywhere. I have no identification. My family has disappeared. My husband. Someone is after me. I don't know who they are or what they want."

Mistrust entered her eyes. She pulled herself back in confusion and let go of my arm.

"How can that be?" she finally asked.

"I don't know. I know nothing."

"The Police. Were you with the Police?"

"No, I don't trust any institution. These men have uniforms. I'm scared."

"You have to get help ... I'm calling the police."

She wanted to do it because my presence scared her and she didn't want to be drawn into anything. I held her tightly.

"I'm going now. If you want to do me a favor, don't call anyone."

Her body was absolute resistance as it bent away from me.

"It's the pregnancy", she then said.

She thought I was delirious.

I left. Rudolf. I'd forgotten him in my struggle. Had forgotten that he'd been an important part of my life. One betrayed good and secure thoughts so quickly when in danger.

I didn't trust the woman and left the district. I should have stolen her identification instead of complaining about my troubles. My belly hurt. I laid my hand on it. Rudolf. As long as he'd been beside me, he'd been my happiness. Now he was gone, absolutely gone.

Later I sat on the Danube Island surrounded by old willows rustling in the summer breeze. I'd found a place with just one transient, opening his plastic sacks of supplies. At first he watched me warily. It was unusual for a daintily dressed young woman to venture out to the transient-island. I fished my last roll out of the bag and turned it in my hands. Then I broke it apart and handed a half to the man.

"Here", I said.

Shocked, he looked at me.

"Need nothing", he then hissed, maybe simply angry about the worthlessness of the alms, humiliated. I kept staring at him till he looked over at me.

Disconcertedly he blinked while glancing at the sun. His pupils swam restlessly about.

Finally he responded to my stare, I noticed, and observed me.

"You don't have anything more yourself", he decided.

I nodded. His realization loosened a wave of self-pity. He was the first person who realistically understood my situation.

"Did you guzzle it all away?"

I laughed bitterly. "I don't know about that. Someone took away my husband. They're following me too. I don't understand why."

He didn't try to get rid of me. Instead he grabbed his dirty bag, pulled two squashed peaches out and handed one to me.

"Do you have identification?"

"No. The credit cards were in my purse. I have nothing but these clothes I'm wearing."

"No good", he confirmed.

We chewed on the rolls and peaches. The sun now was very bright.

"I have to find some shade."

"Are you sick?"

I shook my head. Close by grew a large elm and I stretched myself under its branches. I must have fallen asleep, because when I woke up the transient was gone, and in his place he'd left about a dozen no-credit identifications. Next to them was a fire pit with taxi stubs to light a fire.

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The loud night was breached by the clang of church bells, as powerful as the very threshold God had made for his people by parting the red sea. I found myself on Mexico Plaza, where the bars would close at two o'clock, except the junk-bar with the "only sado-live-show" of Vienna, as the neon-orange marquis broadcast to the sky, which closed at five in the morning.

Church bells. Figures from my childhood beckoned to me: next to the big-bearded God a sweet little child Jesus, a virgin mother, and a false father on the front line, who was supposed to help hide the adulterous conception. Religious groups with the halo of elite demands could maybe provide shelter for me, at least for a while. I was so alone now, that my pride, my resistance to certain irrational states of mind, was out of necessity becoming meaningless. So I went further, following the clang of the bells, let myself be led by the tone like Hansel and Gretel were led by the sight of the gingerbread-tiled roof. I approached with bent body the high towering palace of Catholicism, crept over a piece of lawn plastered with dog vomit. My hands shook as I approached the sacristy, out of which a weak light announced the presence of people. I pressed my body against the plump stone wall, shoved my face to the glass of the window, saw an eternal light and emptiness. No one was there. The bells didn't need any people anymore to ring them. Under my feet something crackled. A light paper. I carefully pulled it from under my shoe, turned it around and observed the picture. Put together with beautiful fruit and blossoms was the portrait of a king. On a brown background I saw apples as cheeks, black cherries, pears and peas were set together to make eyes, ears of corn and grapes, figs, olives, pears and red cherries built a wonderful mane of hair around the peaceful, beautiful face. The strongly lined throat was made of squash and leeks, the shoulder out of cabbage and artichokes, over the breast hung a garland of lillies, marigold, roses, carnations, pumpkin blossoms, tulips and peppers. On his breast white cabbage curled like thin hair. He smiled softly at me, the god of vegetation and transformation: Vertumnus of Arcimboldo. The image of Rudolf.

Later I crept near the violet mosque where I'd spent the last few nights: in a giant cement pipe on a construction site. Since I'd found the picture I sensed that Rudolf wasn't in danger. I stared at the gray ceiling above me and imagined him on Oxford Road, where I'd first met him. As he looked at me, I instinctively returned his gaze from the other side of the street, and from that moment on we didn't let each other out of our sight till we'd touched. Later I'd tried to explain it to Michael's mother; namely, that it wasn't Rudolf's conventional manly good looks—his large body, wide shoulders, strong head with intelligent even features to the face; in fact, the power of his beauty I wasn't even initially conscious of.

Rudolf and I, without exchanging a word, went to his apartment. Strange that this essential event was so fragmented in my memory. In any case, I followed him through Soho Street to Soho Square.

/Black Cadres/

he stands before me on the four steps to the door and I wait, then open the door, his smiling eyes pleading with me to go further

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I lay in a wide white silk bed, and before me stands Rudolf naked with his stiff member pointing at me. Soho Square

/Black Cadres/

And now I lay in a cement pipe.

Amidst the yelling of a group of construction workers I crawled out of my hard bed. They'd accidently discovered me, for their actual workplace was almost a hundred meters away from the bank of the stream. I didn't want to stir things up, didn't want them to notice me, wanted them to keep silent, so I didn't answer their casual calls. As if deaf and dumb I walked towards the taxi stand, where I hoped to hide in the crowd. But one of the workers jumped up and down like a clown, cackled and turned his arms like a propeller, then bent his knees and drummed the gravel road with his palms like a monkey. He was making more of a fool out of himself than me—a cultural characteristic of my city. The people at the taxi stop watched us. Instead of continuing to head for work,

they observed my admirer and me and began to grin shamelessly. I could see in their hands the credit cards they would use to pay for their transportation, and I didn't dare go any further, because I was dirty and my clothes were stored away.

Suddenly a young man stepped out of the crowd of voyeurs, grabbed the chimpanzee, who was looking around for more validation, by the overalls, and brutally pushed him away so that the fool rolled on his back. "Beat it!" he yelled.

For a moment I expected the furious worker to attack the young man, but the incident had its desired effect: the trouble-maker scurried to his feet, brushed off his pants and turned to his fellow workers. My saviour threw me a disgusted look before I could even say thank you and stepped into the next taxi.

I was alone with my fear for so many days. At last, though, the longed-for blood sprung out of my vagina, as if the lie of my supposed memory had reminded my womb that the sign of freedom was already two weeks due. I observed the two lines of blood running down my naked thighs under my skirt. Like tears they slid further down, with purple traces.

/Black Cadres/

this trace on Rudolf's cheeks, these clear tears, when he saw the blood spread about my lap, the sick fury in his eyes

/Black Cadres/

Rudolf's tears? I sat on the rim of the water basin in Ressel Park. The warm water rinsed the blood from my legs. I'd never seen Rudolf angry, nor could I imagine him crying.

I kept running into holes like rips of a filter in my memories of him. I knew that sexuality had played an essential role in our lives together, but even though every memory was erotic, the only real sexual situation I could clearly remember was the one on Soho Square, where he was standing in front of me with a hard-on. That image, which sprung up with the water, and the trace of the blood, and the vague anger and the tears were all a surprising new insight into my life with Rudolf.

"René?"

I turned around as fast as lightening to see a woman standing next to me. Her eyes glided down from my face to the blood-smearred legs in the rose-colored water. Michael's mother.

"Where is Michael?"

Concerned, she laid an arm on my shoulders.

"In France", her voice's dark timbre momentarily appeased me, "since last year. He found the love of his life."

"The apartment?"

I had to be certain she wasn't just illusion.

"It's been empty since then. How about you? Something isn't right. Is something wrong with Rudolf?"

Her question, which had the tone of a statement, didn't hide the hate she'd felt for Rudolf since the first moment she'd met him.

I looked into her gray eyes and said, "He's been taken away."

"What?" She seated herself on the rim and bent towards me.

"Last week. I wanted to pick him up at the lab one evening. As soon as I entered I sensed something was wrong and kind of panicked." I shook my head, repulsed at the thought of that moment. "And then I saw them: four men who'd cornered Rudolf and were violently holding him down. One stood at his side, a small fat man, and looked me in the face and said, 'There's our proof. Now we have them all together.' I ran away, although they had Rudolf, and since then they've been after me and have tried to kill me."

Lena hugged me and said, "You're coming with me."

She washed the blood from my ankles, led me to the next taxi stop, gave me her jacket as we sat in the car and brought me to her apartment.

In the bathroom she helped me take off my filthy clothes and bathed me. I was so thankful that she didn't say anything about my condition, just handed me tampons, fresh

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sheets and a sleeping pill. Then she dragged me to the bedroom. The back of the head hit the mattress as I sank into sleep.

At first it was the cars I heard, later far-off voices from the street, then children's laughter from the stairwell, a man breathed loudly two floors above me, next door a cat scraped in its litterbox, in the room above the cat two men gave each other slobbery kisses, and next to me Lena set a glass on the bedside table.

"No", I cried. "What did you give me?"

Lena stood at the door smiling. "Is something wrong?"

I heard the click of her tongue as she talked, the lids rustling as they pulled over the glass eyes and rustling again as they opened, her deep breathing rattled while inhaling and exhaling, then the sound of my heart beating overwhelmed all other sounds. It droned on heavily through the passageways of my body, blood throbbled out of me, eating its way through the top layer of my tampon.

"I can't stand this!"

/Black cadres/

Rudolf at the door behind Lena. His dark expression is passionate and full of threat. He opens his mouth, forms words with his full beautiful lips, his eyes like dark cherries, I can't hear anything, then he steps out of Lena's shadow and holds a fake penis in his hand

/Black cadres/

I woke up at night, sated with sleep. Lena had left the apartment, but in the living room I found fruit on the table with a note: "I'll see you tomorrow morning. Lena."

Although for the first time in days I was safe, I felt a restless unease.

On one chair next to the table was a photo album half covered with the draping table cloth. Lena had placed the album there with perfidious exactness. The first picture showed Michael's hot-air balloon. Out of the passenger basket smiled Michael and my faces, pressing against each other. I pushed the album away. A forgotten world. And it should remain forgotten. Rudolf stepped between us, took my biography in another direction, covered my life from before with his large body. The balloon climbed upwards to the sky and lost itself between the clouds, while I remained on the ground; maybe from then on I'd begun to fall into the abyss.

But Lena's plan worked, and I pulled the photo album to me again and gazed in Michael's young face, his impish laughter and gray eyes. On this day, the first and only time we both lost the ground from under our feet together, I laughed unforced at the camera, laughed at myself, laughed out of myself.

A scream lurked in my throat, but I didn't risk it, because I wasn't alone. Vertumnus was there. With a small gesture I'd pushed forward the picture from beneath the photo. Why had Lena hidden this print under the photo?

The key in the lock. I shivered, although it could only be Lena. I looked at the door in panic. It opened. A man's hand. My heart raced.

Michael. He didn't smile. His face, still young, remained unmoved, almost accusing as he looked at me and sat on the armchair on the other side of the room.

As if he could read my burning question, he said, "From Paris. Mother called me."

Michael had left Paris for me, this very evening. I began to cry.

"Were you at least happy before?"

The anger of his question helped me gain composure. "Why did you come?"

"It seems like you need a friend."

After a moment of silence I asked with a stutter, "Why didn't you bring with you your book collection?"

Now his face showed surprise. "You were in my apartment. No way ..."

Then I knew that he'd left the books there for me.

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Rudolf fiddling in the bath. He'd turned his back to me. Then he senses my presence and turns around. A face out of blossoms and fruit. I sink before him to my knees

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Michael's face was close to mine. "What did Rudolf give you? What did he get you entangled in from his wonderful laboratory?"

In the fog of my confusion he said, "Do you think we can't tell that you're cold turkey?"

I stared at him. I hadn't seen anything.

"What did he give you?" Michael pressed.

"I'm beginning ... to remember ...", I stammered.

Michael's face flattened as he scooted away from me and observed my attempt to capture the memory. Finally he said, as if stating the obvious, "Drugs. He gave you drugs to forget, memory blockers. What did the asshole do to you, so that he had to give you drugs to make you forget it?" But I knew nothing of that, couldn't think of anything unjust that Rudolf had done to me.

/Black Cadres/

/Black Cadres/

Why did they take him? What perverse experiments did he do in his gene laboratory?

I felt defensive as I answered, "Are you still stupid enough to believe in uniformed men of the state who think they're representing tradition and order? Do you really think the Gestapo arrested him because he experimented for foreign countries?"

Michael grabbed my shoulders and laughed cynically. "And you, dumb lamb, still don't know what your husband actually did, is that true?"

"No, it's not true. He's a gene technologist and works on a project with plants which could completely eradicate hunger from this planet. I mentioned it to you the first time I told you about him."

The first time. Michael seated himself on a chair next to the photo album and angrily shook his head. He must have thought how that was the time that designated the first break in our friendship.

And then I knew that they stood before the door. Michael. He'd brought them with him without knowing. I was so afraid I couldn't speak a word and reached towards Michael with a trembling hand. He looked at my distraught face and understood everything, threw a desperate look at the door, pulled me to the window and pushed me out to the ledge, where my eyes froze and I tripped while turning to my side. I pressed myself against the wall while he closed the window.

I was surrounded by the night, shrieking, bristling, sweating, vomiting nighttime twenty centimeters wide and with the depth of death. No sound, padded weight of a crossbeam. And while I slowly dragged myself further, Michael didn't pray any child's prayer for my escape, but instead threw himself against men, whose authority he never thought to doubt. The night exploded then with a punch, and Michael was catapulted into a splintering eternity through the window, as I closed my eyes to the pavement below and the heads sticking out of the window. They watched the screaming ball of light in the gray cotton, bent and observed the smack of the impact of the body on the yellow car, while the mute bands of my heart broke.

No morning found me clutching the facade of the house, no sun turned towards the west, where Rudolf would appear. I simply fell off the wall because I couldn't hope anymore for a balloon to save me. Slowly bending forward I detached from the ledge, opened my eyes and saw something gray grow towards me and then I hit a tightly stretched-out cloth. No one grabbed to try to claim me, but a dozen eyes fixed on me, till I slid to the rim of the cloth and stood across from a man in a light-colored trenchcoat.

"You are guilty for this man's death", he said.

They barely maintained the appearance of professional care in the hospital. They led me to a room without a window, the doctor forced my arm down and bored a needle into my vein, which greedily sucked dark blood

/Black Cadres/

into the plastic cylinder and then he left. The surly nurse was to care for the puncture.

My prison.

Somewhere here, I sensed, is Rudolf.

A garland of flowers with the strong scent of lilly over his hairy chest.

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I observed the nun who didn't lock the room when she left. If I manage to find Rudolf, then my fear will end. By his side I'd become strong again. I snuck out of the room, didn't listen through the door, just trusted my luck to wait for me on the other side, went through a neon-lit corridor with black carpet. I smiled at one of the personel who looked at me mistrustfully but didn't try to stop me.

The scent of papaver somniferum, digitalis, aconitum, napellus, belladonna.

I kept being attracted to the door with the sign LABORATORY and couldn't resist it. Carefully I opened it, slipped through the small crack and heard a loud voice call out, "False alarm."

But the voice hadn't addressed me, but someone else in the open adjoining room.

"Negative, Professor."

And then Rudolf's voice answered, "I expected it. The way she was being pursued, of course she lost it."

Softly my trembling began, but soon I wouldn't be able to quietly open the door to escape with my shaking hand. A third man—it was the voice of the man who made me responsible for Michael's death—joined in the discussion. "So I kept my head for nothing, bringing her here so intact. I acted against the boss Steckl's order even though it made no sense to."

Rudolf's indignance: "Steckl wanted to kill the person I was experimenting on. She could have been pregnant, I'm sure that she was!"

"The experiment was illegal, how often do I have to tell you that before you finally get it? You had far-reaching authority in your laboratory, and if you had informed our section about your experiment, you could have definitely received our approval. You didn't need to go into these illegalities, Professor. Then your wife would have comfortably sat at home, and we would perhaps know more."

"Yeah, and while marketing my vegeta-humanoid I could have also sat at home and maybe now and then got a piece of ..." Rudolf's rage.

/Black Cadres/

"One day human beings will have control over photosynthesis That would solve the problems of world hunger. Don't look so disgusted, it's for the best of humankind." My green eyes in front of his blackberry eyes: "Are you experimenting with plant and animal cells?" His blackberry eyes in front of my green eyes: "Human cells are much more interesting." His red cherry mouth opens, and out fall a thousand red pearls of white semen.

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"Professor, I still don't understand how you could use your own wife ..."

I could even imagine Rudolf's face now, full of passion, burning curiosity, as he replied to the other's disgust, "Then you're not a true scientist", and I knew how I'd killed Michael, but I couldn't scream, because Vertumnus was still in the room—the god of transformation, whom maybe I worshipped.

I was meaningless, worthless even, because I wasn't pregnant. Over the black floor I turned back to my white room, where no one waited for me. But I waited for Vertumnus, and after a long time Rudolf came. His eyes radiated with joy while his mouth grimaced painfully. "René, I was so worried about you."

I became the sun as I said, "Rudolf, this is the most important now, and you should know it right away: I aborted your child."

He doesn't raise his hand to hit me, and the fire of his face is weak against my cold smile. Then the rage breaks out in his eyes, and because I know that no one will come to help me, because the balloons have all flown toward heaven already and are long gone, when Rudolf now begins to kill me, I will laugh in the face of my husband.