

Paula

translated by Katy Derbyshire

Sandra
Hoffmann



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Sandra Hoffmann lives in Munich, where she teaches creative writing at the Literaturhaus as well as at the universities of Augsburg and Karlsruhe. She also writes for radio and newspapers, and is an avid surfer. Her novel *Was ihm fehlen wird, wenn er tot ist* (Hanser Berlin, 2012) won her the Thaddäus Troll Prize, followed by the Hans Fallada Prize for *Paula* (Hanser Berlin, 2017). Her most recent publication is her first book for young adults, *Das Leben spielt hier* (Hanser, 2019).

Katy Derbyshire was born in London and has lived in Berlin for over twenty years. She is an award-winning translator of contemporary German writers, including Olga Grjasnowa, Angela Steidele and Clemens Meyer. Having taught literary translation in New York, New Delhi and Norwich, she now co-hosts a monthly translation lab and the bi-monthly Dead Ladies Show in Berlin. Katy is the publisher of the V&Q Books imprint.

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‘Do you know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you
remember nothing?’

T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

We have a word in German: *schweigen*. It means deliberately remaining silent; it is different to merely being quiet. *Schweigen* offers nothing to hold on to, not even if you reach deep into your pockets for a coin to flip between your fingers, or a shopping list on a scrap of paper. You hear, from somewhere else or from inside yourself, the dark sounds of muteness turning against you; you hear them as rumbling, as murmuring, as ongoing grumbling, muttering, somewhere far away and yet also near. As though all the unspoken words were seeking ways out of that mute body and into the room, forging their way to you. They rob you of your peace and of your sleep. *Schweigen*, when someone lives close beside you and remains so silent, swallows down every word so unrelentingly that there is nothing left over, not for you or anyone else. *Schweigen*, at the table when the knives and forks scrape against plates, when someone, just one voice, says: Could you pass the salt, please? And someone else passes it. And above it all, that deliberate silence that seems to eat you up, you and all your good summers and your few good winters. As though joy itself might never return. And you hear the sound of stockinged legs moving under the table and the dog brushing past a chair, a cough or a throat muscle constricting as glugs of water go down. When the sounds of bodies have occupied so much space that there's nothing but density in the room, a buffer against the outside world. That deliberate silence ends up trapped in every crack of a house; it radiates, emanates, makes a house into a fortress, and the only possible release is a drastic end. You can stay and die, or you can leave. In that quiet, though, even a tractor outside in the road would be a beautiful sound, a promise, someone mowing the field for the first time

in the year, the day still light. The world would be there again. Bright light and language.

My grandmother Paula died on 10 November 1997 at the age of 82. She never talked about herself, not to the very end. She took her whole life to the grave, all her secrets and all her troubles.

When I run through the park in the morning, jog around the lake and hear the swans and waterfowl, when I watch the mandarin ducks, luminous like bright dots among the other birds, I often think of my grandmother, dead for 18 years now, and I think of my parents. I'd like to show them the park, the dogs I pass regularly on my run, the lovely spots on the side streams of the Eisbach, the water's surface occasionally brushed by willows. The men face-down on the ground next to their personal trainers, doing complicated gymnastic manoeuvres, or hitting a small punch bag suspended from a tree over and over and over, to make them feel strong for whatever reason. I'd like to show them the yogis saluting the sun, the Japanese woman swinging her arms oddly as she walks. I see the surfers on the Eisbach wave, and sometimes I stop to watch them. I watch these strangers and I'm glad of them, glad I can weave my way between them and, without speaking to them, I know: I'm happy that they're here. I'd like to say to my family: Look, this is where I live now. This is how my life has turned out, and it's fine. But my grandmother is dead. And my parents aren't really interested in any lives not directly related to theirs. I talk to them as I run; I show them my world in my mind, and it always makes me sad.

That deliberate silence has been passed down the generations.

1915 was the year of the wood rabbit in the Chinese calendar. The German politician Franz Josef Strauss was born, Ingrid Bergman, Edith Piaf too, Frank Sinatra, Pinochet. It was the second year of the First World War; the first International Women's Peace Congress was held in The Hague; Albert Einstein talked publicly about his theory of relativity; and Virginia Woolf published her debut novel. Paula was born on All Hallows Day, the first of November, in a small village in the middle of Catholic Upper Swabia. She was her parents' first child. The conditions Paula was born into were modest; her family did not have much money. She grew up with two sisters and a brother, who died on the front in the Second World War. She did talk about his death. Over and over, more often than I wanted to hear it.

He died, in the war.

That was Paula's story. Five words long.

When she died, it was the end of the story of a woman I know little about. She experienced a world war, gave birth to two children. She profited from Germany's post-war boom, but never learned a trade and was like a guest worker in her own country. Cleaning lady was the name of the job she did. Sometimes I can sense her voice. I listen to her like I listened to her sister Marie; she is dead now too. I listen to her like I listened to my mother, who has long since stopped talking about her mother's deliberate silence. I hear all their voices; they don't cohere, they come and go; they like to hide. When I get too close to them they flee; that's how it seems, anyway. I think it might be possible to tell Paula's life story with their help. I want to get to the bottom of it.

She was my grandmother.

I am an unreliable narrator. I've done talking therapy. I've reflected on my life. I've tried to trace the paths I've taken, to understand the past storms inside of me so that I can weather the storms to come. I have got good at all that. You can rely on me in that respect. Yes, you can rely on me to make up everything I no longer know, everything I've never known, everything I have to know – put it all on the page. How else might it be possible to unfold what I never knew alongside what I still know very well? How can a writer tell a story that returns over and over in her dreams – nightmares or fears or dark forebodings that extend all the way to my present life? How can I tell a story that darts up in the form of an image in the daytime, and then darts away again? And how can I say why I haven't been to the cemetery for seven years now – or only once, secretly.

One thing I don't have to make up: the way the skin of my grandmother's face felt, like a violet's petal, almost translucent, like it had never been touched. No furrows meandered along it, nothing but fine lines, signs, traces, like birds leave behind in the snow. And I still know her scent. Warm and not sour. Mild and not coarse. Her smell was better than she was. Softer, gentler. She never smelled old. When I want to, I can still feel that warm grandmotherly body and the wall with the woodchip wallpaper. I can see myself lying between them, on those nights after I had bad dreams. The rosary moves between my grandmother's hands, and she lights consecrated candles. Sometimes my face brushes against hers.

I love you and I hate you – children never say both in one sentence. Children say one or the other. 'I love you' is not a

