

July Mountain Revisited

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In this experiment, a series of vignettes across time animate how a subject is thrown together through the collision of images, impulses, and affects immanent to an ordinary event. Here the banal space of everyday living becomes a field in which the narrator simultaneously remembers and is re-membered in moments of fear, anxiety, anger and suspicion. The subject is always in formation, and yet she is always already formed of the debris left behind by discoveries she has made and impacts she has borne. In other words, she is continually remade through technologies of self-realization imparted in indirect ways when nobody knew they were looking.

Like a live wire, the subject channels what's going on around it in the process of its own self-composition. Formed by the coagulation of intensities, surfaces, sensations, perceptions, and expressions, it's a thing composed of encounters and the spaces and events it traverses or inhabits.

—Kathleen Stewart (2007:79)

I.

Police have pulled a man's body out of the lake just feet from the Austin Hike and Bike Trail. With a dachshund on her arm, a college-aged girl narrates the cadaver's slow approach to the shore for local television viewers. On the TV screen, the dachshund strains, maybe to look over her shoulder, maybe to escape.

II.

Twenty years ago and three hours away from Austin, every morning, my dad drives me to elementary school via Vine Street. Vine Street runs past the old cemetery with the gothic turrets instead of tombstones. I've read in *The Babysitters Club* books that you're supposed to hold your breath when you pass a cemetery so the dead can't mess with you. Shortly thereafter, I begin holding my breath whenever I go by one too. This means I have to hold my breath at least twice daily. The telephone poles that line the streets in Texas demarcate the beginning and end of cemetery space so that I know where the clean air begins. To pass these breathless pauses more easily, I count the seconds between poles.

III.

With a student population of over 50,000, Münster is known as the bicycle capital of Germany. In Germany, you have the same rights as a motorist if you "drive" a bike. You can see the huge Holland bikes and city cruisers stacked three deep at the cafeterias and coffeehouses, outside churches and movie theaters. Near our house there's a huge roundabout with cars and bikes whizzing in every direction around a grassy knoll where rabbits graze, undisturbed by the

surrounding chaos and the ceaseless jockeying on the feeder roads. It's easy to get distracted watching them, especially on a sunny day.

One day we're riding to the *Hauptbahnhof*, the main train station, and I've got one eye on the wildlife while I try to cross one of the feeder roads at the same moment that a guy in an open-top car as small as a go-cart shoots out of the roundabout and onto the feeder, nearly slamming into me.

I squeeze my brakes hard, and Hans nearly hits me from behind as he follows suit, bikes screeching to a halt. Go-cart guy gapes at me, his rusty fleatrap straddling the crosswalk. Milliseconds are stretched into a kind of *Matrix*-time as I lock eyes with him.

He looks suspiciously like an extra from a desert space movie, unshaven, wild-eyed and pissed off. In my memory, he is wearing old-fashioned driving goggles with a leather strap hanging to one side.

"CUNT!!!" he screams in German, shaking a (gloved?) fist.

No one has ever said this to me before. Normally, when insulted, I burst into tears.

"AS IF YOU WOULD KNOW WHAT ONE LOOKS LIKE, FUCKER!" I scream back bloody murder, in accentless Hanoverian *Hochdeutsch*.

Taking the ball, mild-mannered Hans brandishes a fist, his H&M madras shirttail flapping in the breeze. "FUCK OFF, ASSHOLE!"

As go-cart guy recedes into the distance, we lean back on our bikes in unison, electrified. At which point an older man who was probably wearing a tweedy flat cap appears on our side of the road. "You kids give worse than you get!" he chuckles, maybe a little nervously, ambling toward the Yugoslavian restaurant or the Deutsche Bank kiosk.

Wordlessly, we continue onward, looking both ways, direction Bahnhof.

IV.

Hans and I are apartment hunting in Münster one evening in autumn. We're stopped at a light when we notice two darkly clad-men carrying a gurney with a body bag out of an apartment building beyond the intersection. We watch, wordlessly exchanging glances without looking at one another.

A few months later, I am riding my bike down the same road, but instead of coasting through the intersection on a green light, I dismount, wait for red and walk to the sidewalk on the other side of the street in the crosswalk. It's illegal to ride bikes on the sidewalk here. My nose and mouth filled with imaginary gauze, I push the bike as quickly as I can until I reach the next intersection, where I hop back on, dart out into the road and ride away.

V.

In the village north of Münster, where I lived before coming back to the states, I'm like everyone's kid, an easygoing, oversized adolescent who needs a lot of help—carpools, cooking lessons, cleaning tips. But for a time, I'm also a

pretty American trophy wife. It's complicated. I don't have a driver's license or a car. And so one day when I'm fed up with grad school applications I take the bus into Aurich to do some shopping and think about the Thanksgiving dinner I'm planning for my East Frisian friends.

Aurich is only ten or fifteen miles from the village, but it takes the bus nearly 45 minutes with all the stops we make to pick up old ladies on their way to the city. I am the youngest one on the bus by at least 30 years. I think of my German grandmother, Hans's Oma, who never got her driver's license, and I realize that these women and I are in the same boat. Not enough time to commit to the German driving test. And in my case, an irrational fear of manual transmission. They seem inscrutable, and I wonder if they notice me. At any rate, they don't know I'm not German—it's my little secret.

They call Aurich a city but it doesn't feel like a city because it's an oversized town in the heart of Ostfriesland where all the rural people come eat fast food, buy presents, or zone out in the *Diskotheek*. There are quite a few inviting storefronts and a white modern *Glockenspiel* that clashes terribly with the brick Gothic buildings on all sides of the square. The weather is unseasonably overcast, only here they can't blame it on the Mexican smog. After making the rounds and people watching over a currywurst and fries (with ketchup, not mayo), I head back toward the *Busbahnhof* to catch my ride home. It's a series of faux Victorian carports made of white iron and glass, with benches scattered here and there. The buses are infrequent and I've got a while to wait, so I sit outside the information office trying not to notice the handful of children who are snickering a few feet away, clearly looking for somebody to annoy. I try desperately to ignore them, remembering the fifth grade in Catholic school, when those kids hid the library books in my backpack and told the teacher I had stolen them.

Ignore them, until the pebbles hit my face. My cheeks burn brightly with shame.

Only it's not shame, it's rage, and suddenly I'm chasing them down, animated by a strength I don't understand, icy daggers shooting from my eyes.

"Where are your mothers?" I extend an invisible index finger in the space between us, wagging it in their noses. "What do you think you're doing? Do you want to put my eye out? Do you want to be responsible for blinding someone? It is despicable to throw things at people. I cannot believe that your parents allow you to be so horrible to strangers. You should be ashamed of yourselves! *Schämt Euch!*" I'm not a fifth-grader; I'm my fifth-grade teacher. They can't believe that they picked the wrong mark. And I can't believe how small they are, or how stunned they look. They're not scared, they're not angry—they're just stunned. And so am I, turning on my heel to take one more turn around the square before my bus arrives.

VI.

A block from our apartment in the Norbertstrasse is the strangest funeral home in Münster, the strangest funeral home I've ever seen. They rotate seasonal decorations like paper snowflakes or foil Easter eggs in the doors and

windows, and the curtains are always pulled back to reveal a window display with an ornate casket, mounted at an angle, its lid open for passersby to inspect the sheen of its silk lining. I get my impulses crossed every time I go by—either it's breathing while looking, or looking away without breathing.

VII.

In Austin, years later, I'm reading by the living room window when a siren blares from within Hyde Park. Just in front of my house, a fire truck pauses, then drives away as an ambulance pulls up. The back door opens and two medics lower a gurney to the ground, which they roll toward the house next door. Half-upright, with somebody reclining on it, it looks like a chaise lounge with steampunk spider legs. I'm glad I don't have my glasses on yet, because I can't bring the passenger's face into focus.

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