

From *Die besseren Zeiten*, by Christian Haller. München: Luchterhand, 2006

I

Snow Country

Arrival—after a drive across the Jura Mountains, through drifting snow, the narrow vehicle swaying and bucking, father at the wheel, then abruptly stopping in front of a garage door at the end of the village of S. The engine died; silence closed around the car, and the views through the windows had ceased to move. Turning his head towards the interior of the car, so that the outline of his short, straight nose and his square chin became visible under the brim of his hat, father said:

--That's it! This is where we'll live.

The words aroused an expectation that prompted us to get out of the car, mother in her beaver coat, wearing new, fleece-lined boots that she had bought "for the country," my brother and I in heavy wool coats, with berets on our heads. For a moment we stood in the open, in the biting cold of the air, then with stamping steps followed father

through the covered entryway, and entered the house, its empty, echoing rooms.

--This is quite different from how I imagined it, mother said, stepping from the future dining room through the sliding door into the living room. I, meanwhile, walked up to the window of the dimly lit room that I was to share with my brother, looking out into a snow-covered landscape that extended, under a foggy expanse of gray, to the foot of a range of hills, a plain without any marker to hold my eye. And as I had been standing for a few moments at the window of my future room, looking out over the plain, I was seized by a mixed feeling of curiosity and apprehension, unable to make up my mind whether I really wanted to be here, in the village of S., the place to which my family had had to move on this February day in the early fifties.

As far as mother was concerned, father's eye disease, which had befallen him when he was still a young man, served as an excuse for many incomprehensible things that he did. Even though they had been happy in B., he had agreed without protest to move to this village to become co-owner of a foundry that grandfather had bought.

Father's eyes were discolored by a yellowish haze around the bright irises. They showed tiny bumps like those left by insect bites, scars from the injections he had received three times a day during the period of his blindness. After a number of weeks a crack finally did open in one of his eyes, allowing light and blurry outlines to penetrate, and father was cured, even though he had already been taught Braille.

I loved those eyes with their tiny bumps, eyes that sometimes unexpectedly could betray a streak of helplessness that was otherwise indiscernible in his imposing figure. Then his eyeballs would quiver, shifting back and forth as if they were trying to take in two objects that were moving toward each other, and the apprehensive flicker had also been in his eyes on that Sunday in autumn when we had been "summoned" to A. Grandfather sat at the head of the table, around which his three sons had gathered with their wives and children, while grandmother was readying the wine glasses, the cheese and cold cuts. He was sitting on the only chair that had armrests; dropping his hand on a yellow envelope on the table in front of him, he said that there had been enough talk; now it was their turn to listen. He had bought a machine shop and foundry. W. and O., the two elder sons, would have to take over the company;

they would have to give notice to their present employers, and W. would have to move to S. While his brother's response was cocksure—he had already “inspected” the factory, he said—father's head slid forward; his face took on a dazed expression, his shoulders contracted as if he were trying to make himself small or as if he were wedged in—and W. felt stifled, just as he had long ago during his military service when the snow cover of the Morderatsch glacier had caved in under him and he had fallen into a crevasse. The voices around him were a tearing sound in the ice, the demand that he give up his present position as the director of a barrel factory was the glassy coldness of a wall that threatened to crush him, and in a voice droning in his own ears he shouted that he wanted to stay in B., where he was happy with his family and satisfied with his work, where he had a circle of acquaintances and friends that he did not feel like giving up, and he realized that nothing of all that actually penetrated to the outside and his diffident utterances remained unheard. No rope was lowered; nobody pulled him up. W. saw the crevasse closing above him. He would have to accept the inevitable, as he had had to accept his blindness back then, and father's eyes were quivering. Then they came to rest. Without looking at mother or one of us, he said that he had no objections; he would give notice

and move to S. Then he jerked up his head, and the tone in which he continued resembled that of grandfather:

--Those people won't know what hit them.

When still back in B., mother had already prepared a scale floor plan of the apartment, then removed a page from the arithmetic notebook of my brother, cutting it into rectangles whose proportions corresponded to the furniture: cupboard, tressoir, sideboard for the dining room, in which the oval of the Biedermeier table took center stage; sofa, smoking table, armchairs, the bookcase and the chest of drawers from Cologne for the living room; in addition beds and wardrobes. She pushed those scraps from one side of the plan to the other, brooding for hours over ever new combinations, always guided by a desire to arrange the rooms as much as possible in such a way as to resemble those in B. There, in the apartment that she loved so much, living room and dining room had also been opposite each other, although separated by a hallway open to the living room, while here in S. a sliding door connected the two rooms. But the real task was to preserve the "ambiance"—a typical word in mother's vocabulary—and that task occupied mother to such an extent that she hardly ever even looked out of the window, refusing to recognize

how completely different the surroundings were from those in B., how behind the garden the snow widened to a plain, blinding and empty all the way to the darkly looming forest.

In B., snow had existed only in words: *Isch echt do obe Bauwele feil? Sie schütten eim e redli Teil in d' Gärten aben und ufs Hus; es schneit doch au, es isch e Gruus . . .*¹, snow in the words of a dialect that I spoke myself. Their sound evoked a setting reminiscent of an era of generous leisureliness, in which the “*Here Hus*” and the “*Chilchedach*” stood out amidst the gardens, surrounded by narrow streets and squares from which the road led out into the fields and pastures. But here in the village there was no “*Bauwele*” for sale; here there was just plain snow, knee-deep and ploughed into piles of glassy chunks along the edges of the road. The air was icy and clear, invading and stiffening one’s clothes, and filled with a radiance that only around the edges turned gradually into a soft murkiness, which also covered the distant sky. The blinding glare of the snow flooded the still empty rooms with a merciless intensity that penetrated everything and could always be trusted to highlight the very things that were

¹The verses and the two following words in italics are in Alemannic dialect (Schwyzerdütsch), from a poem by Johann Peter Hebel (1760-1826), “Der Winter”: “Is there perhaps cotton for sale up there? A goodly portion of it is pouring down on the gardens and on the house; it’s really snowing so hard it’s frightening . . .” “Here Hus” is the parsonage, “Chilchedach” the roof of the church.

meant to be hidden and unseen: that the house was poorly built, that faint outlines of the bricks remained visible under the wallpaper; that we were exposed to a less protected as well as more primitive way of life than we had known—except perhaps father from his youth. Here there would not be a trustworthy environment, grown over centuries, of streets and buildings, as there was in the city, not the park with the mansion that we had looked out upon from our balcony, no chapel in front of old houses whose lancet windows were framed in red sandstone. The houses in the village were scattered in wasteland and fields, only loosely grouped around the parish hall, and as I stood at the window of my room, looking out over the plain and towards the forest, I was seized by a creeping fear that rough, violent reality would have an easier time invading these gap-riddled rows of houses than it would in the city. Our house, moreover, was the last of the village, already built on the other side of the railroad tracks and standing right next to the main road.

--The apartment is too small, mother said, why the deuce do people around here have to scrimp so when they build?

And yet she managed to arrange the furniture to a large extent after the model of the apartment in B., although it required the help of two

workers from the foundry, who pushed the pieces around the rooms. But one part of her effort remained unrewarded: the boys' room. Nothing, but absolutely nothing, of the furniture intended for it would fit. It was the smallest and narrowest room of the apartment, and it was father who was charged with solving the problem. He ordered bunk beds to be made in the model carpentry of the company, and since we were not going to have rooms of our own, each of us was to have at least his own desk, one for my brother and one for me. Those were delivered posthaste by the "largest furniture mart," two identical pieces that made the room even narrower and smaller when they were pushed up against the wall next to each other, especially since the set of bunk beds turned out to be a crudely-made, unwieldy pine contraption. It was forcibly screwed together out of struts and boards—a "primitive thing" mother called it—while the desks, varnished in brown and provided with golden keys, did not even merit any comment from her. It was enough that they were "typical" of all that new-fangled cheap stuff offered in the gigantic cube of a factory at the end of the village: would-be furniture for people without any taste. But we boys found the desks quite serviceable; they had drawers on both sides, drawers that we could lock. The only thing that was a bit bothersome was that the tops

started to sag after only a short time, the boards of the drawers came unglued, and books and pencils slid to the center. Although in the beginning mother had still protested against the arrangement of the furniture in our room, her subsequent resignation was meek, but her opinion did not soften. Something that did not suit her elaborate design had invaded the apartment, something that she felt was unseemly and in no sense compatible with her way of life: something crude, betokening a loss of "gentility."

[Translated from the German by Peter K. Jansen, July 2006]