

GREG NICHOLL

*Sage*

I said I'd see the fire safely extinguished  
even though we finished the last beer  
hours ago. I told you it was jet lag, but to be alone  
in the backyard of a town not mine was all  
I wanted that evening. To pretend the bodies  
asleep upstairs were mine to protect.  
The fire pit. The orange plastic chairs.  
The picnic table where we reunited over steak  
and stories, your youngest demanding I sit  
next to her on the bench, giggling when  
I mispronounced *schwül*. It's an honest mistake.  
The difference between gay and humid. And I  
am always a little bit both. After dinner,  
we walked the garden border and I quizzed her  
on names of herbs, even though I momentarily  
forgot the word for *sage*. Together we tore corners  
off *Petersilie* and *Bärlauch*, touched them  
to our tongues while you watched, skeptical  
that the tiny shoots we plucked were indeed edible.  
I liked sharing this with her. Being this. Someone  
she will never see again, but may remember.  
In the morning, you quietly watched from the corner  
of the kitchen as we ate breakfast at the counter  
and she showed me her workbook, of the cartoon  
German boys and girls, who were any boy and girl.  
And I can't remember if I told you last night how I,  
myself, was almost a father, how the mother decided  
to keep her. That I respected this and at the same time  
broke. When it was time for us to go our separate  
directions, I smiled as I heard her whispering  
to herself while she packed her school bag:  
*Salbei, Rosmarin. Lorbeer. Erdbeer. Himbeer.*

*Charnel House*

The ossuary smells of horsehair  
and lace, its altar built upon skulls  
stenciled with vines, names tattooed  
along the frontal eminence of each  
cranium. I try to pick out who was gay  
as if suture lines can tell me who  
they slept with in 1881. I've always done this:  
When two or more are gathered,  
I pick out the queer, the closeted, the ones  
who don't yet know. I've been told  
I think every man I meet is gay.  
I've been told my writing is not  
queer enough, that I rely too heavily  
on nature. Too many rain-soaked forests.  
But isn't it enough that I sleep  
with men? The skulls from the ossuary  
were once buried elsewhere, a temporary  
repository where bones could cure.  
Even in death we don't always get a say  
in where we end up. Once a year a town  
in eastern Germany is inundated  
with black latex and fishnets, thousands  
of *Gruftis* congregating in Augustusplatz  
or basement clubs on the outskirts  
of town. In high school I was better  
at being goth than gay. And I wasn't  
even good at that. In my mind

they are linked. How even *charnel* sounds  
like *carnal*. Maybe my work does need  
a dose of drag, needs more leather,

more sex, one less pastoral landscape.  
Inside the room by the cemetery I stare  
at two skulls I know are male, a single

vine snaking across the bones, drawn  
by the same hand, continuous from one  
to the other since 1881. And what

will befall my own ashes? Will they settle  
deep within a forest per my final request,  
parceled between moss and bracken?

Or end up somewhere I never authorized,  
sealed beneath a stone marker, impervious,  
no matter how strong the breeze above.

## *Gross Anatomy*

I don't know how my stomach will respond  
when I enter the lab. Still, there are drains

beneath each cadaver should I need one.  
My husband dislikes it when I tell him I poked

inside the student's dissection, felt the ridged wall  
of epiglottic cartilage, watched flecks of flesh

flung into the air as layers of fascia  
were peeled back. On our third date we discovered

a mutual obsession with horror films,  
tested our limits: *What disturbs you more —*

*a teenager bludgeoned by a sledgehammer  
or the smallest needle slid beneath the skin?*

It wouldn't take long to learn it will always be  
the needle. In *Anatomie*, medical students

are hunted, injected with a serum that paralyzes  
long enough to turn the blood gummy.

The bodies dissected while semiconscious  
as the surgeon chants from the Brothers Grimm.

Another tendon removed seconds before  
arteries solidify, the twitching finger

permanently silenced. I've seen museums  
devoted to preserving what's inside:

the labyrinth of lymphatic drainage,  
renal arteries webbing like fans of brittle coral.

Entire corpses exhibited, arms of pristine muscle  
extended to shake your hand. Skinless bodies

embracing as they make love. They promise  
it was consensual. In the lab, I listen as students

refer to their cadavers by name, each incision  
a eulogy to the excised skin and bones

scraped clean then splayed on the table  
long after they've been severed at the joint.

## *Selective Hearing*

My husband translates what he thinks he hears  
as I watch soap operas set  
in an east German hospital.

*Du hast Krebs.*            You hate crêpes.  
*Hallo . . . vier!*            Halo of fear.

And I question  
which to believe is correct.

//

An actor on YouTube, clad in national drag,  
recites words in French, English,  
Italian, Spanish—each more lilting, more  
seductive than the last:

*Avion. Aeroplane . . . Farfalla. Mariposa.*

The joke, of course, the same man now in Lederhosen  
screaming at the end: *Flugzeug!*  
*Schmetterling!*

//

In line at border patrol, I overhear a German officer  
demand the 80-year-old Vietnamese man in front of me  
answer his questions. *If you want to enter my country, you must  
tell me why you're here.*

//

*See. It sounds like he's screaming,* my husband says,  
as the doctor on TV calls for the scalpel, details  
inserting the laparoscope.

//

*Hochinteressant.*      Hot croissant.  
*Entschuldigung.*      Chewing gum.

//

I've never seen Lederhosen on the street, except  
during Oktoberfest or  
in Wisconsin.

//

Harsh. Guttural. Everyone defaults to mocking  
with Hitler accents.

//

Because he *is* yelling.

//

Later, sitting in a Weinstube tavern for lunch  
my husband orders an Aperol Spritz, asks me to translate  
the words snaking along the molding:

*Fatherland. Tradition.*

And asks if we should leave.

//

I can't stop hearing: *my*  
country.

//

What I am trying to say  
is I am aware of how easy  
I pass.

//

There is no mistaking *Stopp* for anything  
other than *freeze*.

//

In the Weinstube, the bartender reaches beneath the counter,  
produces a plastic straw festooned  
with iridescent frills that tendrill  
from its neck.

I tell my husband: *It's okay*.

*They brought something special  
just for the fancy American.*