

Helga Schubert: The Present Day (OT: Der heutige Tag)

Sample Translation
By Eleanor Updegraff

Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

—Matthew 6:34, King James Version

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Every second with you is a diamond, says Hewhom, and he hugs me when I come into his room in the morning and up to the side of his hospital bed.

We have been together for fifty-eight years.

Two old people in love.

Is it morning or evening, he asks me.

I go into the bathroom, fill his tooth mug with warm water and a couple of drops of mouthwash, clean his dentures, take them into his room and sit down on the edge of the bed. He shifts over a little, laboriously, so I can sit more comfortably on the mattress; I pass him the tooth mug and a large empty yoghurt pot into which to spit the mouthwash.

I turn back his duvet, empty the catheter bag, check whether his nappy is wet.

I love him very much.

I roll the wheelchair right up to the bed and pull him slowly into a sitting position. He feels as though the world is spinning around him; I'm to wait a bit, until it stops.

I bring him his dark-blue fleecy dressing gown, help him insert his right arm into the sleeve

and pull the robe across his back, otherwise his left arm won't find its way in.

Then he locks the brake on the wheelchair – this needs to become routine, otherwise the chair will roll away when he tries to transfer himself into it from the edge of the bed.

And so I just stand there.

No, let me, he says, don't touch me or I'll lose my balance.

He supports himself on the arms of the wheelchair, turns around with small steps and sinks, groaning, into the soft padded seat.

Then I push him to the breakfast table in the conservatory, which I've already laid for us.

Hewhom arranges his breakfast the same way every morning: an avocado, scooped out of its skin like an egg; a tangerine; a boiled egg, sliced; bread with salted butter and herbs. Plus coffee with warm milk and three tablets of sweetener, alongside cold tomato juice and ginger ale to wash down his eight morning pills: the diuretic, the ones to regulate his heartbeat, the ones that prevent all manner of inflammation.

If I were you, I'd just give my husband a couple more drops of morphine – it's no kind of life for him any more, the sleep specialist advised me four years ago.

He, however, was determined that he would kill himself immediately were his wife to die. Without her, his life would be pointless.

I pointed out the contradiction in this.

But for him, it wasn't a contradiction; the two did not compare.

Hewhom loves cold drinks and sitting in the sun and watching the blackbirds build their nests and the horses in the field next door, the foal they’ve raised despite the fact that its mother barely survived the birth, and the wild geese above us in their wondrous arrow.

He would like me to sit beside him in the sun.

He wants to put in a good word for me with God, stay sitting by the gates until I get there too, when he will say:

Here she is.

I can’t do anything any more, says Hewhom. I used to write books. And I painted more than thirteen hundred pictures. More than thirteen hundred oil paintings. And last year, just two.

Yes, I say, beautiful paintings.

And this year I can’t paint at all. All the oils have dried up in their tubes.

But last year you painted hundreds of pictures on that one canvas; you painted over it again and again: the view from your hospital bed to the large blossoms on the magnolia tree outside. On the windowsill in front of it, the two Barlach bronzes – the flute player and the reader – and the big raven carved from a piece of wood.

Then summer came and the magnolia shed its flowers, then came autumn and its leaves fell to the ground. Then came winter and snow lay on its branches, then it thawed and the magnolia tree was left quite bare. You followed the seasons with your painting, with layer upon layer of oils.

Hewhom has been with me for a lifetime. The first time I met him was sixty-six years ago. I was, as far as men were concerned, a completely inexperienced seventeen-year-old.

Once, on a camping trip after Year Ten, there was a boy who kissed me on the mouth. Four of us had gone to the beach from the ice-cream parlour, and he put a hand on my shoulder to turn me towards him, gave me a questioning smile. I still remember his name; he was the same age as me and far too similar. I'd have been pleased to have a brother like him. We didn't meet up again.

Hewhom, on the other hand, seemed mysterious right from the start. At that time he was a thirty-year-old university assistant at the Institute of Psychology in Berlin and, like his colleagues, was obliged to conduct interviews with us high-school leavers who were hoping to study psychology.

I was assigned to him. He seemed to me rather bored, and also somewhat arrogant. Right up until the end of school, I hadn't been able to decide on one subject; I really did enjoy everything. Maths, of course, but also chemistry (*Come up to the board, Helga, and explain this formula to the class; you think chemically*), and I'd thought about biology, too. Then there was German; when we studied plays at school, I would be asked to read the love scenes out loud with our teacher, something that nowadays would doubtless be viewed with suspicion.

I had been strictly brought up and thought eventually of psychology, hoping that a psychology degree would deliver a few more human insights than simply reading Dostoyevsky or listening in on court cases.

And this was how I answered Hewhom's question about why I wanted to study this subject in particular.

I had the impression that, right from the off, he wanted to divest me of my illusion that psychology could be an interesting course. He spoke about the anatomy of the central nervous system, statistical screening and concentration tests, and recommended I do a year of unskilled work in a factory before embarking on a degree, in order to ground myself.

Forget the idea of spending a year doing the night shift on a psychiatry ward; come into contact with people who don't always have their nose in a book. You can pre-enrol for the next academic year. With those results, we have to take you anyway, he said in conclusion.

He had black hair, dark eyes and a moustache, wore a white coat and crepe-soled shoes that he clearly had from West Berlin; the wall wouldn't be built until four years later.

I'd planned to move to the West as soon as I turned eighteen and to continue studying there. If I'd gone then, right after school, I would have had to re-sit my exams again there; in the East, we did them after Year Twelve. As a student from the East, however, I could transfer straight into the corresponding semester at a Western university. It was how I'd planned to save myself a year of life.

And now this assistant has gone and ruined it for me, I thought irritably.

But I did spend a year working on an assembly line, standing in a production hall alongside three hundred other women, soldering television antennae with a spot-welding machine. My supervisor transferred me to work on the final inspection line, and then assigned me as a floater.

After this so-called Practical Year, I was finally allowed to embark on my degree; I attended Hewhom's lectures and passed the exams he set.

An older fellow student once told me that he exuded a Strindberg-like aura. That's what a doctoral student had confided to her.

By that time, I was married to a painter and graphic designer, who set great store by my external appearance; my predecessor had been a fashion student, and my respective mistress was, I would later learn, an actress, dancer and nude model. At his request I dyed my clothes black and my hair henna red, and wore purple stockings from West Berlin at a rate of 1:6.

Hewhom still remembers those purple stockings; also that there was once a conversation about me at lunch in the canteen, in which it was determined that I was marriage material and made a very married impression in that I didn't flirt. And I still remember a confusing situation that happened four years into my degree: one day, leaving the library at the Institute, I took my coat off a peg in the hall, at which very moment Hewhom – who was standing there talking to someone – took two steps towards me and asked if he could help me on with my coat.

I let him, and noticed how, without touching me, he put his arms around me while enveloping me in my coat. It was a gesture of incredibly tender respect and gallantry. Wordless, without any sense of intrusion.

The Berlin Wall had been built by then. He had two small children, a son and a daughter,

and I had a young son.

The following year, the last of my degree, he supervised my thesis, entirely professionally. And later, when I'd begun working, I attended a conference in Dresden, at which he and a colleague came and sat with me after presenting a paper.

They asked me if I was also going to the dance that was planned for that evening. Yes, I told them, I was.

At the event, he asked me to dance – and suddenly it was easy, very easy. We had never danced together before. He wasn't arrogant, wasn't ironic, wasn't awkward, but entirely natural and familiar to me.

He said: You have a soft structure, don't you. This was seven years after my admissions interview.

That evening, we walked for hours beside the Elbe, down by the water, beneath the bridges, and we told each other about our lives – two grown-up, married people; he thirty-seven, I twenty-four. And we knew that things would become serious between us. And, that night, we kept our distance. A gate had opened for me, a gate to a world before my own life: as a young man, he had consciously lived through the Nazi era, had been a soldier, a prisoner of war held by the Americans in a Belgian mine; he had lost his parents, who had died as they tried to flee. He was the youngest of their four children; the one allowed to do anything, the one who was loved.

A gate to his world, into which he invited me, into which he continues to invite me still.

In the evenings, when I had arranged everything for him as required and had got him ready for the night, when I sat on the edge of his bed with only the bedside lamp on, when we intertwined our fingers, his cold in my warm ones – this was when the best part of our day began. He told me I was his mother, sister, older brother, all of whom are now dead, that I was his husband and his wife. Everything. I asked him if he really wasn't in pain, and I looked forward to turning on the laptop, first the welcome screen with its image of high waves breaking on a fort in the Atlantic. It actually doesn't matter where I live, I thought, as long as he's there, and if he wasn't lying in this hospital bed any more, content and full and not in pain, but if his body were dead and I were to live in a one-bedroom flat, perhaps in a home or a shared flat for seniors in the Netherlands or on the North Sea coast or in Berlin, he would still always be there, because he is within me.

When I switched off the bedside light, kissed him and got up, he did actually say into the darkness – although it wasn't entirely dark, firstly because the advent star was glowing just inside his window, secondly because the living-room light always shone through the open door in the evening, thirdly because the light was already on in my study and visible around the corner, and finally because the baby monitor was blinking – quietly, he said:

*You belong to me, I belong to you,
You should know this to be true.
You're a part
Of my heart;
And I've misplaced the key,
So here you'll always have to be.*

And recently, when the volunteer doing home visits for the hospice was sitting at our coffee table and we were talking about our beginnings, Hewhom suddenly remembered the Morgenstern poems, all of which we'd known by heart on a camping trip half a century before, the ones about the canyon dog and a sigh on the ice and the dream of a maiden which concludes:

*‘Hold—
hold your tongue!’ says the woman now, ‘and go
about your work, Ce-ci-li-a!’*

It was much more common ground and attraction like this than through sleeping with one another – though, yes, I wanted it every day, and he did, too. I enjoyed seducing him at unexpected moments, when our visitors had already spoken to us through the intercom downstairs at the entrance to our block of flats – after all, they needed to make it to our front door first. We heard the buzz as they accessed the hallway with its lifts and letterboxes, then their summoning the elevator, waiting for one of the three lifts to arrive before riding up to the ninth floor, then walking down the corridor to our entrance, up another half-flight of stairs to ring our doorbell: time enough for us. I wanted to be connected to him always, even if only through my foot resting on his beneath the table, my knee against his thigh. It overcame the faint distance, the tinge of arrogance, which I often sensed in him.

Back in the GDR, when I had come under surveillance – the telephone clicked suspiciously, envelopes dropped crumbs from their ready-gummed seals, meaning they’d already been opened – when Hewhom was a professor at the university and we were married, there was a period in which he would come home amused and recount how another really quite pretty student had hailed him in the canteen stairwell and asked whether he was also going to lunch. And whether she could join him, because she’d always wanted to go to the professors’ canteen. And how, when he’d taken her there, at her request, she’d asked whether they might be able to meet up outside uni sometime as well. This, or something like it, had been offered to him several times. ‘I must really have a way with women,’ he told me, and laughed.

I didn’t doubt it.

Then, after the collapse of the GDR, when the Ministry for State Security’s archives were opened and we were allowed to see our files – in other words, when the federal commissioner’s office asked me when I wanted to come, because I was to read everything first; my husband had chiefly been of interest because he lived with me, and so he should read his own file at a later date – I said that as far as I was concerned we could come together, they didn’t need to cover up

or redact anything, a marriage that couldn't survive a dictatorship wasn't a marriage. And so we were able to sit side by side in the reading room and wonder at all the people who'd informed on me: there was a literary theorist who went by the code name Adler (Eagle – a fitting alias for a former SS man), someone from the university, even our neighbour. Then we found the Stasi's concluding remark: He's a ladies' man, agreed to unofficial collaborator's suggestion to have lunch together in the canteen, but turned down suggestion of meeting in private. He appears to be faithful to Schubert.

Aside from this, his file noted that he seemed to have a calming influence on me, from a political point of view. This was true, because I always wanted to go to the West with him, whereas he was of the opinion that sensible people needed to stay in the East – particularly pastors and those who worked in the field of medicine.

Despite years of effort, my file also noted, it had proved impossible to place an unofficial collaborator within my personal orbit, because I was surrounded exclusively by people who were themselves under observation.

Our marriage, then, had survived the dictatorship of garden gnomes intact, and the officer conducting observations for Department XX: Counter Political Underground (or some such thing) apologised later, in the nineties, even to me – he felt, he said, shame and regret for the measures he'd taken.

He appears to be faithful to Schubert. This sentence is so exposing because it reveals a contemptible image of a man: an unfaithful husband so afraid of his wife that he becomes susceptible to blackmail and, subsequently, spies on and betrays her, simply so as not to have to face her when it all comes out.

When is she coming again, he asks me – he whom I love so much:

I call him Hewhom.

I’ve Googled the name: it doesn’t exist yet.

Hewhom is asking me about myself, I think, aghast; he doesn’t know who I am.

I say: But I’m here, here in front of you. Who am I, then, if you’re asking me about myself?

On her first home visit to us, perhaps to prepare me, the palliative care doctor had predicted:

Soon he will no longer recognise you.

That is the worst thing, I thought at the time. Then I’ll be nothing to him but some replaceable helper.

No longer the only one, the unmistakeable beloved.

There’s a woman who imitates you, who copies you, Hewhom says to me. Where is she now? Has she gone? She often leaves and then comes back in a taxi. She writes books and reads aloud from them.

That’s me, always me, I cry.

She doesn’t want to live here; she wants to move to Berlin.

That’s me.

Hewhom gives me a look full of pity.

And you carry all that? You carry a lot.

I weep without sobbing.

I made a gallery in our house, he says; you just go down two steps. All my pictures are there. Have you ever seen my pictures? Have I ever shown you the gallery?

Yes, I was there for every picture you painted. And we held a hundred and thirty exhibitions in the gallery, with your paintings.

And did you know I always chose music and poems to go with them?

Yes, I was always there.

Sample Translation „The Present Day” (Helga Schubert)

You’re my wife, then. What are you called, again?

I say my name.

So we’ve been married seventy years.

No, forty-seven.

As a child, the promise in that song about God and the stars reassured me greatly – the one in which he counts all the clouds and stars, *doth mark their number, with His eyes that never slumber*, and then comes that wonderful line about His children: *And He loves them, every one*.¹

Counts me, too, and loves me. It was on this that I built those many decades with Hewhom. And now what?

You’re my wife, then, but where are the other two who look like you?

Even now, as an old woman, I suddenly thought, I’m still faced with real challenges in life:

It’s about letting go,

acceptance;

it’s about making peace,

being in accord;

about not constantly wanting to change other people, yourself, life.

And, who knows – perhaps I am made up of three women. Perhaps he has just recognised that. I was the one who hadn’t known it yet.

¹ ‘Do You Know How Many Stars There Are?’ (‘Weißt du, wie viel Sternlein stehen?’), original hymn text by Johann Wilhelm Hey, English translation by Henry William Dulcken, 19th century

All around me is silent. We drank a bottle of pear juice at his bed, and he took the pills, didn't want any supper, was peaceful and happy, felt no pain.

I went to my desk and my laptop; I'd been yearning all day to be in this state, in which I can write in peace.

And I described how it was at eight o'clock this morning, when I came into his room, in which I'd drawn the blinds the previous evening, as usual, how I said good morning, how he was lying there unchanged and well tucked in and warm again after his fall outside on the cold stones, with his face turned to the interior wall, in the middle of his three pillows, how he didn't answer and how I thought *but he can't be dead* and raised the blinds, and how again I called good morning, very loud now, and how relieved I was to hear his agreeable, not irritable, grumbling.

For half a century I turned my head towards him at night and in the morning. And he was breathing.

If he hadn't answered, I wrote, not even after I'd called repeatedly, I wouldn't have gone any closer to his bed but would have sat down by the front door and waited until the nurse or the carer from the home-visiting service arrived for his twenty minutes of personal morning hygiene. And then they might not even have had to close his eyes, because he wouldn't have opened them again from sleep. The nurse would have taken me in her arms. And I wouldn't have cried but would have slipped instead into a wondrous alienation. And if it had been the carer working that morning, he would have looked at me calmly and asked: What kind of help do you need right now?

And either he or the nurse would have rung their head office and asked to be covered for the morning, and they would have sat with me there a little while longer.

And then they would have got into their little red car and never come back again, because this, after all, is their profession.

And I would have stayed sitting there, would have looked at the telephone and gone to his bed, in which he would have been lying with hands folded, eyes closed.

And I would have sat down beside him on the edge of the bed and laid my hands on his folded ones.

And then I would have kissed them, his thin-skinned, beloved hands.

And I would simply have stayed there with him, like an old, faithful dog.

And slipped once more into that weightless dream-state, in which I correctly do all that's required.

And the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.