

EISENBAHNSTRASSE. The weeks after you died, and then the months that followed, as though measured in some other, more malleable, unit of time. How elastic everything seemed, as though things could slip into another form at any moment, as though the very space surrounding me could loop in on itself, become turned inside out without warning. Sometimes I imagined that I was already an old woman merely dreaming of being young, and sometimes I imagined that I was already dead, or a mother who had just lost a son and not the other way around, as though your death had induced time to tunnel back inside me somehow. How I floated through the days that followed with my eyes wide open and my voice sounding as though it were coming from somewhere outside my own skull. And the jobs at the theater that winter, stapling the long canvas banners to the floor and rolling the paint over them while the set designers and production assistants came and went around me; how I placed a large fan

at one end of the banner and went down to the cafeteria to wait for it to dry, hiding away in a corner with a cup of coffee and a book. And on some nights, in between dress rehearsals, the actors would begin drifting in with their make-up and costumes, thronging around the cash register and the refrigerated glass vitrines. What, one of them cried out—no fruit salad? *No more muffins?* Exaggerated expressions; boisterous laughter. How I watched them drift in and gradually fill the cafeteria, and then closed the book and laid it on the table before me as a man in a powdered wig and a plumed hat picked up an empty parfait glass from the rack of used trays and called out in a woeful tone, *this might have been your fruit salad, my lad*. And then a woman with her bosom neatly tucked into the bodice of a dirndl bent over my table with a conspiratorial wink to ask me if the other chairs were free, snatched up my book, and held it out at arm's length, enunciating the title as though it were a papal edict and gesturing solemnly as

I shrank back into my corner with an overwhelming urge to cry. Where are you; where are you. I hurried back upstairs, hung up my gas mask by its rubber strap, fetched my coat from the locker, and made for the door without a word. And then, remembering the impending rent, I thought the better of it and carried my coat back to the locker, washed out the brushes that were already beginning to stiffen, stretched a string for a base line, and began sketching out the letters spelling the title of the next premiere. How I painted them in, kneeling on the hard wooden floor and tracing the curves with a trembling hand, thinking about how much I hated the theater, hated everything about it, hated everything dramatic, everything theatrical. Those were the months I used to write myself little notes: watch out when you're crossing the street; watch out when you're handling the drill. An absent-mindedness I was unable to shake, and that feeling of being under water, or under glass. How cold and damp it was, how

I froze in my thin jacket as we walked around the botanical garden in Paris that November, and then, suddenly, we found ourselves in the tropical climate section, and then in the desert climate section, and how I wanted to stay in the desert, never leave this desert with its cactus and its rare, lavish flowers, protected and warm forever. You, and you. A day or two later we went up the Eiffel Tower, diligent tourists, and you told me that you wanted to be cremated; you were leaving your ashes to a friend to be used as a pigment, you said. What a dismal color it will make, I answered; ash grey, mixed with linseed oil on a glass palette, *I wouldn't want to paint with that*. And then you photographed me with an antenna in the background, motioning for me to move a little more to the left so that the antenna would appear to be sprouting out of the top of my head, but that came later, I only discovered that later, after I'd picked up the developed pictures. And what do I have from that week, still: a red plastic folder; a white cot-

ton bedspread stolen from the hotel and later dyed a deep shade of rose, which I hung in front of our bedroom window and which gradually faded to a pale pink over the years; the photos I took of myself in an automatic booth somewhere near the Gare du Nord, killing time until my train left for Berlin, haunted by the nagging sense that I would never be seeing you again—these four photographs with a blue background and that look of being under water, or under glass, two in a drawer somewhere and the other two completely forgotten until I caught a brief glimpse of them years later, when the official at the Ausländerpolizei* opened my file and briskly leafed through the pages as I sat across the desk under the harsh glare of the fluorescent light, filling out an application for a right of permanent residence. And how odd it was to see them unexpectedly among all these formulas I'd filled out and signed over the years, with two neat holes punched into the left margin and filed away in a manila folder; how it felt as though

I had stumbled into a trap, confronted with some kind of awful and irrefutable evidence.

* immigration authorities

EISENBAHNSTRASSE, and how we worked together on a theater production, was that ten years ago? Eleven? And then another, and the carpenter named Freddy who nearly never said a word: his tabloid newspapers, his wurst sandwiches wrapped in plastic foil in the refrigerator with the wood-grain contact paper curling up at the corners; how he spent the day cutting wood and putting together the raw constructions for the sets, having never gone to see a single production, having never been interested, having never been invited, perhaps, with a pair of tickets to the premiere tucked inside a clean white envelope with his first and last name printed carefully on the outside, but nobody knew Freddy's last name, Freddy was always just Freddy. How we had to work through the night making changes for a set designer who was very, very friendly, and very, very worried, difficulties with the director, difficulties with the set, and how I broke out in hives at the sight of him smiling in between the buckets of paint,

needless buckets from colors not quite hit upon, always a little off, a little more red, a little more ochre, and then it was all too dark, masses of paint, and all of it far too dark, and how many more gallons of white were needed to lighten it up enough, what in the world are we going to do with all this superfluous paint, all these useless buckets. And all of this occurring backstage with a production going on around us and stagehands carrying things to and fro. Then, the sound of the orchestra and the shadow of an actress ascending a stair under a spotlight, projected onto the curtain behind her and visible on the reverse side, where we paused, brush in hand, and watched her silhouette in astonishment: the raised head, the outstretched arms, a grand finale; crescendo and applause. The few things we still have from there: a discarded vacuum cleaner; an old mattress; two huge stretchers Freddy once made; a small desk which was far too beautiful to be a prop and which I talked you into stealing; a roll of sandpaper for the sanding machine, half of

it gone, half of it left, even now, after ten years, or eleven.

EISENBAHNSTRASSE, and the job we never got paid for, painting circus wagons for a Buffalo Bill show pieced together with the straggly remnants of the former East German state circus gone bankrupt. The animals out in Hoppegarten, waiting in their cages with nothing to do, watching, alert. Baboons throwing nuts and anything else they could grab out of a belligerence I didn't think existed outside the human species; scrambling up to the bars of the cage and kicking against them in defiance. And the camels; a polar bear; two elephants swinging their trunks in unison; a panther crouched in a dark corner, silent and invisible except for his glowing yellow eyes. And a lion, pacing back and forth with the restlessness of an intelligent animal accustomed to activity. How the lion picked up on my movement and followed me when I walked by the cage, and when I stopped and turned, how he did the same, as supremely alert as a cat following a toy with its gaze. We longed to believe that we could let him out

of the cage to play, that we could stroke his beautiful fur and he'd arch his back and groan in pleasure, that he wouldn't maul us to shreds. The animal attendant and the buckets of raw meat he threw into the animals' cages; how he peered at us with a taciturn and sour gaze. I went off to watch the elephants swinging their trunks in wide arcs, back and forth, back and forth, standing side by side with their huge bodies touching gently; were they passing the time, or were they trying to dispel their anxiety, I could never tell. We eventually learned that soon there wouldn't be any money left to feed the animals, that they would have to be sold off individually wherever they could; that it would be nearly impossible to find a buyer for two elephants—and how little their chances of survival would be in the event of separation.

THAT ONE MOMENT, that one detail which has remained in my memory, but why, it was nothing of importance, nothing occurred, a shaft of light falling obliquely across a sidewalk, a rustling of leaves. And all of it burned into my mind with a brilliance and a clarity, every detail branded upon my inner eye like the crisp letters of a printed word I do not understand. I say light, leaves, yet none of it can convey the mythical significance it holds for me. And does some larger thing lie concealed within it, and why have I forgotten it—forgotten the sudden realization of self-betrayal for instance, there, then, with this sidewalk, these leaves—or is it a random product, jettison caught up in the craggy recesses of a mind.

BEDFORD AVENUE; standing in front of the subway map, pronouncing the names and tasting the residue they left behind on my tongue. How far removed they seemed, as though from another world, another time; how unlikely it seemed that I could go outside with this map in my pocket and actually board a train. And then I finally overcame my lethargy and walked down Bedford Avenue and descended the steps to the subway as the sweat trickled down between my breasts; how I got on an air-conditioned train with no clear plan in mind, reached up for the overhead bar, and watched the goose-bumps appear on my bare arm as the sweat on my skin grew cold. I changed trains several times, first at Union Square, then at Grand Central, combing the crowd as the subway pulled into each station, my eyes darting from one face to another, searching for someone I might know, anyone at all, inconceivable to have grown up in a city and recognize no one, absolutely no one. My eyes shifted from the sub-

way window and the river of people rushing past outside up to the row of advertisements above them, hotlines for wife abuse, child abuse, centers for cosmetic surgery, dental surgery, with a picture of Doctor So-and-So and his signature underneath, topped off with a medical sort of flourish. And then, suddenly, I found myself on the way up to the Bronx and decided to get off at 149th Street to see if the old building was still there, when was the last time I went, I must have been a child. I walked down Brook Avenue without recognizing a single building, a single tree, turned the corner at 148th Street, and walked towards St. Ann's, counting out the even numbers on the south side of the street as they approached 516, the building my great-grandparents purchased after they arrived in the country, the building my mother grew up in, my grandmother grew up in, two long rows of five-story buildings on either side of the street with railroad flats two to a floor and women in long skirts and aprons sweeping the sidewalk

every evening. Here was 514, a two-story building set back somewhat from the others; there was a child's tricycle lying on its side on a small concrete patio out front with weeds sprouting up between the cracks. I walked on to the next building and saw the numerals 518 nailed into the wood above the door, and then I stopped and retraced my steps; I must have passed it by, I thought, but there was no 516, only a building with the number 514, and another with the number 518, both of comparatively recent construction, but no 516, and I stood there, gazing at number 514, then at number 518, and realized that the building must have been torn down long ago, after the neighborhood had turned into a slum. And later, after the lots were redrawn and new buildings erected during a phase of urban renewal, 516 simply vanished from the row of addresses on East 148th Street altogether, and I stood here, where the front door to the building must have been, picturing my mother sitting on the front steps as a child,

my grandmother, a child, here, on this very spot where the building once stood, manifested now in nothing more than a gap in a numerical sequence. I stood there for some time studying the buildings and the sizes of the lots, unable to explain how an address could have vanished, the newer buildings being no larger, no wider than the older ones had been, they wouldn't have taken up the extra space to make an entire lot vanish like that, I thought, and I walked down the street and turned the corner my mother had turned every day throughout her childhood on her way to the grammar school, across the street from the park, where the tough boys used to slide down the big granite rocks on cardboard boxes and tall trees grew out of the crevices in between, littered now with old newspapers and crushed beer cans and small piles of used syringes scattered among the underbrush.

BEDFORD AVENUE: taking the train to the ferry and traveling out to Staten Island to see my mother; borrowing the car to drive up to the cemetery. How it took some time before I found the grave, searching among the rows of small headstones decorated with bouquets of wilted flowers and American flags washed pale by the rain. And how hard it was to find anything in the new section, where the cemetery borders on Todt Hill Road; how everything looked alike, acres of mown lawn on treeless hills and rows upon rows of uniform plots, like a model, a miniature suburbia, until the sight of your name engraved in stone sent a sharp stab to my heart, as though I were seeing it for the first time. Once, on your birthday, I found myself passing another cemetery and went in to wander around in the snow, thinking that you'd have turned eighty today, but that came later. I stopped in front of a gravestone that read *Nach fleißiger Arbeit und erfüllter Pflicht** and suddenly had to think of your little shoeshine

corner in the basement with the metal shoe form screwed into a stud in the wall and the wooden brushes lined up in a neat row. Sometimes I made the trip out to Staten Island to escape the heat of the loft, climbing down the basement stairs and thinking about how huge it once seemed, when we used to skate back and forth on our metal roller skates, when we used to jump around on the pogo stick, digging little round pockmarks into the cement floor after the rubber tip got lost somewhere. And then I decided to give the walls a coat of paint, and I cleared the stacks of furniture away and moved all the old paintings to one wall and took down the screens from the windows, brushing the dried leaves and spider webs off the oxidized aluminum and scrubbing them clean under the garden hose out back. How I taped sheets of the Staten Island Advance to the floor and dipped the roller into the tray of paint with my mother looking on, and how she pointed out that this had all been my idea. And why was I doing this

again, why was I always painting everything white? The little ceramic tiles glued to the inside of the window well: how nobody ever got around to grouting them, the white ones where Barbara's room used to be, the little square brown ones where my room used to be, Lisa's room used to be, back when the basement was sectioned off with imitation wood paneling and stucco ceilings, when the three of us moved downstairs to make room for Grandma, but Grandma died before she had to watch the first tenants take her place upstairs. The mirror that used to be in Barbara's room, with the frame painted bright red, everything in Barbara's room being white or red, or white and red; how the mirror is hanging in Laura's bathroom on Ninth Street to this day. And the sewer that used to back up into my room every time it rained, seeping under a low door on hinges cut into the wall; how I glued a thin sheet of cork to it and pinned my drawings up, penciled heads of John Lennon and Jimi Hendrix copied

from record album covers with the faces carefully shaded and the highlights picked out with an eraser. Again and again, I wandered around the basement that summer, into the tool room, where rows of jars containing screws and bolts hung from the low ceiling, or into the recreation room with the indoor/outdoor rug and all of the things my brother left behind, computers, electronic components, a dismantled piano, crates and crates of papers, as though he hadn't long since gotten married and bought a house and started a family of his own. And all the old paintings stacked in the corner, the dresser, the trunk, my little stash of possessions, as though a part of me had never moved out, as though this were my little place to crawl back to, just in case, and I thought about the two of us, my brother and I, each of us with a piece of territory staked out, each of us with a place to return to, even now, in this vast empire of our childhood.

* after [a life of] diligent work and fulfilled duty

BEDFORD AVENUE, and the night before you came to New York. How I had been waiting; sweating through the hot days and walking the baking asphalt streets and waiting; and now, how I sat listening to your voice on the telephone with my eyes shut tight, suspended in the space it created around me. And you were in that state of anxiety prior to departure; you were coming tomorrow, and you hadn't begun to pack yet, dead tired and a flight at six in the morning. And I would be meeting you at the airport tomorrow afternoon, I would see you emerge through the gates with a crumpled newspaper under your arm and a look of groggy confusion and be seized with the impulse to turn around before your searching eyes could locate me in the crowd of excited onlookers, and run away.

A DAY, AN HOUR without contradiction. To have a feeling, to have it once and to retain it without ambivalence, without another flip of the coin. How many days spent immobile, waiting for these twirling bits of thought to slowly settle down at the bottom of the jar, afraid to move, afraid to stir up the commotion again, and every thought containing its antipode, every insight bearing the imprint of its opposite, and all the while struggling to locate one premise that can serve as a fundament to build upon, as an axis to revolve around, one feeling, one basic truth not destined for revision, for refutation. Not to spend another afternoon groping around in the dark—where did it go, where did it go—another afternoon, another day.

EISENBAHNSTRASSE; the futon spread out on the floor of the studio, and my brother stretched across it with his long feet hanging over the edge, sleeping off the jet lag. His travel case in the corner near the coal oven, open and sprawling with jeans and shirts and underwear, and beside it a pair of sweaty socks and a plastic bag of duty-free chocolate. I gazed at his sleeping body and thought about how well I knew it, and how I'd known it through every stage of growth, known it when his shoulder blades were tiny and fragile and we used to take baths together in the yellow-tiled tub, staring into the bubbles and imagining ourselves inside them; floating the shampoo bottle, the bar of soap like little boats across a lake. I suddenly had to think of him taking apart the radio when he was still too small to speak, scattering the parts all over the living room rug; how I had to gather them all up again after he was tucked into bed. And my little brother, playing the villain now, towering above me in a threatening pose, casting a long, black,

jagged shadow and laughing the sinister laugh we used to imitate from the Saturday morning cartoons. Our private joke; his revenge for all the years I pushed him around, dunked him in the pool. What a terrible sister I was, taking advantage of the difference in age, the difference in size, and all the tall tales I told him: how he believed every word. We spent all our free time together, glued to each other's side, entire summers under water in the pool out back, the skin on our feet shriveling, our fingertips shriveling, jumping up and down wildly in the water and making waves, higher and higher, pulling ourselves up onto the edge of the pool and throwing ourselves back in, laughing and shrieking and jumping wildly and pretending we were at high sea, shipwrecked, exhilarated, the water splashing over the edge of the pool and flooding the ground around below. And then, exhausted, we'd cling to the side of the pool, breathing in the smell of the blue plastic lining in the sun and bouncing up and down with the waves until the

water grew calm again, and then we'd take turns counting the seconds: who can stay under water longer, who can swim more lengths without coming up for air, trying to break the record each time until our lips turned blue and our eyes were red and bleary from the chlorine. I was always the one who made up the rules, and sometimes, imperiously, I changed them on a sudden whim. And now, my brother lying there on the futon, fast asleep; the first time we saw each other after the funeral, his first time abroad. How he took apart my broken vacuum cleaner and fixed the motor and put it back together again, how he fixed my bicycle, but that came later. How I had to go back and forth to the store several times a day to carry all the groceries; his disappointment that you couldn't buy exactly the same things as you could in Waldbaum's, a gallon of Florida orange juice, Thomas' English Muffins. And I was always pushing him to try something new, Königsberger Klopse for instance; we stood in front of Max and Moritz arguing, I explaining

that it was similar to a hamburger, only better, and he finally giving in with a dark, silent fury. How he liked it in the end and forgot all about his resistance, his stubborn refusal, but that came later. And now we were like two orphans who'd forgotten to leave a trail of breadcrumbs behind, lost in a dark wood and afraid, and I thought: I'll never leave you, I'll protect you, but I knew it wasn't true, I knew that he'd be gone again in a few weeks, and that our magic bond was a thing of long ago, when we used to sit in our towels on the front steps, shivering and comparing our wet footprints on the cement walk, the size of our feet until it grew dark and the fireflies started coming out, and the stars. And then we'd talk about time, time and space and marvel at it all, living on a ball revolving in a vast and empty expanse, and how far away the stars were, and how old the universe, and I'd make up some new scientific fact, I'd tell him I knew how to focus the rays of light coming from other planets and could see the past as

though it were on TV, and he'd believe me,
he'd believe every word.

EISENBAHNSTRASSE, and how different everything seemed with Artie suddenly there, occupying space and turning my studio into a displaced chunk of Staten Island that was becoming larger and larger each day. How he wore a pair of jeans once, a shirt once, throwing them onto the floor in the corner and the pile growing higher and higher until there were no more jeans, no more shirts in the suitcase, and my brother, having never been to a Laundromat, having never turned the dial on my mother's washing machine, having never left home, except once, when he ran away one day without any warning, and having nowhere to go, rode the ferry back and forth for an entire afternoon until a young man in a faded sweatshirt asked him if he needed a place to stay, who knows what he had in mind, but Artie never used to see these things. How, a few days later, I got a call from a friend, my former downstairs neighbor; a person was staying upstairs, he said, a young man with the same eyes as mine. He coaxed him down and

put him on the phone, and strangely enough, it actually was my brother, who had just wound up in the same apartment upon leaving home as I had two or three years previously, crazy coincidence. I told him to come stay with us on Ninth Street and called my parents to tell them he was safe, and he eventually went back home and my mother gave up trying to talk sense into him and finally left him alone. Later, after I moved to Berlin, the snapshots of the family occasions I no longer took part in: christenings, birthday parties, my brother's graduation from the police academy, in uniform, and next to him his father, my father—was it really the same man?—with his hand around Artie's shoulder, proud that he had finally amounted to something decent. How I took him around the corner to see the parts of the Wall being dismantled, and how I tried to describe to him what it was like before, when the geography ended there, the map in the mind ended there and the grey zone began. And my brother's imagination was

sparked all of a sudden: the sweep of history, the way the world can suddenly change, and I was wondering if the futon would dry by the end of the day, after having scrubbed it in the middle where the cat had urinated, out of jealousy, presumably, because I hadn't had an overnight guest for some time.

EISENBAHNSTRASSE. The trip we took up to Rügen, and all the little Trabants zipping past; the chug-chug of their two-stroke engines. The currency union had just gone into effect; the shops, closed down over the weekend for inventory and reopened now with new stock on the shelves, a new look of shy pride. A fabulous array with the four-color allure of marketing strategies still magically irresistible to those not yet inured; the sober disappointment when the effect on the monthly budget eventually manifested itself in hardship, but that came later. The emptiness that remained behind after my brother left, the feeling of instability; my clothes, hanging under the loft bed and looking as though they were waiting to be packed away, and how precarious the order on the desk suddenly seemed, everything with an air about it now as though it might pick up from one moment to the next and walk away. This living from rent to rent, commercial space, and if I had to leave, where would I go? All these paint-

ings, too big to store in an ordinary apartment; *why don't you just sell them*, Artie asked, and I had to laugh; I didn't think of that. And all the paintings in the basement in the house on Staten Island; how he helped me carry them out of Ninth Street after you gave up the apartment, after you'd given up hope that I'd ever come back. And I, trembling as we maneuvered the huge canvases out of their storage in the front room and through the narrow ground floor apartment, their weight bearing down and threatening to fall on top of us; backing them one by one into the hallway, watch out for the door, watch out for the edge of the kitchen sink, the railing in the hallway, anything that might gash the back of a canvas and ruin it. How they were an inch too tall to get through the door; how we had to tilt them, feeding them diagonally through the opening and barely grazing the doorframe. And then they were outside, leaning against the building, everything I'd worked for during my last years in school,

here, on the street. And in the meantime, the things I'd packed into plastic bags, old clothing, letters, receipts, strewn about the sidewalk, someone having ripped open the bags and rifled through them in the few minutes it took us to carry a painting outside. I stood and stared at my life, scattered about the sidewalk now, a piece of it carried here, a piece there, like bits of string to be woven into faraway nests. And the roll of drawings I'd leaned up against the garbage cans, gone, hanging, perhaps, in someone's apartment on the Lower East Side to this day, who knows. How we swept the sidewalk, spread out a sheet of plastic, and slowly lowered one of the biggest paintings down onto the cracked cement. I pried out the staples, removed the stretcher, and laid a cardboard roll onto the back of the canvas, as delicate now as a mammoth animal whose skeleton had been extracted clean as a fish. How we began rolling it, Artie at one end and I at the other, and how I heard the paint begin to crack. How we rolled

it a little further, taking care not to let it stray to either side, and then I heard another crack, and then another, and how I had no choice but to continue, rolling it slowly, inch by inch, a crack here, a crack there, barely audible. We eventually packed everything onto the truck and tied the canvases I'd left on the stretchers to keep them from toppling over. And they'd been in the basement now for how many years, keeping me awake at night, and how I longed for everything to be in one place again, my bed and my dresser and the lamp on top of one of Grandma's crocheted doilies, with the piano in the living room and the World Book Encyclopedia in the book case, everything in its place, there, where it used to be, when the objects in the house had been there forever, would remain there forever, every picture on the wall, every worn-out piece of furniture, locked up and safe in one place.