

Those Dark Days

Ruth Schweikert
Autobiographical Novel
German



“And what am I waiting for now?” – in her latest and most deeply personal book, Ruth Schweikert writes of her experience of breast cancer. On 9 February 2016, she was diagnosed with a particularly aggressive form of breast-cancer. Guesswork and fear become reality. But what is that reality?

“Tuesday 9th February 2016, 1.09 pm; I’m standing in my winter coat in front of the Café zur Weltkugel in Zürich smoking what could be my last cigarette; the almost full pack I tapped it from with my numb fingers is striped a dainty sky blue and white, like the material for a summer dress, or a baby blanket.”

Title

Tage wie Hunde

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Ruth Schweikert was born in Lörrach in southern Germany in 1965 and grew up in Switzerland. She now lives in Zürich with her family and works as an author and playwright. In 1994 she made her debut with an acclaimed collection of short stories entitled *Erdnüsse. Totschlagen* (*Peanuts. Killing*), followed by her novels *Augen zu* (*Eyes Closed*), *Ohio* and *Wie wir älter werden* (*How We Grow Old*). She has won numerous awards for her work, including the Ingeborg Bachmann Competition’s Bertelsmann Scholarship (1994) and the City of Zürich Art Prize (2016).

Photo: Sibylle Meier

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Excerpt translated by Jen Calleja

Tuesday

(Tried to get hold of you yesterday. Heard there's apparently still no results?)

Dear fru dr. schnell,
yesterday evening I arranged an appointment with your Surgery Assistant for today 3.30pm despite my request to speak to you personally

Dear Frau Dr. Schnell,
Yesterday at 6.15pm your Surgery Assistant called me and told me that she would have to arrange an appointment with me to discuss the results. My request is to speak with you personally

Aaaaaaaaand? A. asks, greeting kindly

Dear Frau Dr, Shcnell
I'm asking you, please, to call me. It is a thousand times more preferable for me if you discuss the findings on the telephone rather than I wait until 3.30

Hello Ruth,
I'd really like to rearrange that meet up we didn't get around to. When would suit you ...? I'm away skiing next week. Could you manage this week? Or the one after? I hope you're well?

The sky is hazy, the air smells like snow; a touch of yesterday's snow is still on the rooftops; grey-brown slush on the pavements, salt stains leave their mark on shoes

Tuesday 9th February 2016, 1.09pm; I'm standing in my winter coat in front of the Café zur Weltkugel in Zurich, smoking what could be my last cigarette; the almost full pack I tapped it from with my numb fingers is striped a dainty sky blue and white, like the material for a summer dress, or a baby blanket; Parisienne Ciel is the

lightest Parisienne there is, but no less harmful because of it, they say one simply inhales the toxic substances all the more deeply; with every deep drag nitrosamine, tar, polonium 201, nicotine, benzopyrene and so on make it to the approximately 300 million alveoli, which hang like tight bunches of grapes from the bronchial branches (that's pretty much how I imagine them); the most delicate air sacs, in which the poisonous substances nest or from where they diffuse into the blood, like the oxygen molecules constantly needed by all organisms; seven more seconds of a lifetime tick away until the first nicotine molecules break through the blood-brain barrier and dock in the acetylcholine receptors of certain nerve cells, while I mentally tot up how many more birthdays I'm likely to reach, fifty-two, fifty-three, fifty-four, fifty-five, fifty-six, fifty-seven, fifty-eight; a counting game I have a habit of reciting out of pure boredom while waiting at a red light for the umpteenth time or riding my bike over the same ramp in the Selнау estate; every extra second an extra year of living - or I stand, like I did ten days ago after feeling a pea-sized knot inside my left breast while in the shower, in the kitchen of the little house in Bergen-Enkheim for writers in residence and turn the tap on; a gushing, a burbling, a roar; how long will it take, how many seconds, until the basin overflows

In Saint Jean de Luz: before first light, the first cars, later, the birds; the flies in the tiny caravan bedroom, seeking out our sweaty bodies for nourishment; almost rather solemn in the afternoon, the to-ing and fro-ing of the lawnmower; a hornet underneath the parasol

Tuesday 9th February 2016, 1.16pm; I'm standing in my winter coat in front of the Café zur Weltkugel smoking what could be my second last cigarette; at what point did I actually make up my mind, *if-then*, and why didn't I stop straightaway, irrespective of the results of the biopsy?; not that long ago I didn't want to wean myself off of it, this nicotine addiction, which at times I myself don't completely believe in, not as a physical-psychological dependency; it seems more like an attitude to me (the perpetually stressed, perennially occupied writer, lecturer, super-mother); I'm actually smoking more than ever during these days (and nights) of waiting: burning

glow between agitated fingers, and then this craving, the craving for precisely this glow, this numbing heat in my mouth, the burning in my throat, as if the only thing that mattered was to literally max out my self-imposed time limit to the last breath

(how else to gauge one's own room for manoeuvre? Stretch it to its extreme: the greatest possible autonomy, the greatest possible moment of freedom, being at one's most vital at the moment of decision, in the face of judgment: *l'instant de la décision est une folie*, Kierkegaard says in Derrida's translation - the instant of decision is madness; *very well, then I won't smoke a single cigarette again*; nothing was, nothing is easier for me)