On a freezing Monday morning Bernd and I drove to the switching substation at Salurerstrasse 11 for the first job of the day. Inside the car it was warm and I was yawning. Bernd sat moodily next to me and did not get out when I brought us to a standstill; he just stared at the mountain range enfolding Innsbruck with a belligerent expression on his round face. Every year, when the weather turns wet and grey and nothing relieves the vast stony expanses of the mountain faces, Alpine winter sadness turns Bernd into a will-less, shapeless vat filled to the brim with existentialist despair. 'They're coming closer again,' he moaned. 'I can just feel them creeping up on me and pressing me down with their blackness. It's like a prison in this town, there's no escape.'

From the car I looked at the substation, a monolithic structure that stands incongruously among the cherry-coloured, long-established houses of Innsbruck that surround it. I let my eyes glide over the silky curves of black basalt that shield the city from the heavy and dangerous transformers. The rounded corners and the slow, swelling curve of the east elevation drew my gaze up and down and around to the side. Behind the stone building the Alps loomed, my eyes panned the panorama of the snow-covered peaks in the distance. I turned back to Bernd and motioned silently; let's go in.

I got out of the car and cringed; a gust of icy wind blew my poppy-coloured scarf in my face. Bernd was dressed more appropriately for the arctic cold with huge moon boots and a balaclava that concealed most of his face like a mask. We hurried towards the service entrance. Inside, an open staircase positioned parallel to the south facade led to the top of the building; glass strips, narrow-looking from the outside, let in broad bands of radiant white light. The concrete walls, curving overhead to form a small plateaus about half-way up, were painted a deep blue, the doors an acid, lemony yellow. We went around the station, checking the machines behind the yellow doors, as we have to do regularly. When we were finished, we went to the small staff room on the third floor that is required by law to be on the premises although it is used rarely, and sat down at the table. I extracted two folded-up newspaper articles from the pocket of my anorak and put them on the table in front of Bernd.

'Look at this,' I said.

He glanced at the first article; 'Black is back,' he read out loud and looked up suspiciously. 'What is this' he asked, 'the fashion news?'

I ignored him and shoved the second article in his direction. 'Now this one,' I commanded. Bernd raised his eyebrows disbelievingly before resuming his reading. 'The universe will expand forever,' he cited. He looked up briefly, frowned at me and went on in a halting voice: 'Stars exploding in deep space are used as mile-makers to measure the rate of the expansion of the Universe, which started with the Big Bang.' He sat back in his chair heavily, raised his eyes to heaven and obviously deemed me a complete idiot.

We left the substation, locking up behind us carefully, turned around and, despite the biting cold, both stood still and faced the billowing planes of basalt lava and the mountains beyond.

'It is about black,' I finally said. 'Except for us two, nobody in this town can see beyond the walls of this building, can they? They are not allowed to go in because
CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT
For the third time that week I found myself at Frankfurt airport. Feeling tired and smoke-dried from last night's company dinner, I schlepped past the numerous tax-free shops, where even at this early hour people congregated around counters laden with products that are available everywhere: Estee Lauder, Sony, Herald Tribune. Through the impene-
trable machinations of my office I was booked on a five-thirty am flight to New York. In the Frequent Flyers Lounge I was surrounded by types like myself; subdued, unobtrusive, quietly self-righteous members of the 'international business elite.' Stiffly I let myself drop on a low sofa while the loud-
speaker announced that my flight had a forty-minute delay. I considered getting a
cup of coffee from the self-service bar, but my usual back pain had extended to my
legs, so I just sat and stared at the dark plate-glass windows, against which a cold rain
splattered. An hour and a half later I woke up with a jolt when a ground stewardess
coughed briskly in my ear: 'We're now ready for departure, Mr. Ochs.' I rubbed my
eyes with trembling hands and headed for the gate, my raincoat trailing on the floor
behind me.

Eight hours later I lurched into the arrivals hall at JFK and immediately came up
against a crude, handwritten sign with my name on it, held up by my angel, that is to
say, the student allocated to look after me for the duration of the conference. She was
shaking her waist-long, gleaming black hair and tapping her stiletto-heeled left foot.
'Can we go to the hotel first?' I asked by way of introduction. The angel looked at
her venomously green wristwatch. 'There is not much time' she replied.

'But I want to be checked in,' I persisted. She shrugged and told me that, by the way,
her name was Durga. She wrenched my attaché case from my hand and marched
me to her car, a surprisingly luxurious bordeaux Cadillac with cream upholstery.
Before we had even left the car park, Durga had carried out three conversations on
her cell phone, lit a cigarette, which she threw out of the window after two pulls, and
taken a bite out of a mango. She turned to me, the sticky yellow juice dripping from
her chin, and asked: 'You're using the hotel at the World Media Center, Mr. Ochs?'
I nodded. The car stereo went on full blast and I was treated to a medley of Bengali
ballads, which aggravated the abrasive headache that the jet stream had given me.

Durga spoke on her cell phone incessantly, which distracted her from her driving,
but, ferociously corrected by her navigating system, she managed to find her uncon-
tentional way into Manhattan while devouring a papaya, taking swallowing from the world's
tallest latte, occasionally turning over the pages of a garishly illustrated novel that
she kept on the passenger seat next to her and recklessly pulling at the steering wheel.
As she swung violently past the Hudson River Park I was beginning to feel nauseous.

The low, vaulted forms of the housing developments glittered with reflected sun-
light. In the ground-level park the tourists, hedonistic city dwellers and small dogs
mingled. Swerving furiously, Durga rushed us past Penn Station, where the public
plane changed from a park into an urban surface, thickening to accommodate a mu-
titude of activities; finally we entered the taxi loop leading up to the media cluster,
situated in between the mellow riverfront houses and the frenetic commuter station.

Durga pulled up to a screeching halt and rushed out of the limo to open my door
and stand to attention while I lifted my luggage out of the back. I faltered into the
lobby with its grand spiral opening on to the World Media Center, where the confer-
ence would take place.
‘I’ll wait here,’ Durga said. Her long black hair was draped over her right shoulder like a scarf. I went to the reception desk to get my key, ‘Give me five minutes,’ I told Durga. I took the lift upstairs and checked my face in the dark mirror. My under-eye bags had deteriorated and my gums tingled.

I put my suitcase on the only chair available in my single room, pulled off some of my clothes and went to the bathroom where I again studied my face in the mirror, this time a bright light one. I didn’t look much better. In the room behind me I heard the hotel telephone ring. I smoothed back my hair with my hands. Back into the bedroom I put on my jacket, collected my laptop and some papers I needed for my presentation at the conference, later in the day.

For a moment I stood motionless beside the bed and then, without realizing I had come to any decision on that count, I stretched out on the bed and closed my eyes. After two seconds the hotel phone and my own cell phone both rang. Without bothering to answer I got up and went downstairs, where Durga was pacing in front of the receptionist she had obviously instructed to ring my room, and simultaneously screwing up a newspaper and holding an unlit cigarette, while she held her own cell phone, on which she was calling my mobile number, pressed to her ear.

‘Hello,’ I ventured cautiously. Quick as lightning she turned around, relieved me of my notebook and sped in the direction of the conference hall.

‘What about a cup of coffee?’ I pleaded.

There was no reply. Annoyed, I trailed behind her, glancing around the vast, irregular space of the World Media Center. Everywhere I saw people I might want to know; dark-suited, slim, streamlined individuals with sharp faces. They seemed to be going in more attractive directions than ourselves; following the sunlight that came in through the opaque, glass arcs, diagonals and asymmetric domes of the building. I wanted to go after them and have a little break; for God’s sake, was I not even allowed to have a cup of coffee?

Durga halted in front of a set of double doors.

‘Right, what are we going to do now?’ I enquired.

‘We’re here,’ she said and opened both doors with sweeping gestures of her mighty arms. Instantly we were greeted with thunderous applause. Suddenly I realized that I had forgotten to put my shirt back on and was wearing nothing but a low-necked vest underneath my jacket. I clutched my bare neck.

‘You’re only half an hour late,’ Durga hissed, giving me a not so gentle push forward, ‘the moderator has been filling in time for you.’ I couldn’t believe it; I had been so sure that my presentation was planned for the afternoon. Overcome by the sensation that I was descending down a black hole at immeasurable speed, I waded towards the stage, accompanied by the steady clapping of the conference goers.
In the space of three weeks Diouma Baaba Ouagadougou lost her watch, her mobile telephone, three books, two woollen jumpers, a T-shirt and a pair of trousers, two earrings (not belonging in a pair, so two sets were ruined), a nice pair of stainless steel pasta tongs, a packet of coffee filters, four laminated business-card sized cards pertaining to her membership of respectively a supermarket, a video shop, the public library and a health club, and her job. Oh yes, she lost her job. It was only a lousy cleaning job and Diouma had already discovered that there was an endless supply of other things, so she felt quite indifferent when the manager told her not to return to the canteen the following day. But she took the loss of the other things, far dearer to her and immeasurably more difficult to replace, as a sign. God was trying to tell her something. But what? What was God's message to her?

Diouma began to watch out for signs. No sooner had she begun to do this, than the town appeared to be full of them. Everywhere she looked she saw giant, hitherto unnoticed objects; strange playthings for colossal monster babies, objects vaguely reminiscent of forms from nature and massive geometrical figures. They were made of concrete and steel, painted in different, but mostly dull colours, and sturdily planted beside railway tracks, in the middle of traffic roundabouts and similar places where no one lingered, so that they had flashed by before she could grasp their meaning.

One day she tentatively left a small offering in front of one of the puzzling totems; an old yellow Teletubby key ring to which she was not particularly attached. Still her possessions kept vanishing; a dozen hairclips, three mittens, a pound of fish, two lemon-ade glasses and a teacup (well, actually they were accidentally broken), a new box of matches and a large-toothed fluorescent pink comb.

She found another job, but already she knew it was not for keeps. Everything she bought she mentally said goodbye to as soon as she put it in her shopping bag. Losing stuff had become second nature to her. In her dreams she lost even more, her house, her mother, her car, her hair and all her teeth. Waking up scared stiff in the morning Diouma returned to the giant objects in an attempt to ward off disaster. On the cold grey-green grass surrounding leaden pipes and rough pedestals she placed a tube of Smarties, a lily-scented candle in a small red glass jar, a silver-framed pair of blue sunglasses from which the left eyeglass was missing, a gilt pen – lovely trifles.

She had a dream in which she strode through a large bare space shedding stuff until she was naked. The room was like a wide tunnel with sloping rocky walls. At the end of this tunnel there was no light, but floor and ceiling met in a thin black line. As she slowly walked towards the horizon, she left a stream of objects in her wake. They fell from her body, together with her clothes, a vivid, clattering waterfall of fruit, chocolate bars, postcards, magazines, cooking utensils and garments.

Suddenly she heard a rustling sound behind her and she turned to look back; from a great height people were gazing down on her and applauding. The rattling of clapping hands turned into the early morning sound of water sprays spurting against a plastic shower curtain and Diouma got out of bed. Today she would meet the spirit who had been stealing her things.
She drove to the new job and parked on a derelict building site behind the railway yard. She was late for work and hurriedly gathered together her belongings. Stumbling over loose stones, she scurried across the empty lot. Suddenly she halted and frantically began to disentangle the bundle in her arms; her bag, her scarf, her keys, her Walkman were all there, but her leather jacket was missing. Finally she had lost her most precious possession.

She raced back to the makeshift car park, but it was too late. The plot was deserted, except for an old, dirty red car that was just pulling away. Without a second thought Diouma got back into her own car and swung out of the car park, following the ghost who had taken the short, soft, black, lambskin coat. She chased him through the morning rush hour traffic, ignoring the other cars that wanted to come in between her and the fleeing red car. Surrounded by furious faces and frenzied hooting she pursued the vehicle into the parking garage next to the railway station on the other side of the tracks.

They descended into its depths. Walls painted in intense colours rushed by, yellow, orange and red. With each turn the wheels of the car squealed on the smooth concrete. She passed underneath a glazed bridge and recognized the gaping, bare space of her dream.

When she reached the bottom of the garage the red car was not there. Slowly Diouma circled the vast, column-less floor, but the aisles, separated by long, gradient walls were largely vacant. She left her own car in an empty space in Section 45 and got out. She dashed to the nearest exit and found herself in a huge shaft, vibrant with daylight. There was no one there. She took the lift up to the next floor. Her heart was pounding as she scanned the floor. Once more the space was deserted. She ran to the other side of the building, passing the rough, rocky walls she had seen in her sleep. The crumbling and stony walls seemed incongruous in this land of clay and sand.

Still the red car was nowhere to be seen. Panting, Diouma pushed open a heavy glass door and entered the second shaft bisecting the parking garage. A long, long staircase rose up in front of her. She caught a fleeting glimpse of a figure hurrying towards the top and set off in pursuit. The polished concrete walls and the staircase of stainless steel were gleaming anewly in the white strip lights.

Finally she reached the top. Breathlessly she pulled open the door to the top floor and spun around. A mere few metres away from her stood a woman with short, blonde hair. She was busy stuffing her parking ticket into the front compartment of her handbag. The leather jacket hung casually in the crook of her arm.

A few strides and Diouma was there; she snatched the soft piece of clothing from the unsuspecting woman's arms. Astonished, the woman let go of the jacket without protest. Diouma sank to her knees, clutching the black, silky leather to her face, breathing in its smell of talcum, of hide, of herself. 'Thank you,' she gasped, 'thank you for finding my jacket.'

'I lost it,' she explained, 'I lost so much.' She got up and moved away swiftly. Back in her car she burst out laughing. She was still laughing loudly and gustily as she drove over the glass bridge and briefly glanced down into the immense void below, so vacant, so bare, and so blessedly free of things and their images.