

Ackermann

by Josef K. Strosche

When he took Medieval German Lit in graduate school, Ackermann read *Der Ackermann aus Böhmen* by Johannes von Tepl. His professor was amused both by his last name and that his grandparents were Germans from Bohemia. Of course, only his grandmother was from Bohemia and didn't acquire the name till she married his grandfather, an East Frisian, as an expellee in the British Zone of Occupation in 1947. Ackermann nevertheless felt nausea that first day, envisioning a future wife he didn't yet know taking ill and leaving him a young widower.

The work, you see, which is also known as *Der Ackermann und der Tod* and dates from the year 1401, concerns a man in the prime of his life whose wife dies suddenly from illness. He reproaches Death for this offense, taking him to task in the odd-numbered chapters, while Death defends himself with ice-cold reason in the even-numbered ones. Ultimately, God himself intervenes as judge, reminding both to whom they owe their very existences.

Ackermann envisioned a faceless stranger when he thought forward to his dead wife, reading chapter after chapter with growing dread, despite the fact that he was in a relationship at the time. The girl was a European and, though he was quite convinced he loved her and she loved him, an improbable choice to be his wife, if for no other reason than neither wanted to live away from family for any prolonged period of time. Weeks after checking *Der Ackermann aus Böhmen* off his list and submitting his short essay, Ackermann had expunged all thoughts of the work from his mind. Then he caught a cold. The cold passed in a week, and he developed a cough. Once the cough was gone, a severe sore throat ensued. He phoned his mother, who told him to see a doctor. He did and was promptly told that he had mono.

He and the girlfriend avoided kissing at first, mindful of the colloquial moniker for the affliction, but the practice soon proved too difficult. Ackermann was warned that he'd become lethargic, sleeping for days at a time, and that he might consider taking the rest of the semester off. Yet nothing of the sort occurred. He even noted that he felt as well as ever most days.

Rather than being good news, the curious fact terrified the young man. His theory was that he'd been misdiagnosed. Surely something worse was to blame. He bounced his guesses, from lupus to lung cancer, off of his girlfriend, who was mostly just annoyed until he posited that it must be HIV, missed by a blood test taken too soon. At this she became irate. She slapped him across the face. Before he could react she punched him in the arm. It took hours for him to convince her that it was categorically impossible for him to have contracted the disease, if not from her.

Despite resumed intimacies, the girlfriend never contracted mono, much less HIV. But they did part ways not long thereafter, the girlfriend returning home and Ackermann intent on finding his calling in the world. He sought it first in Prague with an internship at the *Goethe-Institut*. When it ended he got work teaching English through a private language school. He made friends, mostly with the English but with a sprinkling of Spanish and Greek to keep him on his toes. They began with dinner and drinks around nine, hopped bars till one, and closed clubs at seven. He met the younger clients, who neither minded nor judged, in the mornings with booze yet on his breath. The older ones, the ones who paid better, the business folks, he met after waking in the late afternoon, just before heading out with his tribe to do it all over again.

Not quite a year into Prague he took the time and acknowledged the thoughts that had been waiting patiently in the back of his mind. After granting them their hearing he judged in their favor, opting to head north to investigate the ancestral nest of his deracinated

grandmother. The village he found was depressing and lorn, bearing scars of expulsion and communism even some version of capitalism couldn't and wouldn't heal. It soured Prague for Ackermann. He found himself taking lonely strolls through Josefov and peering through the miniscule slits in the walls surrounding the spooky Jewish cemetery. He even took a tour once but had to abort midway through, scared out of his wits.

After another visit north to his grandmother's homeland, he moved to Germany, deeming it the only fitting solution. In Oldenburg, he was an hour east of the patch of soil on which his father had been bred. There too he first taught English for subsistence earnings, but in place of the late nights and strong drink were great aunts who could cook and second cousins with connections. He got a decent job working for an online journal. With the respectable salary he could afford a real apartment. He met a girl.

The girl was nice, a Slovenian in town for the university. The fact didn't seem to pose the problems it had in the past. They didn't even talk about where they'd end up, only that they'd end up somewhere together. For a year it went on. His parents came over and joined them on the train to Ljubljana so that all could meet in one colossal language blur. She moved in. They expected a child but lost it late in the first trimester. It hurt but didn't deter them. Six months went by without another pregnancy. The doctor at first told them it was complicated and then that she was sick. It was an intestinal disease first misdiagnosed as stomach cancer. The treatments were awful and the symptoms even worse. In time she improved. The two close calls, however, were too much for Ackermann to take, leaving him wondering if his time chasing Death in Bohemia might not have infected him.

He left the Slovenian and soon all of Europe behind. Two years of isolation in the States passed. He buried his grandparents before he met me, the first and last woman he'd marry. I don't know what it

was that shook him out of his slumber, as much as I'd cherish saying it was me. I'm twelve years his junior, so I've always wondered if he thought I was immortal. When he'll listen I still tell him how ridiculous it is, how his past has nothing to do with his illness. And yet, with what they keep swearing is eight weeks to live, he insists that I should exact my revenge on a Death I don't even believe in once he's gone. I ask him what I'm supposed to do. Should I take our two small children to the babysitter while I sit at home in a vodka rage, calling out some specter for what he's robbed from me? He drifts in and out nowadays. We decided to keep him at home. Last weekend I heard him praying to God, stuttering and mumbling but begging fiercely for forgiveness for something I could not decipher.

