Blood Lust

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All kinds of blood flow in literature, but periods rarely stain the page. Thomas Mann was one of the first writers to let menstrual blood spread and dry up across a story. *Thomas Mann?!* This was not what I expected to find when I returned to his work after a hiatus of almost two decades. I was reluctant to go back, afraid of being disappointed, of casting a shadow over enchanted reading memories. Moreover, I wasn't sure what was to be gained by giving more attention to such an established, lauded writer. Another old, white man – was my thought. At the same time, I was disconcerted by this reaction. A category which legitimately, necessarily describes a systemic, exploitative power dynamic is problematic if applied indiscriminately, without consideration, without qualification. I resolved to revisit Mann as an act of resistance against my worst presumptions. What an astonishing encounter it turned out to be.

It started with an online search: »Thomas Mann feminist«. Since my own recent writing has been so defined by feminist perspectives, I was curious about what, if any, affinities I might find approaching Mann through this lens. A book came up, one I'd never heard of: *Die Betrogene*. The English translation was titled *The Black Swan*. I found, read and was swept up by it, just as I had been by Mann back in my twenties. Gripping story, striking imagery, sharp irony, deep humanity – classic Mann. Yet also atypical – for the time, and for him: the central character is an older woman.

In spring 1952, Thomas Mann interrupted work on Felix Krull to write what he called a »größere Erzählung«[1], a »Frauengeschichte«[2], inspired by an anecdote he heard from his wife, Katia, about a friend of hers: a middle-aged woman falls in love with a much younger man, her desire for him is intensely physical, but she is wracked by a sense of inadequacy because she has gone through the menopause – that point when a year has passed since a woman's last period. At the height of her passion, she starts to bleed again and takes this seeming resumption of her menstrual cycle as Nature's validation of her emotion. It transpires that the bleeding is caused by cancer in her uterus, she dies soon after. The tale, Mann said, »spoke to me immediately«[3] and would not let him alone[4] – it became the plot for his new novella. His diary entries and letters during the book's creation reveal his excitement about the story, the efforts he made with particularities of the local dialect and geography in Düsseldorf, where the tale is set during the 1920s, and especially the pains he took to get right the medical details. »It will be aesthetically difficult to make agreeable, I told myself; but to make possible that which is not really possible has always seduced me.«[5]

In his late-seventies Thomas Mann began to imagine himself into the mind and body of Rosalie von Tümmler, a woman in her fifties. The result was his final completed work – *The Black Swan*, published in 1953: a story devoted to a subject that, as Emily Pine notes in her essay *Notes on Bleeding and other Crimes*, published in 2018, has long been considered »too embarrassing, too unwanted, too *female* to talk about out loud«.[6] Pine wrote: »I am sick of the silence and the secrecy and the warped idea that blood is taboo when it comes out of a vagina. To hell with covering up, with being embarrassed, with

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1 Thomas Mann, letter to Louis Leibrich 16.5.1953, letter to Martin Flinker 8.4.1953, letter to Max Rychner 11.4.1953, letter to Martin Flinker 8.4.1953, letter to Agnes E. Meyer 14.3.1953, from Rudolf Hirsch/Werner Vordtriede (eds.), *Dichter über ihre Dichtungen*, Band 14/III: Thomas Mann Teil III: 1944-1955, ed. by Hans Wysling & Marianne Fischer, Heimeran-Verlag, 1981. All citations translated into English by Priya Basil.

2 Thomas Mann, letter to Max Rychner 11.4.1953, letter to Felix Braun 18.12.1952, ibid.

3 Thomas Mann, letter to Walter Rilla 14.11.1953 and also in *Rückkehr*, 1954, from *Dichter über ihre Dichtungen*, p. 524

4 Thomas Mann, letter to Klaus Mampell 10.3.1954, from *Dichter über ihre Dichtungen*.

5 Thomas Mann, *Rückkehr*, 1954, from *Dichter über ihre Dichtungen*, p. 524

6 Emily Pine, *Notes on Bleeding and Other Crimes*, essay from *Notes to Self*, Penguin Random House UK, 2018, p. 116.

being silent.«[7] Mann seems to have shared her view, even if he expressed it very differently.

Early in the novella, Rosalie and her daughter, Anna, who is twenty-nine, are out walking, enjoying Nature, in which Rosalie fervently believes. Anna indicates that she needs to return home because, »I am having pains«[8]. Rosalie understands right away that Anna is referring to her period. She begins to reminisce about Anna's first one. »…it was only natural and necessary and something to be glad over and…it was really a sort of glory because it showed that you had finally ripened into a woman…«[9] The narrative is suffused with such affirmative descriptions; periods are »crowning days«[10].

Initially this struck me as a corny, somewhat glorified view of menstruation, a man's view. Then I considered how, even today, many still find it awkward to talk about periods. *My Little Red Book*, published in 2009, and reprinted many times since, is a collection of true stories about first periods from women the world over, and quite a number, of all ages and backgrounds, describe how they thought they were dying when they began to bleed, how they encountered silence on broaching the subject with mothers, sisters or friends, how this left them feeling embarrassed, ashamed. I remember the awkwardness when I told my mother, even though she was kind and practical. I remember how uncomfortable I was soon after, when my younger sister came to me after getting her period, how abrupt and unhelpful I was, unable to admit that I didn't know how to use tampons, envious when she figured it out for herself.

Sometimes you don't know what you're missing, what you need, until you find it. Only in recent years, spurred by my own perimenopause to search for information and stories about other women's experiences of this transition towards menopause, did I realize how impoverished my vocabulary for the topic was, how limited. I wish I had read *The Black Swan* back when I immersed myself in Mann's oeuvre. His careful, generous treatment of periods would have been a welcome surprise, galvanizing my sense of what can constitute literature. »You have pains beforehand – it's a trial… I never had any…« In Rosalie's words to Anna Mann acknowledges how different women's

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7 Ibid.

8 Thomas Mann, *The Black Swan*, translated by Willard R. Trask, University of California Press, 1954, p. 26.

9 Ibid., p. 27.

10 Ibid., p. 104.

experiences of menstruation can be, he shows how there can nevertheless be sympathy. Sometimes new perspectives, new possibilities, emerge from places, from people, we least expect. Much as I'd prefer it to be otherwise, sometimes a man telling a story can open the way for a woman to tell that story.

Why isn't *The Black Swan* better known? Almost everybody I asked, even those who'd read most of Mann's works, hadn't heard of the last novella. I went to the Thomas Mann Archives[11] in Zurich to see what I could learn about the book – its genesis and reception, its significance for the writer, for us. The archive includes Mann's last library; furniture, books and other possessions arranged as he had them at home in Zurich before his death, right down to the placement of objects on his desk. There didn't appear to be a single work by a woman on the shelves. Mann's intellectual and public world was male dominated, but women loomed large in his domestic and emotional life. Indeed, like many men, he depended on the devotion of his wife, and later also his daughter, to work as he did. *The Black Swan* speaks explicitly of these women's influence and of Mann's capacity to engage sympathetically, seriously with their concerns. »It is so easy and so stupid to call a feeling incomprehensible if one cannot imagine oneself having it,«[12] Anna remarks at one point in the novella. The promise of literature lies in its potential to collapse the distance between us and what seems unknowable. Mann achieved this in *The Black Swan* by frankly narrating Rosalie's predicament while using motifs that emphasize how ambiguous nature – life – can be: the spring crocus and autumn colchinum »practically the same flower!«[13], an old oak »hollow, cemented, no longer able to produce a full crown of leaves – but when his time comes, the sap still rises in him… he manages to display a little green…«[14], black swans that »disguised their appetite in condescension«[15]. The tension between appearance and actuality, between age and youth, desire and fear, plays out in the plot and also metaphorically.

The object of Rosalie's desire is a young American, Ken Keaton, her son Eduard's English tutor. To Anna he is »distressingly commonplace, anything but

11 Housed at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule, Zurich.

12 Thomas Mann, *The Black Swan*, p. 70.

13 Ibid., p. 109.

14 Ibid., p. 26.

15 Ibid., p. 115-116.

distinguished by intelligence«[16]. Mann shares her view and mercilessly satirizes both America and Keaton, emphasizing the latter's ignorance through his misplaced adulation of Europe. Rosalie seems to be smitten above all by his youth, which is also what torments her: »Am I a shameless old woman?«[17] At the same time, she notices »this time it is I who desire, of my own will and motion…«[18] – she experiences this desire as a choice, an empowering one. But society's expectations and her own social conditioning inhibit her.

The Black Swan divided critics, a few found it »disgusting«[19], many described it as »tasteless«[20] – a reaction Mann called »primitive«[21]. Some couldn't believe that a writer of such stature would busy himself with mere matters of menstruation; the story was therefore read allegorically, as a symbol of »Mother Europe's infatuation with young America«[22]. The same story with a woman's name beneath it would be considered ›domestic‹ or ›women's‹ fiction, but because it's by a man, in this case Thomas Mann, it's not about periods, of course, but geo-politics. Mann was incredulous, »Some really seem to believe that Frau von Tümmler stands for ›Germany‹.«[23]

Rosalie alludes to the »symptoms of her state of transition«, but never explicitly describes them. By contrast, Emily Pine is frank about, »what it feels like. How the absence of blood feels. How your body starts surprising you. How what was wet is now dry. How what was vivid red is now brown or gone entirely. How it smells *different*. How it smells *old*… If I felt shame at the onset of bleeding, those feelings are multiplied ten times over at its ending.«[24] Rosalie's revelations, if more discrete, are equally stark: »It is very hard even for the body to find itself in its new situation, that alone is torment

16 Ibid., p. 35.

17 Ibid., p. 49.

18 Ibid., p. 50.

19 Nina Pelican Straus in the introduction to Thomas Mann's *The Black Swan*, p. xi.

20 Thomas Mann, letter to Wolfgang Schneditz 17.12.1953, from *Dichter über ihre Dichtungen*.

21 Ibid.

22 Nina Pelican Straus in the introduction to Thomas Mann's *The Black Swan*, p. ix quoting the critic Henry Hatfield who considered the plot an »echo of Mann's reaction to the United States after the war ended and found in widow Rosalie's deeply sexual attraction to the young American Ken Keaton an allegory of ›Mother Europe's infatuation with young America‹«.

23 Thomas Mann, letter to Richard Braungart 2.8.1954, from *Dichter über ihre Dichtungen*.

24 Emily Pine, *Notes to Self* , p. 117.

enough.«[25] Mann wrote about menopause as only he could, Pine as only she could – as, indeed, only a woman could. On the ground of literature they meet and briefly join hands – both capturing the reality, the ambivalence, the potential of the aging female body.

»When it has ceased to be with us after the manner of women, we are no longer women at all, but only the dried-up husk of a woman, worn out, useless, cast out of nature,« Rosalie says to Anna, »we are given just 35 years to be women in our life and blood, to be complete human beings, and when we are fifty, we are superannuated, our capacity to breed expires, and in Nature's eyes, we are nothing but old rubbish.«[26] If this novella had been as widely admired and studied as Mann's other books, what difference might that have made to how we read similar stories?

In the 1970s women artists and writers began challenging the taboos around the female body and menstruation. They took approaches that were not »aesthetically agreeable« back then, and remain unpalatable for many even today. Germaine Greer's unforgettable exhortation in *The Female Eunuch* to taste your own menstrual blood; Judy Chicago's seminal art work from 1971, *Red Flag* – a photolithograph of herself removing a bloodied tampon from her vagina. Since then, many women have contributed in various ways to making the subject culturally acceptable – yet we still have some way to go before it is widely considered valuable.

Today more women are also embracing menopause as a form of liberation, even cause for celebration. Susan Mattern, historian and author of *The Slow Moon Climbs: The History, Science, and Meaning of Menopause*, published in 2021, writes: »So useful has midlife and old age been to our species, that evolution has gifted women with a post-reproductive life stage that frees them from childbearing.«[27] In an interview Mattern says, »Nature has given us this gift of freedom from fertility, freedom from reproduction and we should absolutely appreciate it.«[28]

Decades earlier, Mann offered a strikingly similar view. »To [Rosalie's] bitter words of acquiescence in the ways of nature, Anna did not answer as many

25 Thomas Mann, *The Black Swan*, p. 32.

26 Ibid., p. 32.

27 Susan Mattern in an essay about her book: https://press.princeton.edu/ideas/in-dialogue-with-susan-mattern-and-richard-bribiescas-reframing-how-we-think-about-aging

28 Susan Mattern in an interview: https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/rethinking-menopause-authors-argue-dreaded-life-change-has-an-upside-1.5270317

women would doubtless, and justifiably, have answered. She said: »How you talk, Mama, and how you revile and seem to want to reject the dignity that falls to the elderly woman when she has fulfilled her life, and Nature, which you love after all, translates her to a new, mellow condition, an honourable and more lovable condition in which she can still be and give so much, both to her family and to those less close to her.«[29]

What Mann and Rosalie call »Nature« is, of course, also partly a social construct. Menopause is a natural, biological process, but its consequences – particularly the sense of alterity, the ostracism women can experience – are socially mandated. The same with aging, illness, sexuality – society's attitudes to these natural phenomena affect how we perceive and live them. »One of the reasons behind the stigma of menopause is that women's potential fertility is connected to ideas of sexual attractiveness,« says artist and gender researcher Wencke Mühleisen. »When women no longer produce potentially fertile eggs, they are defined out of the game of lust through cultural myths. If we disregard that a few people may consider this a relief, it is primarily connected to frustration, anger, grief and loneliness for a lot of women.«[30] Men too can be sidelined by age, but it tends to happen differently. »What is fifty for a man?« Rosalie says. »Provided he has a little temperament, fifty comes nowhere near stopping him from playing the lover, and many a man with greying temples still makes conquests even among young girls.«[31]

Some years ago, a popular joke came into my orbit: *Madonna is 55, her boyfriend is 22. Tina Turner is 75, her boyfriend is 40. JLo is 42, her boyfriend is 26. Mariah Carey is 44, her husband is 32. Still single???? Relax, your boyfriend isn't born yet.* The joke – jibe? – proclaims a cultural shift, yet simultaneously underlines the enduring belief in the lone woman as social aberration; a woman's life is assumed to be in a sort of holding pattern until she lands a man.

»I wrote it out of a sense of outrage and anger, also from a certain affinity with the material, and an ambition to deal with what's embarrassing,«[32] Mann said of *The Black Swan*. He resented what he saw as Nature's cruel duplicity: the reappearance of Rosalie's bleeding suggests renewal, but in fact

29 Mann, *The Black Swan*, p. 32.

30 From an essay by Anne Bitsch, 12.03.2021, Kilden genderresearch.no: https://kjonnsforskning.no/en/2021/03/simone-de-beauvoirs-analysis-old-age-still-relevant

31 Ibid.

32 Thomas Mann, letter to Oscar Schmitt-Halin 15.1.1954, from *Dichter über ihre Dichtungen*.

signals a terminal condition. Conversely, the physical signs of aging belie the enduring intensity with which an older person can feel sexual desire. Rosalie however insists: »Never say that Nature deceived me… death is a great instrument of life, and if for me it borrowed the guise of resurrection, of the joy of life, that was not a lie, but goodness and mercy.«[33] The sentiment seems utterly true to her and yet this ending bothered me, especially the last line of the story: »Rosalie died a gentle death, regretted by all who knew her.«[34] I couldn't accept this gracious, conciliatory exit – it didn't feel very feminist. But what finale would? The image of a woman decrying patriarchy or fate on her death bed would be no more satisfactory a finish for this story. Mann struggled with the end too: »I had nothing good to say about Mother Nature. She's well-spoken of at the end only thanks to Rosalie's benevolence,«[35] he admitted after the book's publication. In literature, characters have their own integrity. Mann reluctantly accepted Rosalie's position, her disposition as, eventually, I did too – because the willingness to acknowledge another, different vision is feminist.

Still, Mann called the book *Die Betrogene / The Deceived* and I wonder whether that was some kind of covert, absolute judgment – on Rosalie, on the reader, on himself? Considering the novella across the distance of time though, I find the ultimate deception lies elsewhere – in the hands of patriarchy, which has tried to hoodwink us by sidelining, amongst others, stories centering experiences specific to the female body. Is it not they – the critics, the men oblivious to their own biases and blind spots who are the duped ones? *Der Betrogene* could be a good title for the story of patriarchy, which has never hesitated to draw blood to maintain power.

Still single???? The joke has stayed with me partly because it reminds me of my own unease at learning, in my twenties, that my mother had had an affair with a man twenty years younger than her. How could she? I thought back then. Just as well I didn't know before it all started – I might have tried to dissuade her, as Anna does Rosalie. »You speak of an emotion inappropriate to your years, complain of entertaining feelings of which you are no longer worthy. Have you ever asked yourself if he, this young man, is worthy of your

33 Mann, *The Black Swan*, p. 140.

34 Ibid., p. 141.

35 Thomas Mann, letter to Erwin Lowey-Hattendorf 15.9.1954, from *Dichter über ihre Dichtungen*.

feelings?«[36] Anna asks in a more insightful moment. When Rosalie indicates she has no intention of marrying Ken, only wants an affair, Anna urges her mother to consider the »outward realities… the practical aspects of the situation«[37]. When Rosalie harks back to her womanizing husband, Anna ends up, as many women do, unwittingly propagating the double standards of patriarchy: »…for you, it would really be debauchery to do what, for Papa, the man about town, was simply dissipation, doing violence neither to himself nor to the judgment of society.«[38] Even Rosalie is surprised: »In your art you are so advanced and profess the very latest thing… But morally you seem to be living God knows when, in the old days, before the war.«[39] Later Anna, conscious of Rosalie's suffering, asks »herself if she, who had once grievously longed for sexual pleasure, but had never experienced it, had not secretly begrudged it to her mother and hence exhorted her to chastity by all sorts of trumped up arguments.«[40] Mann astutely captures the vexed nature of our closest ties, how we can hold one another back even as we purport-want-need to free each other – to be freed – from the stifling strictures of patriarchy. Now I'm so glad my mother followed her desire, took her chance at happiness. I wish she would – could – again, but the world tells her she's too old.

While writing my book, *In Us and Now, Becoming Feminist*, I understood that the whole point of feminism is to discomfit us since it involves a constant questioning and re-questioning of our assumptions, goals and methods. It became clear to me that feminism is, first and foremost, a fight you have *with* yourself.[41] But it is never a fight you have *only for* yourself. Steeped as we are in patriarchal structures, in gender roles, the fight is always hardest closest to the heart, that pulsing point where love and loyalty collide with judgement and theory, where old attachments and affections clash with new insights and good intentions. These are the silent intersections of feminist struggle, the private sites of contradiction, of hesitation, of desperation – or, sometimes, sublime instances of emancipation.

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36 *The Black Swan*, p. 70.

37 Ibid., p. 91.

38 Ibid., p. 100.

39 Ibid., p. 97.

40 Ibid., p. 111.

41 Priya Basil, »Im Wir und Jetzt, Feministin werden«, Suhrkamp Nova, March 2021 – original English author's own.

Some years ago, after encouragement from my sister and me, my mother agreed to try online dating – on the condition that I would do all the registration, communication and selection. »I don't want to know anything, unless you come across someone you think I might like,« she said. There was nobody: almost all the men – at least 95 % – in her age-group, then 60-70, indicated they were only interested in women who were 50-60 or 40-50 years old. »So, can I go for younger men then?« my mother wondered. *Your boyfriend isn't born yet!* I felt that old pang of worry – was this right-appropriate-safe? – but suppressed it. No matter the age of the men on such sites, my mother would never be young enough there. Of the men in whom I indicated an ›interest‹ on my mother's behalf, few responded. I couldn't help but take this as rejection, and didn't tell my mother – as if I could protect her from what she already lived daily. Finally, one who seemed okay replied. When I showed his profile to my mother, she declined: he was too ›old‹.

After the book's mixed reception, there was a noticeable change in the way Mann referred to it. The novella began to be mentioned in his correspondence as a »pénible Geschichte«[42], a difficult story. He often emphasized that the story was »true«[43], as if this might excuse him – or it – somehow. He constantly underlined what a »sensitive«[44] theme the book tackled, and repeatedly paraphrased Schiller, saying »the content is redeemed through the form«[45]. Clearly hurt by the negative reactions to the book, he began to feel insecure about it, occasionally even to diminish it – as one does to protect oneself. »*The Holy Sinner*, still appealing, and *The Black Swan* are already overhanging appendixes, already unnecessary«,[46] he wrote in his diary in the middle of 1953, and towards the end of the year, in a letter to Käthe Rosenberg, he referred to the novella as a »late, small sorry effort«[47]. By 1954 he was professing »indifference towards the product«[48]. He conceded there was »no excuse«[49]

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42 Thomas Mann, letter to Max Rychner 26.12.1953, from *Dichter über ihre Dichtungen*.

43 Thomas Mann, letter to Agnes E. Meyer 27.9.1953, ibid.

44 Thomas Mann, letter to Oscar Schmitt-Halin 15.1.1954, ibid.

45 Thomas Mann, letter to Max Rychner 26.12.1953, letter to Ernst Benedikt 1.1.1954, letter to Oscar Schmitt-Halin 15.1.1954, letter to Ernst Drucker 19.10.1953, ibid.

46 Thomas Mann, diary entry, Erlenbach 6.VII.53, Tagebücher 1953-1955, ed. by Inge Jens, S. Fischer, 1995.

47 Thomas Mann, letter to Käthe Rosenberg 15.12.1953, from *Dichter über ihre Dichtungen*.

48 Thomas Mann, letter to Klaus Mampell 10.3.1954, ibid.

49 Thomas Mann, letter to Alexander Moritz Frey 20.3.1953, letter to Hans Reisiger 21.3.1953, ibid.

for the weaker parts of the novella, and yet expressed great satisfaction with the beginning, the end and the dialogues between Rosalie and Anna which run throughout (so, basically, all of it!). His faith in the book was revived each time someone responded well to it, and he was especially pleased that Theodor Adorno appreciated it, admitting to Adorno that »plenty of stupid things have been said about the story«[50]. His own mixed reactions touchingly affirm what he said to Hermann Hesse: »I write on – always with the sense that I must ›prove‹ myself.«[51]

For a while, Rosalie submits to her daughter's exhortations to »learn to love without pain and in accordance with reason«[52] so as not to be »living in contradiction to herself«[53]. Anna insists that »harmony between one's life and one's innate moral convictions is… necessary«[54] – but it's not clear what Rosalie believes: she both resents and accepts the social rules by which she is expected to abide, she struggles »to associate the idea of renunciation with the idea of happiness«[55]. Then she thinks, »could not renunciation itself be happiness, if it were not a miserable necessity but were practiced in freedom and in conscious equality?« Rosalie, Mann tells us, »reached the conclusion that it could be.«[56] What sort of freedom, equality with whom, how? It seems to me that Mann was answering that question for himself, not for Rosalie. Abnegation might hold fulfillment of sorts for some – but the self-denying, sacrificing woman is not just a literary trope, it is a mundane reality – and a deeply painful one. Anna soon realizes that, in fact, »the moral resolutions…to which [Rosalie] so steadfastly adhered, were against her nature.«[57]

In one diary entry from November 1953, Mann notes that fourteen-year old Klaus Sommer wrote him a long, intelligent letter requesting a copy of *The Black Swan* to give as a Christmas present to his mother. Mann's reaction? »Sent him *Lotte in Weimar* instead.«[58] A strangely paternalistic gesture in the context of a book with such emancipatory potential. It echoes a statement Mann made soon after the novella's publication: »It's a women's story that's

50 Thomas Mann, letter to Theodor W. Adorno 12.3.1955, ibid.
51 Thomas Mann, letter to Hermann Hesse 8.1.1953, ibid.
52 *The Black Swan*, p. 82.
53 Ibid., p. 105.
54 Ibid., p. 101-102.
55 Ibid., p. 105.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., p. 111.
58 Thomas Mann, diary entry Karlsruhe, 22.XI.53, *Tagebücher 1953-1955*.

not for women.«[59] These anecdotes reveal so much about Mann's ambivalence in the aftermath of publication, as well as his inherent sexism. It confirms that oft made observation: the writing self is the better self. Thomas Mann was not just ahead of his time in writing *The Black Swan*, he was ahead of himself.

I told a friend about the maternal digital dating debacle. She (in her fifties) – and her mother (in her seventies) – had both recently found their partners online.

»Why did you give your mum's real age?« the friend asked.

I stared. It hadn't even occurred to me to do otherwise.

»Men haven't a clue,« she went on. »They have no idea what a woman can be at fifty or sixty or even seventy.«

But then everything starts with a lie, I thought.

»You're not deceiving them,« she said, »you're surprising them, educating them, getting around their prejudices. Your mum looks twenty years younger than she is anyway, no man could hold the age-thing against her, especially not if he's elderly himself. I would have thought her profile pics alone would garner lots of interest. That's what most men go on.«

I told her my mother had picked a rather subdued photo, rationalizing that this way she would then look better in reality.

»What? You're supposed to use the best shots of yourself even if they look nothing like you!« She and her mother had put up images of themselves drinking, cooking and laughing.

I said that in her profile my mother had indicated she was ›teetotal‹ and ›vegan‹.

She stared. »No wonder you didn't get anywhere!«

Black swans, native to Australia, were introduced to various countries as ornamental birds in the 1800s. It is partly the impulse to see these birds that leads Rosalie to plan an excursion to Holterhof Castle near Düsseldorf. Towards the end of the novella, she visits the castle accompanied by Anna, Eduard and Ken Keaton. There, in a scene loaded with symbolism, Rosalie takes the stale bread that's warm from being held against Ken's body and takes a bite instead of offering it straight to the birds. »One of the swans, however, pushing close against the bank, spread its dark wings and beat the air with them, stretching out its neck and hissing angrily up at her. They laughed at its jealousy, but at the same time felt a little afraid.«[60] Soon after, Ken and Ros-

59 Thomas Mann, letter to Klaus Mampell 28.6.1953, from *Dichter über ihre Dichtungen*.

60 *The Black Swan*, p. 124.

alie, break away from the group and escape down a dark, damp passageway. Rosalie admits, »I love you… and you, do you love me too, a little, only a little…?«[61] They kiss and immediately Rosalie is full of foreboding; they should have kissed »in kind Nature's lap… and not in this grave!«[62] They leave the castle with a plan to meet again, but before that happens Rosalie is found at home fainted in a pool of her own blood: »What, on its first return, had made her so proud, so happy… reappeared calamitously.«[63] From there the novel accelerates to its close: terminal diagnosis, hasty decline, death.

The initial negative reviews, the book's fall into obscurity, indicate a prevailing belief that menstruation – a defining aspect of the female body, a process fundamental to human creation – can't be the subject of high literature. This is how patriarchy works: through disapproving, diminishing, dismissing. If even an established, venerated figure like Thomas Mann was susceptible to the take down, think how it is for women who write based on their experiences then have their stories ignored, disbelieved or mistreated by the media – something that still happens all the time.

»It was an experiment«, Mann said of *The Black Swan*. »I was always novarum rerum cupidus, I always experimented and one does that with mixed results.«[64] In literature there's a tendency to associate experimentalism with form, language, style – but content may be the most daring of experimental materials. A writer takes a radical risk each time s/he tries to imagine-inhabit-narrate a completely different consciousness-experience-character.

61 Ibid., p. 131.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., p. 135.

64 Thomas Mann, *Rückkehr*, 1954, from *Dichter über ihre Dichtungen*, p. 524