I said I’d see the fire safely extinguished even though we finished the last beer hours ago. I told you it was jet lag, but to be alone in the backyard of a town not mine was all I wanted that evening. To pretend the bodies asleep upstairs were mine to protect. The fire pit. The orange plastic chairs. The picnic table where we reunited over steak and stories, your youngest demanding I sit next to her on the bench, giggling when I mispronounced *schwül*. It’s an honest mistake. The difference between gay and humid. And I am always a little bit both. After dinner, we walked the garden border and I quizzed her on names of herbs, even though I momentarily forgot the word for *sage*. Together we tore corners off *Petersilie* and *Bärlauch*, touched them to our tongues while you watched, skeptical that the tiny shoots we plucked were indeed edible. I liked sharing this with her. Being this. Someone she will never see again, but may remember. In the morning, you quietly watched from the corner of the kitchen as we ate breakfast at the counter and she showed me her workbook, of the cartoon German boys and girls, who were any boy and girl. And I can’t remember if I told you last night how I, myself, was almost a father, how the mother decided to keep her. That I respected this and at the same time broke. When it was time for us to go our separate directions, I smiled as I heard her whispering to herself while she packed her school bag: *Salbei, Rosmarin. Lorbeer. Erdbeer. Himbeer.*
The ossuary smells of horsehair and lace, its altar built upon skulls stenciled with vines, names tattooed along the frontal eminence of each cranium. I try to pick out who was gay as if suture lines can tell me who they slept with in 1881. I’ve always done this:

When two or more are gathered,
I pick out the queer, the closeted, the ones who don’t yet know. I’ve been told
I think every man I meet is gay.
I’ve been told my writing is not queer enough, that I rely too heavily on nature. Too many rain-soaked forests. But isn’t it enough that I sleep with men? The skulls from the ossuary were once buried elsewhere, a temporary repository where bones could cure. Even in death we don’t always get a say in where we end up. Once a year a town in eastern Germany is inundated with black latex and fishnets, thousands of Gruftis congregating in Augustusplatz or basement clubs on the outskirts of town. In high school I was better at being goth than gay. And I wasn’t even good at that. In my mind
they are linked. How even charnel sounds
    like carnal. Maybe my work does need
    a dose of drag, needs more leather,
more sex, one less pastoral landscape.
    Inside the room by the cemetery I stare
    at two skulls I know are male, a single
vine snaking across the bones, drawn
    by the same hand, continuous from one
    to the other since 1881. And what
will befall my own ashes? Will they settle
    deep within a forest per my final request,
    parceled between moss and bracken?
Or end up somewhere I never authorized,
    sealed beneath a stone marker; impervious,
    no matter how strong the breeze above.
I don’t know how my stomach will respond when I enter the lab. Still, there are drains beneath each cadaver should I need one. My husband dislikes it when I tell him I poked inside the student’s dissection, felt the ridged wall of epiglottic cartilage, watched flecks of flesh flung into the air as layers of fascia were peeled back. On our third date we discovered a mutual obsession with horror films, tested our limits: *What disturbs you more—*

*a teenager bludgeoned by a sledgehammer or the smallest needle slid beneath the skin?*

It wouldn’t take long to learn it will always be the needle. In *Anatomie*, medical students are hunted, injected with a serum that paralyzes long enough to turn the blood gummy. The bodies dissected while semiconscious as the surgeon chants from the Brothers Grimm.

Another tendon removed seconds before arteries solidify, the twitching finger permanently silenced. I’ve seen museums devoted to preserving what’s inside:

the labyrinth of lymphatic drainage, renal arteries webbing like fans of brittle coral.
Entire corpses exhibited, arms of pristine muscle extended to shake your hand. Skinless bodies embracing as they make love. They promise it was consensual. In the lab, I listen as students refer to their cadavers by name, each incision a eulogy to the excised skin and bones scraped clean then splayed on the table long after they’ve been severed at the joint.
Selective Hearing

My husband translates what he thinks he hears
as I watch soap operas set
in an east German hospital.

*Du hast Krebs.*  You hate crêpes.
*Hallo . . . vier!*  Halo of fear.

And I question
which to believe is correct.

//

An actor on YouTube, clad in national drag,
recites words in French, English,
Italian, Spanish—each more lilting, more
seductive than the last:


The joke, of course, the same man now in Lederhosen
screaming at the end: *Flugzeug!*
*Schmetterling!*

//

In line at border patrol, I overhear a German officer
demand the 80-year-old Vietnamese man in front of me
answer his questions. *If you want to enter my country, you must
tell me why you’re here.*

//

*See. It sounds like he’s screaming,* my husband says,
as the doctor on TV calls for the scalpel, details
inserting the laparoscope.

//
I’ve never seen Lederhosen on the street, except during Oktoberfest or in Wisconsin.


Because he is yelling.

Later, sitting in a Weinstube tavern for lunch my husband orders an Aperol Spritz, asks me to translate the words snaking along the molding:

*Fatherland. Tradition.*

And asks if we should leave.

I can’t stop hearing: *my* country.

What I am trying to say is I am aware of how easy I pass.
There is no mistaking *Stopp* for anything other than *freeze*.

//

In the Weinstube, the bartender reaches beneath the counter, produces a plastic straw festooned with iridescent frills that tendril from its neck.

I tell my husband: *It's okay.*

*They brought something special just for the fancy American.*