

ALOIS HOTSCHNIG

Three Stories from *That Didn't Reassure the Children*

*Alois Hotschnig was born in 1959 in Carinthia, Austria's southernmost province. It is a region in which history has a tendency to resurface, if not quite as farce, certainly with sinister and clownish echoes. Carinthia was the home base of the far-right xenophobic Freedom Party, whose recently deceased leader, Jörg Haider, earned international condemnation for his demagoguery. In rhythmic, allusive prose, Hotschnig has examined the social, political and historical conditions that create fertile ground for such demagoguery and other disorders and has portrayed the burdens of shame, guilt, and complicity that are an unavoidable consequence of suppressing or distorting the past. His play *Absolution* (1994) and his second novel *Ludwig's Room* (2000) are most explicitly concerned with what the Germans so succinctly call *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the coming to terms with or mastery of the past. The focus of his recent fiction, however, has turned sharply inward, putting into relief the psychological mechanisms that determine or obscure one's sense of identity. His new collection of stories, *That Didn't Reassure the Children*, functions as an exercise in *Gegenwartsbewältigung*, or mastery of the present. Again, it is the unspoken, the unacknowledged, that often holds sway over the apparently obvious.*

In this collection, the more minutely Hotschnig observes familiar settings, the stranger they appear. It is in the disjunction between his stories' placid surfaces and their troubled undercurrents, between the cool, distanced precision of his always musical prose and the disorientation it evokes, that their truth lies.
Translator's Note

The Light in My Room

I turned off the light and looked out toward the island, from which I had heard the sound of someone calling, but in the darkness could not see that far. After a while, lights flashed in the reeds, and I could finally make out the man whose voice I'd been hearing for hours. From his boat, he shone a light into the reeds, in which I saw something light colored. It moved back and forth across the water, always returning to the circle of light, like a person trying to get onto shore. It was, in fact, just a piece of cloth, perhaps a vest of one of the children I'd seen on the island

that afternoon. The man kept shining his light on it but did not pull it out of the water.

I remembered how they'd rushed back from the island in their boat to this shore, and the minute they stepped on land, they'd disappeared into their homes without the usual hue and cry that spread through the neighborhood whenever they returned.

Usually they made their way from a spit of land, through the reeds and out to the island, and it always took a while before they could be seen again in the undergrowth, since they had gotten so good at disappearing into the landscape. Whether any sound from the island reached me or all was quiet depended on the direction of the wind.

They were a bunch of kids from the neighborhood, not many and not always the same ones. It was hard to say why they were so drawn to the island, where they went often, almost daily. Because of a few protected species that nested there, access to the island was prohibited.

Mostly they took sticks and poles with them in the boat, and apples, which would end up floating, a few days later, in the water near the reeds.

They played tag in the reeds. With their sticks and poles, they waded in the mud along the shore, and frightened animals shot out of their holes and escaped out over the lake. Then they rowed out to the island and, depending on the wind, there would come a slapping beat of oars or silence. This silence drew me to the window more often than any of their yelling.

When they were headed back or were on their way over, they made sure they were safe from any unwanted witnesses, and if they realized they'd been discovered and were being watched, they waved politely and headed off in another direction. There was no point in taking it personally, since everyone in the area had snuck onto the island at one time or another.

The light was still shining in the reeds and the man poked at the water with a hook.

I drew the curtains since I knew perfectly well what there was to see. The man himself had made sure of that. I thought of him often, and in dreams I would climb into his boat and he would row me out to the island. He was at it again, and a vest floating in the water, a piece of cloth that had gotten caught in the reeds, or an empty boat caught in the branches along the shore meant that for days, even weeks, it would be impossible to calm him down.

For years things had been quiet at the lake, even if the quiet was only temporary, since there were plenty of opportunities to find things in the water. He had spent those years, during which he'd grown old, in his boat. He went about the lake for his work but seemed to be constantly searching in the water, along the shore, in the reeds, on the island. Everyone here thought they knew the real reason for his agitation. And yet, because of his unusual preoccupation with the children, many felt he was someone best left alone.

He supplied the local inns with fish and sold the rest of his catch in the town nearby. During the day he sat in his boat, and evenings he slipped along the shore, and at night you could find him in the bars near the harbor or, again, in his boat. He was attentive and polite but would still often row past without a greeting, only to draw attention to himself at the next opportunity with an enthusiastic wave, then an invitation to join him in his boat with a friendliness against which I, especially as a child, had no defense and with which, time and again, he persuaded me to accompany him on an *excursion*, as he would say, while he told me all about his work and what he had caught that day and all that he would see and do at work day in, day out, throughout the year and in all the years he had spent working on this lake. When he talked to me, he seemed absent and remote, then would suddenly look at me insistently and confrontationally, but without ever asking about anything definite. As we approached the island, he always seemed to grow nervous and erratic. He would break out in a sweat, his shirt would be dripping, and his entire body trembled, his eyes fixed on me. Only the oars kept him grounded. His trembling gradually subsided and his gaze once again became open, free, even conciliatory. As if he had recognized my shock, he smiled in embarrassment and ruffled my hair. Then we turned and rowed back to shore, and yet, as relaxed and open as he appeared to be, he never once took his eyes off me. It seemed to me that he was using me as a device that would make it possible for him to trace his boy, even to find him. I didn't want this and tried to avoid him, but couldn't. Outwardly, he seemed to give up and asked me about school, about my classmates and friends, their likes and dislikes. He wanted to know everything. Occasionally, he managed to convince one or another of my friends to row out to the island with him, and he would stare at each one just as penetratingly, as if searching for some-

thing or maybe just in memory of his son and thinking of what he might have looked like now. Whatever the reason, it was as if he had discovered and recognized and understood something in each of us, so we were glad when our parents forbade us from going near him.

He almost always had with him in his boat one of those children who now and for so many years have made the area less safe. He taught them how to fish—they took him up on that offer—and in winter he taught them to ice-skate. That way he could spend time with them throughout the year. With him they weren't shy and they trusted him, at least they seemed to. They sat in his boat with their fishing rods and let him help them up when they slipped on the ice. And yet, it seemed to me that they tolerated rather than liked him, as more than once, I saw them duck into the reeds and hide when he rowed past. He was, in any case, the unavoidable witness of their secret expeditions, or at the very least an accessory who tolerated their trips to the island, since it is inconceivable that they could have slipped past him. And so they surely agreed to sit with him in his boat every now and then, to keep him from betraying them.

He would not have covered for us. Even on the way out to the island we had had water in the boat, more than usual. The boat didn't belong to any of us, so no one bothered to take care of it. It had been abandoned years before, tied to a tree trunk that rose from the water. On that day the boat rode lower in the water than usual. We rowed out anyway, probably because we had the new kid with us. He had come to our school a few weeks earlier, and we took him with us out to the spot where we always landed, an opening in the reeds, a clearing where we always tied up, and that is where I always see him, since then, how he stood there in the reeds, looking at us, not certain what we had planned for him.

All summer long they searched for the boy. They found his bicycle not far from where we had set off.

I have not gone back to the island since then and since then the boy's father has not left the lake and I have looked at him and watched him all the years since.

We never said a word about the incident. Life went on and we still met up, but we no longer went out to the island.

I turned on the light and sat on the bed. The next morning, children were creeping around the house. "The light's on in his

room," I heard one say. In the next moment, they were standing in the doorway and in my room, watching me with bright, satisfied expressions. One of them held out to me a box with a kitten. It had run up to them, they said. They asked for milk for the cat, and as I came back into the room, they were standing at the window, looking across the lake over to the island in the reeds.

[Translated from the German by Tess Lewis]