

Ingeborg Bachmann was born in the provincial Austrian town of Klagenfurt in 1926 and died in Rome in 1973. In the short span of her lifetime, she managed to bag the lion's share of the Germanophone literary prizes and get nominated for the Nobel; play a vocal role, through her lectures, radio work and membership of the influential Gruppe 47, in the cultural and political reshaping of German society after the catastrophe of World War Two; become romantically entangled with such luminaries as Paul Celan, Max Frisch and – improbably but truly – Henry Kissinger (whom she met when he organised a symposium for European intellectuals in 1955, although she seems to have cooled on him during his carpet bombing-advocacy phase); and, not least, publish two volumes of poetry that, by any reckoning, must take their place among the most important of the post-war period in any language, never mind German. I want to begin this book, written on the eve of her centenary, by

homing in on a poem that appears towards the end of *Borrowed Time*, the first of these two collections, published in 1953.

In the second stanza of ‘Salt and Bread’, Bachmann writes (and here, as throughout, I turn to Peter Filkins’s excellent Zephyr Press translation):

Into the hand of my oldest friend
I place the key to my post; the rain man will now manage
my darkened house and lengthen
the lines of the ledger which I drew up
since I stayed less often.

The words, like so many of Bachmann’s, are obtuse, elliptical, reluctant to offer themselves up for instant comprehension. Nonetheless, they give us things to work with: images, contexts, allusions. The poem’s title points us to the German custom, known as *Brot und Salz*, whereby neighbours, friends and relatives bring bread and salt to welcome people into a new house. Bachmann, though, has inverted the ritual’s order: *Salz und Brot*. In her telling, salt comes first, then bread. The reversal extends to the whole scenario: the sequence being painted here is one of departure, not arrival; moving *out* rather than in; shutting up

shop; closing a house down, passing its keys and general management over to someone else rather than assuming it oneself. But then, a few stanzas later, we get a second reversal:

So I gather the salt
when the sea overcomes us,
and turn back
and lay it on the threshold
and step into the house.

The poem's narrator, the 'I'-figure, seems to have had a change of mind, or at least destination, back to the home that she relinquished earlier. Returning to it, she takes on the role of, initially, welcoming neighbour, laying salt on its threshold, then, again, inhabitant, stepping across this threshold, back inside. Her re-entry, though, rather than restituting to her full domestic mastery, inaugurates a kind of joint-accommodation set-up. The poem's final couplet reads:

We share bread with the rain;
bread, a debt, and a house.

You'll notice that the 'I' has become 'we': this new arrangement is a general condition. What does it mean for us to share our house with rain? Symbolically, it implies a structural rupture: breach of a dividing membrane, an opening of inside to outside (private to public, individual to collective, human to inhuman or elemental). More basically, at the most literal level, it just means our roof is broken.

This book will be a slow unpacking of these twelve lines. It will involve, like Bachmann's poem, a set of digressions, of departures and returns. To put it more viscerally (or perhaps eviscerally): as with the house that Bachmann invites us to imagine, the poem's inside will be laid open to the many scenes and histories – collective, elemental, frequently inhuman – that amass, burst and drizzle, drive or hurtle down towards it from beyond its borders.