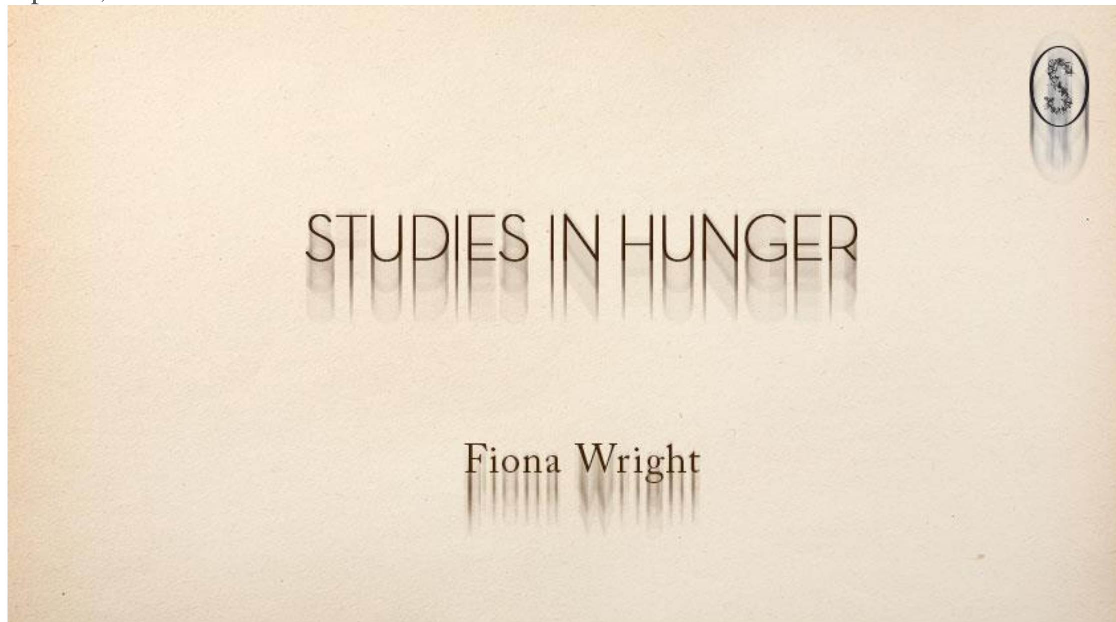
STUDIES IN HUNGER

April 2, 2014



I felt smaller in Berlin than I ever had before: the Northern Germans are, by and large, a big-boned people, the shanks of their legs are particularly impressive. My language teacher had taken to calling me 'Fee-ona', from the German word for fairy, or sprite; I couldn't reach any of the pots in my billeted kitchen. And I was nervous that evening, as I always am at train stations, faced with the mechanised movement of so many people, so many ways to get swept up and out and along. The station was crawling with football fans headed to a screening of a match somewhere near the Brandenburg Gate and I knew, as it were, that the German trains would run on time.

I was wending my way west, I sat against a tinted window, the sinking of the sun slow and languorous as it is in the height of summer at these longitudes. It was dusk for almost all of my four-hour journey, only the last few towns finally sank into the dark. The window reflected, just off-centre, a glowing orange sun, the landscape passing on the other side of the train. The reflection blurred slightly, fuzzed around the edges, the long sun tinted the whole scene the strange sepia-orange of old polaroids. It was as if I was looking at the present landscape through some strange, shadowy resemblance of

the past, a feeling I kept encountering in Berlin, as if I were filtering everything I saw through a photo album long gone grainy and crackled.

I was traveling west, after a month of intense language classes, and an even more intense schedule of visits to museums and makeshift bars with ex-pat poets, who delighted in the ridiculously low prices and large shots of hard spirits in Berlin. West, to the small city of Münster, which claims fame as the bicycle capital of Germany, and as the site of the gothic *Lambertikirche* cathedral, its clock face supporting three huge, blackened cages. These cages once held the corpses of the town's most famous rebels, who had promoted propertylessness and polygamy in their agenda, and had controlled the city for eleven months, sometime in the sixteenth century. I hadn't been to Münster for more than ten years, since a Winter-long student exchange in high school. My host family, in the first days of my visit, had borrowed a neighbour's child's bike for me. As I rode into school each day, at least one person would say *oh, I had one of those when I was small*. I had been well.

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My host parents, Hannelore and Christian, picked me up from the train with their dog, a sleek, aloof and lanky thing, with a chest that swept magnificently upwards. In the front hallway, the very same deer-skulls still hung on the walls, the date they were hunted down written in black ink across their foreheads. The same Warhol print in the living room. The same tablecloth was in the kitchen, I'd remembered its print of culinary herbs and their cursive names, which had soaked into me a marvellous vocabulary, *Basilikum, Thymian, Rosmarin, Salbei*. In my attic bedroom with the sloping roof, the one I'd slept in all those years ago, a bunch of pale pink snapdragons, called *Löwenmau* – lions' maws – were resting on the bedside table. The relief I felt was physical, a sudden heaviness of limb, an abandoning of the constant guardedness that Berlin had pressed upon me. I remembered waking early in this room, and watching nuns cycle past on thin-framed bikes, trying to catch the first snow of the

season in my hands, thrust through the tiny window. On the small green writing desk was a ceramic dish filled with foil-wrapped marzipan. 'You must still love marzipan!' Hannelore said.

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In Berlin, I couldn't help but realise, very early on, that so much of what we know medically about hunger comes, however indirectly, from this land. That the two most notorious – and most thorough – studies of hunger came about because of the Second World War. The first of these is easier to talk about, because it happened at the University of Minnesota, in preparation for an eventuality that no one really knew the scale of yet. An academic hunger – it was 1944, and ethics boards were yet to be imagined into being.

The Minnesota Experiment recruited a group of healthy young men, mostly conscientious objectors, who had passed a rigorous series of physical and psychological tests to prove that they were specimens in their prime. These men were deliberately deprived of the full amount of food their bodies needed over a period of nine months, the changes in their weight, behaviour, physical functioning observed at a minute level, before a period of re-feeding later on. They were creating, in a controlled way, a microcosm of what whole populations were experiencing in Europe, trying to model what rehabilitation might need to look like once the war was won. At this stage, the scientists were thinking of the civilian damage of war – the famine caused by destruction of farmland, loss of manpower, disruption of infrastructure. No one could imagine yet what was happening in the camps.

The men ate boiled potatoes, swedes, macaroni, bread, the kinds of foods that Europe's population was relying so heavily on. They were given small doses, occasionally and unpredictably, of sugar, butter or meat. They were expected to walk thirty-five kilometres each day, and lose twenty-five percent of their body weight in the first twelve weeks. One of the diagnostic requirements for of anorexia, in

comparison, is a ten percent weight loss. The lead investigator, Ancel Keys, became well known in the 1960s for publishing several books on The Mediterranean Diet, advocating olive oil, antipasto and red wine. He also invented the BMI.

Keys' subjects, these perfectly healthy young men, soon exhibited so much of the behaviour that I had, until I learnt about the study, only ever seen written as the symptomology of any eating disorder. The lists of things to watch for in your daughter, the tell-tale signs I'd been so steadfastly ignoring in myself. The men grew rigid around meal times and developed intricate meal rituals, eating slowly, guarding their plates, asking for extra salt and extra spices. (My use of garlic had become infamous within my family, my dishes inedible to everyone else.) They chewed each mouthful many times, cut their potatoes into miniscule, even pieces.

Some men drank up to fifteen cups of coffee a day, others chewed gum endlessly. They collected cookbooks and takeaway menus, became irritable, snappy, they squabbled. They were possessive. One man was caught rifling through the laboratory's garbage, eating food scraps straight from the bin. Most bought and hoarded food – not to eat, just to own – and kept it in the wardrobes of their rooms. And every single one of the thirty-six volunteers eventually stole from the grocer in the town where they were staying.

I had been stealing, by the time I read about Minnesota, for over two years, mostly from the oversized, overstocked Coles on the first floor of Broadway, near my house. It wasn't a matter of need, I could afford the items I was dropping to the bottom of my bag. I rarely ate them. I know I felt, at times, resentful at the idea of paying for food that I'd go to great lengths to avoid, that I only needed to feed to friends at dinner parties, or to give my pantry shelves some appearance of normality, but it's still not something that I really understand. I said this out loud, once, inside the public hospital clinic I attended for my treatment, an eight-week, four-days-a-week group program

that I finally acceded to after two full years of trying to get better on my own, and there was silence.

And then the other women started talking. One of them had stolen ice-cream and chocolate, in quantities she was embarrassed to run past the check-out staff. One had been unable to pay for her binges. Two had been caught by store detectives, one was forced to go to court.

None of us had ever spoken of our theft before. But part of us had become animal, gathering and squirrelling away the things we needed to survive, hoarding outside ourselves the things we kept in such dire shortage inside our bodies. None of us had ever said these things before.

The men grew apathetic, inattentive. They gave up on their studies, on their relationships, because they just couldn't be bothered any more. They couldn't concentrate. They stopped telling jokes. Their dreams, when they occurred, were about food. I only recently realised that most people don't eat in their dreams.

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The physical effects of starvation syndrome – as it came to be called – are much more familiar, more obvious. The body grows thin, the organs – especially the heart – slow, and shrink. Bones hollow, muscles waste as the body begins to feed off itself. The skin grows dull, flaky and grey; it breaks easily, and repairs itself with difficulty. It bruises. Hands and feet grow cold, hair and nails brittle. Keys described the process as a strange kind of accelerated ageing, a trimming back, economising on anything that isn't essential to survival. The men fell more often, grew clumsier. But their senses stayed alert, and their mental acuity did too. Starvation is a state of constant sensual anxiety, even as the body powers down.

In the clinic, we were told that our bodies were like cars, we have to fill them up with petrol or they stop running. I said I was trying out solar power and was sent from the room like a naughty child.

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The Minnesota Experiment was less successful around the question of rehabilitation – it wasn't until the sweeping crises across Africa in the 1980s and 90s that scientists finally got a handle on the delicate processes of refeeding the starving body without causing it to completely to shut down in shock. The experiment had been designed to include two phases of refeeding: the first six weeks, a controlled and gradual stepping up, where different groups of men were given different supplements, different calories, but essentially the same meals, potatoes, swedes, butterless bread. This was to be followed by a 'free' phase, where the men were allowed to eat whatever they desired. But the men rebelled in the controlled phase, angry and impatient, and began eating outside of the program. They'd grown stubborn and rigid and controlling, impatient, they'd turned inwards, into themselves.

But as the men slowly became better fed, almost all of their symptoms reversed. With nutrition, the body healed itself, with energy, their concentration, attention returned. But behaviourally, psychologically, there were traces that remained, tactics learnt that just wouldn't go away. All of the men ended the project weighing more than they had at the beginning, eating more, and more quickly, lest the food be taken from them again. Many of them battled with obesity for the rest of their lives, others claimed to never have lost their distrustfulness. Three of them left their studies to become chefs. I've met many ex-patients, throughout my treatment, who have become nurses, even more who are now studying psychology.

The body never forgets starvation. I think of my grandfather, still keeping old, but repairable watches, promotional DVDs from Sunday newspapers, recycled pieces of string inside his cupboards, having come of age in the Depression.

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More and more I think that the body never forgets places, the spaces it has moved through. I walked through the empty bedrooms on the top floor of that house in Münster, where my host sisters, now studying in larger towns across the country, had grown up, remembered laughing with Marieke over her English homework (‘I think Simon *fancies* you!’), playing card games on the rolled-rag carpet, lighting candles with Daniele and strategising about her painful crush on her hockey coach, Micha. The flat tiles beneath my feet. I remembered Daniele convincing me that the pale gratings on my soft-serve ice-cream, which the Germans call *Spaghetti-Eis* were parmesan cheese, ordering a pizza with *Erbsen* because I didn’t know the word translated as green peas, how I started mimicking the way Daniele would stab her teaspoon through the paper lid of her emptied yoghurt, never peeling it off completely.

Downstairs the next morning, Hannelore and Christian were sitting at opposite ends of their dark, wooden table, the still points in a scattershot of newspaper, pots of marmalade and jam and plates of bread, a silver coffee service, squat peaches and crumbled eggshells. Hannelore leapt to her feet and hugged me. *Fi-chen*, she said, using the diminutive, ‘we take sweet breakfast here, but I just remembered you like cheese!’ She bounded to the cellar for another platter, more butter, they’d chosen regional specialties and a smoky raclette, which I didn’t remember having tried before until I bit into the wedge thrust on my plate. The body remembers.

One of my Australian friends now living in Berlin claims the trick to a German-style breakfast is to empty your pantry onto the table.

I was talking to Christian about Berlin, how fascinated I had been by the very visible layerings of history on the skin of the city, struggling to express this in my clumsy, flat-tongued German. Christian had been born there, but was evacuated as a small child to his relatives in the countryside near Hannover in the early stages of the war, only ever able to return on short visits after the division of the country. ‘You see, *Fi-*

chen,' he said suddenly, 'This is why we think of you, still, as our Australian daughter! You were always interested, always keen to be involved. You were always *curious.* It was lovely, no?'

I stopped pushing my cheese around my plate, telescoped suddenly outside of my self. I saw the image had stayed frozen there, in someone else's eyes, across the intervening years. I got a glimpse of my fuzzy sixteen-year-old self, overseas for the first time, as yet uncomplicated by disease. I'd been well then.

Hannelore took me to the markets that morning, where eggs were sorted into cartons according to the colour of their shell. She introduced me to their greengrocer, a bow-armed, braided woman, and bought me a dried fruit mix named 'Sunshine' because it made her think about my home. We stopped in at a church on the way home where a group of women were raising funds for the blind, by teaching passersby to type in braille using a six-pronged machine that looked almost musical, each thin, metal key ending with a raised lump for embossing the papers beneath it. I stepped up to have a try and the young woman in charge immediately asked '*Können Sie Deutsch*?'

Hannelore visibly expanded in pride. 'Fiona,' she said, 'is a *Germanist*.'

I'd never though of myself in that way before, either.

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In Berlin, I was constantly being asked why I had learnt German, even by the ex-pat writers I kept meeting, most of whom could only stumble through a menu or a ticket purchase, regardless of how long they had been living in the city. There were exceptions, of course: the students studying Heidegger, Marx or Kant, those who'd learnt bedroom intimacies from local girlfriends. No one ever believes me when I say I love the way the language sounds, how full and fleshy it feels in the mouth, how chewy. But it's also a systematic language, bound by rules, by precise and careful

delineations. It may well be that this is what appeals to me, this structure, this clarity. This regulation.

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It took me some weeks to adjust to the different rhythm of time in Berlin. I've always been an early riser, but this city doesn't shake itself awake, in summer at least, until close to noon. In this early stillness, I walked the streets of a morning, the furry blossoms of linden trees drifting in heaps around me, the footpaths uneven and cracked by their roots. In my first days, mapless, I went searching for remnants of the Wall, and traced instead the lines of metal plates embedded in the street to mark its footprint. I was barely three months out of the clinic, I wasn't supposed to be walking like this, but this was Walter Benjamin's home city, a flâneur's city, I was terrified by the ferocity of the cyclists to boot. I took to having breakfast, once the shutters started rolling up, in a café called Suicide Sue.

In those first days I'd felt stiff-tongued and dumb. It had been at least six years since I'd last had cause to use my German, and my mouth had rusted over. I could understand everything that was being said to me, eavesdrop on conversations, but the words I wanted to use were always hovering somewhere just out of my reach. I spent a lot of time nodding, smiling my way through shop transactions, unable to participate properly in the small social exchanges of the everyday. I was without words, somehow, and I felt it all the more keenly, this slipping away of language, because I was in the city to write.

Even as I started to remember, to refamiliarise, I realised I still had to rely on simpler constructions, simpler approximations for the things I wanted to say. In German, I was unsubtle, convoluted, and anything but witty. In a foreign language I had a different personality and it was never possible to see a person that I recognised reflected in my interactions with other people.

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Six months after my first stay in Münster was Daniele's reciprocal visit to Sydney. My family's house is perched on the edge of bushland, at the point where the valley that it covers becomes too steep to build on. Besides her hockey, Daniele had always been a jogger, she was muscular and strong, once jokingly referred to her lycra-clad body as a *Kampfwürstchen*, a little combat sausage. She was horrified by how few flat areas there were to jog near my house, but ventured out anyway, coming back with the prickles we've always called stickybeaks clinging to her socks.

Daniele's family didn't have a computer – they still don't – so when she typed emails home to Christian's university email, to school friends, she took close to an hour, staring at the keyboard and pressing each key individually with her index finger. I helped her out a few times, typing from her dictation, pausing occasionally to ask about unusual, beautiful words. In one email to Daniele's best friend, I'd typed her words, *Mein Eßverhältnis, Gott sei Dank, bleibt gut. My eating behaviour, thank god, is fine.* I didn't question her at the time, pretended that I didn't understand the folded compound word. I didn't know what lay ahead.

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In Berlin, I was attending language classes at the Goethe-Institut, as a part of the exchange I was involved in. To help support their foreign students, the Institut, offered a series of cultural events: film screenings, walking tours, mini-golf. I loved the three-hour walking tours, of course, but also signed up for a daytrip, on a Sunday, catching the fast train northwards to Oranienberg and Sachsenhausen, the very first concentration camp built by the Nazi regime. I was sitting next to a broad-shouldered Canadian, who'd taken a liking to me earlier that week, when we'd surreptitiously, illicitly, held an English conversation in the Institut's courtyard. He'd rocked up to our meeting point barely able to walk, clutching at a kebab and wearing a lipstick

print on his cheekbone, mumbling about a club with a giant swing. I was furious at his goofy, boozy grin, and deliberately lost him as soon as we disembarked.

There's a long walkway leading up to the gates of the camp, with wildflowers pressing up along its borders. I picked a small, orange poppy to wear in my hair.

Sachsenhausen is a terrible place, a fraught place, stark and bare, its triangular parade grounds open to the sky. It was a labour camp, filled at first with writers, artists, activists, conscientious objectors, homosexuals and criminals, before gypsies and Jews were added to the Hitler's list of undesirables. Few buildings remain there now: three watchtowers, one barrack, the one morgue. The central ground is dominated by a red-brick monument, built by the GDR government in the 1960s, to commemorate the early German socialists who were interned there – the Party always claimed their state was founded by the people who had resisted fascism right throughout Hitler's reign.

Sachsenhausen was not initially an extermination camp, although it was expanded later to include a series of gas chambers. It was the first camp allied with local industry. The inmates were made to walk endless laps of the parade ground to test the durability of shoes. In this camp, it was discovered that hungry inmates are less likely to have the energy to rebel.

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Much of what we know about the physicality of starvation comes from studies conducted by and with the starving population of the Warsaw Ghetto during the Nazi occupation of Poland. In the two years that the studies ran, before the final liquidation of the Ghetto, almost thirty doctors, desperately malnourished themselves, studied growth rate, weight, organ size, dermatology, immunology, circulation, fluid retention, bone density, body temperature, vitamin retention, the functioning of the senses, of hormones, of digestion. In two years, they conducted 3658 autopsies. Only seven of

the doctors survived the war. One pathologist, Theodosia Goliborska, emigrated to Australia in 1946, and continued to practice at least until the 1980s, in this country that has never had to understand such desperate, widespread hunger.

We learn about hunger through hardship, through war or famine, natural disaster or political crisis. We learn through bodies forced onto the edge, bodies that have become sites of trauma, some sort of collateral damage. It's a terrible laboratory that our knowledge comes from, a horrific debt that is owed by my body. More and more I think these studies allow me to make sense of my hunger, which I first experienced as the result of a rare physical illness, one that took eighteen months to diagnose, by which time, I recognise now, I was in the depths of starvation syndrome, acting every bit as irrationally and unintentionally as those young men from Minnesota. I still have trouble, sometimes, recognising that I didn't choose my hunger. That no one does.

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I arrived in Berlin at the height of *Spargelzeit*, the two or three weeks in late spring when asparagus is ripe and abundant, sold in bunches as thick as my thigh, translucent white, or mottled green. The old-style German restaurants and pubs all display blackboards near their geranium beds, listing asparagus menus: asparagus quiche, asparagus soup, asparagus gratin, hollandaise; they continue to serve giant wurst and pork knuckles and schnitzels, peas and carrots out of cans. After *Spargelzeit* comes strawberry season; a stall sprouted suddenly outside my communist-era apartment block, painted red with a green canvas roof, and manned by a beautiful, bored strawberry-blonde in denim shorts.

Along with this celebration of the seasonality of food, I realised too that Germans *believe* – the word is not too strong – in butter. Skim milk only under sufferance. Consider cake part of their cultural heritage. It was barely three months since I'd been discharged from the clinic, but I could see how far I'd come against this backdrop.

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On my last day in Münster, Hannelore and Christian took me to visit the ancestral home of the area's most famous lyric poet, the eccentric, ardent Annette von Droste-Hülshoff. I walked through her low-roofed, top-floor bedroom, running my fingers across her writing desk, her curiousity cabinet filled with speckled-shelled blown eggs, pinned dragonflies. Her bed was hard and thin and narrow.

Hannelore packed a dinner for my train trip home: a two-cheese sandwich with butter, an apple and a peach. A box of chocolate biscuits, a box of pralines, a packet of *Gummibärchen*, and a glass bottle of mineral water. We had strawberry tart for afternoon tea, and Hannelore asked me if I wanted cream beside it. She smiled when I declined. 'I didn't think so,' she said, 'Daniele never takes cream either, you always had such similar tastes. I remember when we had pancakes, you both would pat them down with kitchen paper. Pat, pat, pat, with kitchen paper, before you ate them.'

I didn't know what to say. I had been well then, I didn't know what lay ahead.

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