

I wonder about the downbeat adventures of Benjamin Markovits in Germany, even though they could come straight from a recovered letter home. I believe the elegantly measured opening of ‘The Difficult Question’ by Anakana Schofield: the rain, the red Clarks sandals, the dead father who refuses to save himself in the crashed plane. The authorial voice has the confidence of Bolaño or Sebald – which is to say that we invest our trust in the skill of the storyteller. And we grow uneasy when the magician tries to explain the trick.

So here is a true story. My wife told it to me on her return from a day’s outing to Oxford. Why was she there? I was at home in Hackney, sitting at the desk where I am sitting now, niggling at another commission, another rapidly approaching deadline. There was no time to look out of the window, but I could hear pigeons massing on the tiles. Squirrels headbutting speckled glass. Recently arrived parakeets screeching from tree to tree.

Anna goes, early, into the hotel where she has her meeting, wondering if there is time for coffee or a drink. Someone she recognises is established at a table with her laptop. *Is it?* The woman with the busy screen, fingers flying across the keyboard, is a writer. She comes here to this commercial space, not to a library or a coffee shop, because the atmosphere feels right, it’s not oppressive. Most of the passerines are tourists or business folk.