

# BOOKS FIRST

**new in German**  
**soon in English**



**Fiction**

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## Preface

Dear book lovers,

Hurrah, it's in the bag at last! We are now able to offer you this selection of current German, Austrian, and Swiss books, all of which fill us with great enthusiasm. We are convinced that they not only make significant contributions to a wide range of contemporary issues, but do so with a literary flair that make them well worth translating into other languages.

Think of this as a kind of shop window: the sixteen books presented will give our anglophone readers the opportunity to enter new worlds and make new discoveries, while also opening up the way for publishers and editors to publish these titles in English, and to take advantage of attractive levels of financial support. The English-language rights to all of these titles are still available (unlike those recommended in the appendix, which have already appeared, or will soon appear, in English).

Contemporary German-language fiction doesn't in any way correspond to the stuffy image of it that commonly prevails. It is young at heart, entertaining, multifaceted, and intercultural. It tackles current problems and issues, but rather than doing so in a brooding or self-referential way, it approaches them from multiple vantage points and challenges "absolute truths." Images of masculinity, the roles of women, visions of the future, dystopias, reflections on history, depictions of an author's *Heimat* – all of these are to be found within this reader, conveyed in styles that are sometimes enjoyably straightforward, sometimes teasing as a result of the interplay of different narrative techniques, but never boring. *Heimat* (home or homeland) is indeed a key concept, as it pops up again and again in one form or another. What is my intellectual, political, or geographical *Heimat*? Who is it that decides where I truly belong? Why do you feel threatened when I tell you that your *Heimat* is also mine? For how many generations does an immigrant family continue to be regarded as an immigrant family? Does the same rule apply to everyone, regardless of where they originally came from?

The books presented here amount to a plea for multiplicity, for thought and reflection as well as empathy and indignation, just as all good literature should. We at BOOKS FIRST team are delighted – and also a touch proud – to offer you this selection.

We offer our special thanks to Angelika Salvisberg of the Swiss cultural foundation Pro Helvetia, which supports the project both financially and editorially. We should also like to offer our heartfelt thanks to Kristina Maitt-Zinke and Walter Schlect for their expert advice.

We hope that our choices meet with your approval, and that you enjoy reading them.

*Heike Friesel, Hannah Brennhäußer and the BOOKS FIRST team*

**[www.goethe.de/booksfirst](http://www.goethe.de/booksfirst)**

# Fatma Aydemir



Fatma Aydemir, born in 1986 in Karlsruhe, completed her degree in German and American studies in Frankfurt am Main. She has lived in Berlin since 2012, working as an editor for the *Tageszeitung (taz)*. She writes for various publications such as *Spex* and *Missy Magazine*. Her debut novel, *Ellbogen*, was awarded the Klaus Michael Kühne Prize at Hamburg's Harbour Front Literature Festival.

## Publications:

*Ellbogen*, Carl Hanser Verlag, 2017

Fatma Aydemir, *Ellbogen* [Elbow], novel  
Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2017, 272 pages

## Cool and passionate

Fatma Aydemir's debut novel *Ellbogen* takes a big risk – and it pays off. Hazal is a Turkish-German girl from Berlin's trendy but problem-ridden Wedding district, who, late on the night of her eighteenth birthday, kills a drunken German student. During an altercation in a U-Bahn station between him, Hazal, and two of her girlfriends, she pushes him from behind and he falls head-first on to the tracks to his death. Hazal has no intention of giving herself up to the police, even though the incident was caught on CCTV. She flees to Istanbul to stay with her drug-addicted Skype friend Mehmet. Hazal, born in Germany, has never been to Turkey before.

Fatma Aydemir's sleight of hand is to present her protagonist's extreme behavior and thought processes for discussion without adding her own moral commentary. The reader is never made aware of any pedagogical intent. Hazal's stubborn refusal to listen to reason, which Aydemir supports aesthetically by permitting the perspectives of others only from the sidelines, holds firm until the end of the novel. Aydemir challenges her readers to make their own judgments, offering them the uncomfortable temptation to draw a more moralizing conclusion than the book itself does, while persuading them that such judgment could be problematic.

Aydemir's literary skill provokes this confusing feeling. The language of the novel imparts a convincing proximity to the milieu of Hazal and her girlfriends. Precisely researched, the novel has no reason to pander to the reader. No word is out of place. Aydemir remains linguistically cool and concentrated. This puts the action centre stage and creates space for the girls and their frustrating existence – shaped by close-knit families and foreignness in the country of their birth – the kind of life, in other words, that is not just characteristic for Turks in Germany, but true to emigrant experiences elsewhere.

Treated by her parents like a maid and regarded as an outsider in Germany, Hazal is also viewed as foreign in Turkey, where she is “the German.” Aydemir shows, with a situation as exemplary as it is realistic,

how the non-integration of emigrant children can turn out. Hazal's sudden propensity for violence is inextricably linked to her complete lack of trust in the authorities of her country of residence – a topic that will likely provoke debate in the US too.

Also of international interest are the passages set in Erdoğan's Turkey. Aydemir, who co-founded the website *taz.gazete* for Turkish journalists, to protest against the lack of press freedom, avoids didacticism in this context too. When Hazal ends up in riots against the current Turkish government in Istanbul and is almost run over by a tank, Aydemir's representation is not labored. By maintaining Hazal's perspective, Aydemir avoids touristic or journalistic viewpoints. By presenting her themes in a way that remains open to new insights, she shows how literature can contribute to the exploration of reality.

*By Hans-Peter Kunsch, translated by Jamie Lee Searle*

Sample Translation: *Ellbogen*  
(pp. 7-21)

PART ONE

ONE

Had Desiree with her long clean fingers not modeled each and every lipstick and nail polish for me I would never have hit on the idea to steal. It was summer; I remember exactly because Desiree wore sky blue hot pants and on her legs the gleaming little hairs stood erect because the air conditioning had transformed the supermarket into an enormous refrigerator. I was only seven, but I knew I would never dare to wear pants so short. I also knew that Mama would never have allowed me to buy glitter lipstick. But Desiree had cash in hand and needed only to decide on a color. She selected the pink lipstick, obviously, because Desiree was blond and fancied herself as Barbie. Actually she really did look like Barbie, but I never told her that. Life was already good enough to Desiree.

I walked with her almost to the front door of her building. Desiree's mother was already standing on the balcony, her hands on her hips. She was tall, extremely thin and always a little bronzed. No idea why, maybe she went on lots of vacations. She wore a tight tank top with no bra, so you only saw boobs when you thought about Desiree's mom. The boobs were much smaller than Mama's, not pointy but round like two tennis balls, actually pretty nice. Desiree's mother called out to us with a glare that it was lunchtime. Desiree nodded, looked at me and waved goodbye. She waved even though I was standing right next to her. Not once did I see the inside of Desiree's apartment although I often imagined what it might have looked like.

Then I went back to the supermarket and casually slipped the lipstick into my pants pocket. I can't say what I intended to do with it, I think it was just about possessing it, once in a while taking a sniff at it. No way could I put it on – Mama would have smacked me. As I slunk by the sad cashier with her lady beard I looked down and concentrated on the grooves between the floor tiles. Once outside I ran the three hundred meters home as if I really had to pee, unlocked the door with the key

that hung from a dark blue string around my neck, sprang up the stairs to the first floor, shut the door behind me, ran directly to our room and thrust the lipstick proudly in front of Onur's nose. Onur just gave me a questioning look and kept on playing with his shitty Legos. Spaz.

Then Mama stood in the door. She stared at the glinting package in my hand and asked what it was. "A lipstick," I said. She wanted to know where I got it from. "Tante Semra gave me five euros this morning, when I met her in front of the bakery," I lied. Of course Mama didn't believe a word. Not once had Tante Semra just given me five euros, why would she have? It was neither my birthday nor a *bayram*. No one just gave someone five euros on the street, maybe two, yeah, a two-euro coin you might give away. But a five-euro bill? Never.

Just as Mama picked up the yellow telephone to call Tante Semra I laid my small hand on the black switchhook and told her everything. "I stole it." I said it so fast that I startled myself. Then the tears came. Just like that. Mama slammed the receiver down and totally flipped out. She hates it when I cry; it's still like that today. She says I cry only when I'm guilty. She calls it *Krokodilstränen*, crocodile tears. A freaky German expression that she picked up somewhere and loves to use excessively. Maybe she likes the image: weeping crocodiles swimming in their own guilty feelings. With her heavy, plushy slut slippers in hand she chased me through the whole apartment yelling, "You damned child of a whore!" I jumped on to the velvet floral sofa, from there on to the armchair with the cigarette burn, and ran into the kids' room, crawling into the far corner. Mama stood huffing in front of me. It didn't take two seconds before she also began to wail. Then I knew: Okay. I really screwed up.

Mama ran into the kitchen and came back with our biggest knife, the one my father always cut meat with. "Which hand did you steal with?" she bellowed. "Left or right?" I hid my hands behind my skirt and stuck them in the gap between the radiator and the windowsill. I sobbed and shrieked, said I would never do it again. But Mama wouldn't stop. She only asked again: "Left or right?" I don't think that I was ever so afraid for my ass as then. Not even when I swallowed an entire package of Opa's blood pressure meds, and that was pretty gnarly.

Mama got me by the scruff of the neck, dragged me out of the apartment and hauled me back to the supermarket. I stared at my white plastic sandals while I stood next to her and listened as she spoke insistently in her broken German to the fat store manager. At some point

she pinched my arm and screamed at me in Turkish. Today I believe it would have been less terrible to have had my right hand cut off than to have had to apologize to that dude. That is to say: shame is a lot shittier than fear. When you're ashamed, you're also afraid of being afraid. The store manager scratched his paunch and looked at me in a way I'll never forget. His teensy blue eyes behind the thick lenses of his glasses sniggered. *Ha!* It pleased him that I stole. And it pleased him even more that I was ashamed, the pig.

I never stole again. Okay, almost never. Once I pocketed two cans of Redbull and a bottle of vodka but that doesn't count. That day all of us stole: Elma, Gül, Ebru and I. It was our initiation. That same week I had also had to do my first tongue kiss. With Vincent, poor thing. Back when I still thought he was cool because he had the most expensive kicks in the schoolyard. We stood on the homeless playground behind the church while around us twenty people tittered. A few weeks before Vincent had asked me if I wanted to go out with him. I just laughed because I didn't know how I should answer. At some point I went up to him and said, "Hey, I changed my mind," so that I could stick my tongue down his throat without him misunderstanding. I did it, too. He tasted sweetish, but also weird and old, like stale yellow taffy, and worse: he held his pop eyes open while we were making out. Something I obviously didn't see, because my eyes were closed. But the bitches, as I call my girlfriends, told me this later. Bitches, because back then they used to fuck with me. It had been arranged that each of us had to make out with a German, but not one of them dared after I told them how cold and greasy it had felt. "That's definitely because of all the hog they eat," Elma said, "now you know how pork tastes, man." But it had to be a German; a Turkish boy was out of the question, it would have been too risky. Turks spread everything around until the whole clan knows.

And now I'm staring at a shitty coatrack while I sit with a store detective in the back room of a drugstore. Three nasty jackets are hung up there, they've got to belong to the cashiers. The jeans jacket in the middle is the ugliest, it looks like the one my father wore in old photos from 1993. I ask myself what they must earn here. Gül's mom works at Netto in the warehouse and earns nine euros an hour. The drugstore is much smaller than Netto – maybe you earned seven here. Still double what my uncle pays me, the vulture. I wonder if I should apply for a minijob. If I worked

legal like this, eight hours a day, I would have 450 euros in less than ten shifts. You could definitely buy nicer jackets with that than the ones hanging there.

“First I have to declare a store ban,” says the detective. “You may not, in the next twelve months, enter one of our branches.”

“What? Why?”

“Because those are the rules. You’re charged with shoplifting,” he says without looking at me. With his sausage fingers he flips through my passport, every page printed with a red-and-white crescent moon. I always have the passport on me, since the time the cops stopped me at night and had to bring me home and my father was so appalled that later out of rage he threw a *çaykane* against the wall.

The detective takes out a ballpoint pen.

“I told you I didn’t steal, man. I just forgot to pay.”

“If only you knew how often we heard that one.”

I ask myself why the guy says “we.” And whether he got his job because he looks so averagely German that no one would notice him.

“But it’s really true. I don’t steal. I didn’t do it.”

“*Ja klar,*” he says and drops his pen. He wants to catch it, but he can’t and accidentally whacks his hand against the edge of the table. Every move he makes is hamstrung, chopped up. And a stupid, spoiled face to boot.

“Pfft.” I have to laugh but I squelch it and instead a hacking sound comes out. Awkward. Now I really have to laugh. I hold my hand in front of my mouth. The guy just looks at me, stunned.

“Ja, laugh now, *wa?*” It’s funny, *wa?*” His cheese-like skin turns pink. He picks the pen up from the floor.

“Yeah, it’s funny, man,” I say and laugh out loud.

A vein in his temple bulges. He clicks his pen and pissily eyes my passport. From his brown jacket emanates a strange smell, like an old folks’ home. But the guy is at the most forty. I wonder if he lives with his mother. Or if he visits her a lot at the old folks’ home. Maybe it’s just the jacket, maybe it’s from a thrift store. On the other side of the door a cash register beeps, people talk, but you can’t understand them, they are just saying blablabla. The detective’s face is now sort of delighted, the corners of his mouth a bit upturned.

“You’re still a minor, *Fräulein!* That means we will have to call the police.”

“No, man, stop,” I say incredulously.

“The officers will then take you home to your parents.” Pleased, he leans back, crosses his legs.

“No way.”

“Sorry, I have to do it,” he says. “But you should know this already. It’s probably not the first time you’ve stolen.” He’s almost singing. His nostrils widen, a few little hairs poking out. I imagine burning them with a lighter. He tries again to look serious: “Shoplifting is no minor offense. You know you can be deported for that?”

“Dude!” slips out. *Dude*. I feel like I have to puke, right on the feet of the store detective. Everything is warm and spins. I sink slowly into a dark hole, but I can’t let on or else it will be even worse.

“No, I mean, that can’t happen,” I hear myself say. “In two days I’ll be eighteen.” This doesn’t interest him, I can see that, but I have to keep going. “I’m already an adult ... almost. You don’t need to do that, call the cops.”

“According to your ID you’re seventeen, so a minor. Therefore we are obliged to call the police.”

He grabs his orange HTC from the table. It’s a new one, with lots of gigabytes. My neighbor Nuri could have gotten me a hot one last week for a hunni. I didn’t want it because the camera was shit. But what does a dude with such a grill need with such high resolution? Who wants to see his face? *We* are obliged to call the police. Who the fuck is this *we*? We, the drugstore team, where only *assis* go to use the testers to put on their make-up? Or we, the nasty Berlin “loss prevention agents” who like to hunt little kanaks because one time someone accidentally walked out of a store with unpaid stuff? Or we, the revolting, scaly-skinned, unwashed men, we the sad swine, we with our three remaining hairs painstakingly combed to the side, two centimeters in front and then a curve in the direction of the right ear, in the hope that we can conceal our male-pattern baldness, in order to all-the-shit-day-long look at little girls’ asses while they squirt themselves with the newest Beyoncé perfume; we, the ones who at the end of the day try to poach the cunts of cashiers with their rockin’ jeans jackets from 1993 but not once landing one, and for that reason once more, all alone, going home to our hundred-year-old mommies, the ones that are constantly covered with shit but just won’t die, so that we, ja, can’t quite yet inherit their fusty Nazi crap, waiting till the old potato goes to sleep, praying that she never wakes

up again, and then nice and tidy jacking off to this or that Asian chick on Pornhub and always weeping when we come, always only weeping, weeping until we fall asleep.

"I told you I didn't steal," I said. "I didn't hide the mascara. Do I look so stupid that I would walk through the metal detector with the thing in my hand? If I had wanted to steal it, if I had deliberately done it, I would have taken the tag off and stuck the mascara into my pants."

The detective looks up, eyes me warily. He's definitely thinking something filthy, something about sticking things into pants.

"So you have stolen before, since, ja, you seem to know how it goes," he declares.

"Yes, but no ..." But yes but no. The guy nauseates me but I really need his pity. If I come home one more time with the cops, and this time because I stole, I won't be able to show my face again for three months. And I can forget about my birthday party.

"Ja, I shoplifted one single time when I was a kid. That was a lipstick, but I was only seven," I say and for a moment hold my breath. I want to say more but the story seems weirdly ludicrous.

"My father beat me with a belt."

My voice squeaks. It's a total lie. Tears pop into my eyes. Truly ready for Hollywood, Leoni would say. She always says that when we're at v-tech, when I act like I'm sick and Leonie has to take me home. Usually we go get a coffee. Before I go talk to Mrs. Gawlik I breathe really long and really fast through my mouth till I'm nice and pale. Old Gawlik definitely figures I'm pregnant or something.

"Och, enough," says the detective and takes a paper out of his folder. He starts scribbling on it.

"Please believe me, sir," I beg. "I didn't want to steal the mascara. I paid for the other stuff. Look in my wallet, there's enough for twenty mascaras. I swear! I got paid today." I'm playing the monkey. So what. Better a living monkey than a dead one.

"I really don't have time for these stories now," he says sullenly and waves me off.

"If the police come to our house my father will kill me! You don't know how strict my parents are, sir. They don't think twice, there's no discussion. They just go at it."

I feel a pricking in my head. This here isn't right, *nein*, this is a bad German movie, the kind that plays on ZDF at night. The poor, poor

Turkish girl, all that's missing is the headscarf. I bring my hands to my face and start blubbing. And then I start howling for real and I don't even know why.

The guy gives me a tissue and sits there without saying anything. I blow my nose and cry even louder. As I slowly pull it together I take one more tissue and wipe the tears away from my face. My mascara is definitely smeared. I look around. There's no window in the cubicle, the air is old and stale. That artificial light makes a person sick. As if through a glassy, teary filter I see the drooping corners of the detective's mouth and sense my fear and it starts all over again. New tears stream over my cheeks. I'm no longer in control.

"Hey, calm down," says the guy, the one who still wants to deport me. He lays both hands on the table and stares at me like I'm brain dead.

"We'll figure it out. You won't get beaten."

He seems like he really means it.

On the table next to his telephone lies a little piece of gray lint. I hold my breath and cry more and stare at the lint. The lint must become useful, it must help me finally stop crying.

"I'll act like it was already the twenty-fifth of June, ja? You are eighteen years old today, okay? Because I made an error with the date. And I won't call the police. Okay?"

"Thank you," I say very quietly to the lint. In my throat a little fireball dissolves and sinks slowly towards my stomach.

"Don't get too happy too soon, *Fräulein*. You're getting written up all the same. If this is really your first offense and you don't have a record you'll probably only have to pay a fine. In any case you'll get something in the mail from the police. Till then you have time to talk to your parents. Then it's not such a shock for them, when the police come to the door ..."

Bla. Bla. Bla.

Great. I definitely have to get that letter. Even if I have to cut school for a week.

"And I receive a fee of one hundred euros. That you can pay right now in cash," the detective says and pushes a receipt over to me.

"The mascara only costs seven euros."

"Don't get sassy, *Fräulein*, just because I'm giving you a break. Everyone has to pay the fee. If you don't do it now you'll get another letter, and that will be from a lawyer," he says, and shows me the x next to which I'm supposed to sign.

Better to keep my mouth shut. I set the hundred euros that was supposed to be for my party on the table and sign. Extortion. The guy is ripping me off while acting like a social worker. He delivers yet another sermon but I'm no longer listening and instead I think about where I can get some cash fast. Maybe I can tap Onur. I did last month and he gave it to me, no trouble at all, because he was freaked that I'd tell Mama that I saw him in the middle of the day shitfaced on the homeless playground. Before I leave the store I pay for the bloody mascara. I extra avoid the cashier with the headscarf. But the German chick isn't better, she throws me shade too. I stare back at her and let the ten-euro bill fall next to the coin tray. The jeans jacket from 1993 is definitely hers. Pink Swarovski crystals. On her gels. Really now.

It would be best if I could just run home, just run for hours, but it's raining again and anyway I don't want to go home. I sit on a bench in the U-Bahn station and check my phone for a message from Mehmet. Nothing. The U6 comes, people get off and on. The crowd with their soggy clothes wet from rain and sweat spawns a musty tangle, and somewhere you can smell a couple of piss-soaked bums. A Syrian mother grabs her two little daughters by their pink rucksacks and pushes them into the jammed car. A German family with gaudy shopping bags discuss what's the shortest way to the hotel. It's bizarre how patiently the parents listen to their son explain why he's for the exit on the left - he being at most twelve. Then the daughter chimes in and points to the exit on the right and there's something revoltingly smartass about her. The parents listen closely, they don't interrupt, they just nod. An old German couple stand in front of the train map. The lady casts around for someone she can ask about where they're going, where they're supposed to get off. She walks two steps toward me and then turns to a brunette in blue heels. Will I ever learn to walk in those things? I try to remember why Mama cried so much that time after I stole the lipstick. She just said that it was *haram* to steal, but I'm pretty sure that it was about something else. In our family when we talk to each other we act like there really were a God and a Hell and all that. It helps us to find whichever justification for whatever, and to have less fear of death, and especially it helps to forbid us things. Possibly Mama just cried because she thought that I would become a pathetic fuck-up and botch my life up just like every second girl in Wedding. And possibly from the outside it looks just like that, like I've already botched it up. *Ja*, probably I already have a botched-up life.

Mama always wanted me to become a medical assistant and I wanted to be a doctor. Now I'm neither and I can't even find a training program to be a salesgirl. That's because half my teachers are assholes and the other half are mentally ill. At least Tante Semra says that, she's a school social worker and knows about that kind of stuff. Tante Semra also says that I should keep going to school, that I should get my Abi some day, but I don't want to. I don't want to beg for money from my parents all my life. Also I'd have to hang out with a bunch of complete idiots every day. People who do their Abi talk shit and have greasy hair.

*Translated by Tara Bray Smith*

# Lukas Bärfuss



Lukas Bärfuss, born in Thun, Switzerland in 1971, is a Zurich-based writer, dramatist, and essayist. His plays have been staged around the world and his novels have been translated into more than twenty languages. Lukas Bärfuss is a member of the German Academy for Language and Literature and from 2009 to 2013 was writer-in-residence and dramaturgical advisor at the Schauspielhaus Zurich. His most recent novel *Hagard* was shortlisted for the Leipzig Book Fair Prize and won the “LiteraTour Nord” in 2018.

## Selected publications:

*Hagard*, Wallstein Verlag, 2017

*Stil und Moral. Essays*, Wallstein Verlag, 2015

*Koala*, Wallstein Verlag, 2014; Milkweed Editions owns English language rights, not yet published

*Hundert Tage*, Wallstein Verlag, 2008

*One Hundred Days*, Granta Books, 2012

*Die toten Männer. Novella*, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2002

Lukas Bärfuss, *Haggard*, novel  
Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2017, 174 pages

## Distraught in Zurich

The quality of contemporary German-language literature is significantly influenced by writers from Switzerland, and one of the most unconventional of them is Lukas Bärfuss. First as a playwright, then as an author of prose, he has repeatedly come to the fore with provocative, politically disconcerting material – and the explosive power of his writing extends far beyond the borders of Swiss or European affairs. His subjects are the dark side of Western affluent society and its global machinations, but he also deals with existential questions such as suicide and the unfathomable contradictions of human existence. Bärfuss’s plays are included in the repertoire of all major German and Swiss theatres, and he has received numerous awards for his books.

In 2017 Bärfuss caused a sensation with his most recent novel *Haggard*, which is a mixture of stalking thriller, satire on the times, and dystopia. The French word “haggard” can be translated as “wild, shy, distraught.” In the lexicon of hunting, it refers to captive animals, especially birds of prey, which can be trained, yet are never fully tamable. Philip, the protagonist, is a real estate entrepreneur in his late forties, trapped in an average existence; under pressure to increase efficiency and sensing the emptiness of his life. While waiting for a business partner on a March afternoon in Zurich’s pedestrian zone, the “disturbance” breaks into his life. As if under a mysterious spell, he begins to follow a young woman wearing a pair of plum-blue ballerina flats, who has just stepped out of a department store and nimbly winds her way through the city. Although Philip is unable to see the stranger’s face, he is fascinated and irresistibly drawn to her. He continuously loses track of her but manages to stay on her trail.

After that point, the high-earning entrepreneur and father of a young boy mutates into a wild stalker. The chase leads him to the desolate periphery of the city, so that the hunter becomes more and more entangled in bizarre and macabre situations. The chase also turns into a race against time as the battery of his cell phone is running

low and he completely depends on it as a bridge to his middle-class existence. In the end, after only thirty-six hours, this existence has been shattered.

Bärfuss stages this breathless, tragicomic odyssey not only as a parcours of a personal obsession, but also as a panorama of the modern world with its hostile precincts and latent threats. The plot is dated casually to the very two days in March 2014 when Malaysia Airlines' Boeing 777 disappeared, during the occupation of Crimea, and when the Asian avian flu was all over the news. The topography of Zurich is recognizable, though never mentioned by name. The author's art lies in his creation of a nightmarish, surreal atmosphere within real space-time coordinates, in which "the abolition of humankind" is readily accepted by means of digital external control.

*By Kristina Mайдt-Zinke, translated by Zaia Alexander*

Sample Translation: *Hagard*  
(pp. 7-25)

For far too long I've been trying to understand Philip's story. I want to unveil the secret hidden within it. Time and again I've failed to solve the riddle of those images that haunt me, images of cruelty and comedy that occur in every narrative where desire encounters death.

I know everything and I don't understand anything. I know the sequence of events. I know how the story begins, I know the date and I know the place: the pretzel stand in front of the department store at Bellevue. I know when it comes to an end, namely thirty-six hours later, early Thursday morning, March 13, on a balcony somewhere in the suburbs. The events that happened in the meantime have also been resolved: the incident with the fur, that first cold night in the car, the missing purse, the magpie, the lost shoe, the dead Japanese mathematician - all of that is out in the open. But the circumstances, the conditions that made these events possible, remain in the dark. And the more thoroughly I go about clarifying the details, the more obscure the world in which the story took place becomes. You might think I'm stuck in the same boat as the person in the proverb, but the forest, I insist, is merely an assertion, an abstract system that cannot be found in reality. The forest breaks down into trees, just as the sky breaks down into planets, stars, and meteors.

After all my futile attempts to find a connection between the images, I have come to the conclusion that it is not this story, *per se*, that I don't understand; rather it is the question of how to explain my entanglement, to find out what they are trying to tell me, those apparitions that have beguiled and enchanted me, that more than once have led me to the brink of madness.

My existence depends on this story - at least that's what I keep telling myself - and at the same time I know how ridiculous I am, and that I have nothing to fear. I could easily let go of the events of those days in March and nothing would happen to me, I could continue to lead my life as I had before. In fact, I'd be saved if I could just admit I failed because of Philip's story. This is too big for me, even if it seems quite simple. It's as if I keep forgetting something every time I try, an essential detail, as if I'd lost a sign that would lead me to the right path. I know how often I've sworn and lied to myself like a drunk who deceives himself with a

last glass. I'm a gambler on the brink of bankruptcy getting dealt another hand - I'll make one last attempt, I'll resurrect the events one more time, and then I'll leave it at that.

I was driven by my desire, yes. I, too, have my obsessions, of course, and like everybody else I prefer to keep them to myself. Not because I'm ashamed; some things simply don't fit the image I have of myself, which now, midway through my life, is the same as the image my fellow human beings have of me: I'm a man with many weaknesses and even more principles. But Eros does not ask about the images we hold of ourselves; on the contrary, it often seems as if he is trying to refute them. Everybody has their dark side, so they say, but now I realize how little that means in a moral sense to most people, that darkness need not be equated with evil or light with good. The dark side is simply that which lacks light, and it took me a long while to understand that cats are actually black at night, so not only do they seem black, no: they lack all color. How did I come to this conclusion? Oh, yes: my obsessions. Here I have to think of the confessions of Rousseau, whom I'd read a few years ago, and who, if I recall correctly, begins by saying he is writing a completely honest recount of himself, omitting nothing intentionally, so those things he couldn't tell simply fell by the wayside. And I remember how little I believed in his resolve, had thought it mere stylization, lip service as they say, and I doubted the author until he documented his sexual preferences. I can't remember how he put it, I only remember how it struck me and that from then on I believed his assertions. So do I need to reveal my perversions for my recount to be credible?

Some aspects of Philip's story are embarrassing to me, and I don't mean just the weird, dirty, and sick moments that can also be found in it. It is the inanity of certain details that I cannot accept. Much of them seem almost insignificant and downright mundane. It would have been far easier for me if these plum-blue ballerina flats hadn't caught Philip's attention, ordinary slippers that are no longer reserved for dancers. They can be found in any department store for a small sum, sewn or glued, with or without straps on the instep, in every possible color, matt or shiny. And the fact that they were made of calfskin, finely crafted and carefully selected, does not alter the fact that this story begins with a pair of women's shoes.

The beginning? That's tricky. Nobody can pinpoint the event that begins the story. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, so it is said – but what did he do before then? And whatever it was, why doesn't it count as part of the beginning? Physicists who replace God with the Big Bang would add that the question is absurd because it presupposes time, and such things did not exist before God or the Big Bang. Books and films claim there is a beginning, but in reality there haven't been any further beginnings since the very first one. And for the time being, there also is no end, if that's any consolation. One event flows into the next, but as the end of one story is related to the beginning of the other, it remains undetectable to the human mind. Those who wish to disentangle the fabric of reality will end up entangled in it. That's what I reject. I want to solve the riddle, but I don't want to go crazy.

I am a witness of those days of March, and as a witness I will report them fully and without embellishment. Some things will show me in a negative light, but it's all the same to me. In order to seem credible, I could omit something here, invent something there. But I don't want to. My obsession, let it be confessed, my obsession is truthfulness. And whether it was laughable or not: the fact remains it was the plum-blue ballet flats that triggered Philip's journey. Why did he follow them? I have no answer to this; it might, at least in the beginning, have been a harmless game, without danger, because if Philip had known what would happen in the ensuing hours, he would have immediately let the woman go. He was not seeking his ruin, nor even danger, although when the time had come and he realized the thread his existence hung upon, he faced the danger without hesitation.

One thing is certain: on that Tuesday, March 13, at quarter past four, Philip, a man in his late forties, heavysset – he'd grown somewhat out of shape in the last few years – had waited in a café on the outskirts of the old town for a certain man named Hahnloser.

Philip did not know him, he'd only heard that his painting business had recently gone bankrupt, which is why he had to sell a piece of land that had been owned by the family for generations, an undeveloped property high above the lake. Philip didn't approve of the meeting place, he'd have preferred his company's conference room, but when he saw he could make a quick buck, which he'd estimated would bring him thirty

thousand, he agreed to the rendezvous – he had to be at Belinda's by six that evening and she didn't live far from the café.

The restaurant was located in a nineteenth-century bourgeois palace, a former grand hotel from the era when the city had gone through a massive expansion, when the artillery hills had been leveled and the lakeshore filled up. Gold and red plush held sway over the ambience, a sweeping staircase led to the terrace, mothers sat with their children at tables covered with leftovers of sweets, empty syrup glasses, and coffee cups. Hahnloser had kept him waiting and Philip had been tempted to order a piece of cake from the vitrine, but since only five minutes remained until the agreed time, and since under no circumstances did he wish to be surprised with a full mouth, he contented himself with a cup of coffee with two packets of sugar stirred in. Ten minutes later, which would have been more than enough time to wolf down half a piece of cake in peace and quiet, Hahnloser was nowhere to be seen. He neither responded to the call, nor to the text message Philip had sent him. After Philip had Vera confirm that he had the right number, Philip read through the latest news about the Malaysia Airlines aircraft, a Boeing 777, which had disappeared last Sunday somewhere in the Roaring Forties with 239 souls on board, a tragedy that preoccupied and troubled him. The authorities in Kuala Lumpur didn't have the slightest clue what had happened to the plane. The search, which expanded by the hour into other areas, remained fruitless. The passenger list contained not only Chinese and Malaysian names, but also the names of two Austrians, in reality Iranians, who had boarded with fake passports. For several hours people believed the two were terrorists, until they turned out just to be illegal immigrants, so even this trail led nowhere. Nobody had found the rubble and the oil spill in the Strait of Malacca had been caused by the usual maritime traffic.

At some point, Philip decided to take a look around the restaurant, but he didn't see anybody who fit Hahnloser's description. When he returned to his table, his cup had been cleared away and a fat woman wearing a light blue cap was sitting in his seat. For a moment, Philip stood around, not knowing what to do. At last, he grabbed his briefcase, paid at the register, took his change, and stepped into the street.

Another fact that troubles me has to do with the city in which the events occurred. It is the same city that I've inhabited for twenty years, a city

I've come to know and consider home. When I walk past the places where Philip picked up her trail, see the places where his fate was sealed, those calm, peaceful places, I see how improbable it is to find such a story here. The citizens are industrious and don't tend toward extremes. Life goes on quietly. The battles fought here are rarely exemplary and rarely fatal. If the lifecycle of a typical inhabitant were to be recorded as a straight line drawn from birth to death, the result would be a flat line, with no peaks or valleys, a steady striving toward one's own end, interrupted here and there by a few irregularities, tremors caused by illness or divorce. Rarely past the age of forty will an existence end any differently here than by gradually fizzling out, which perhaps is the wrong term, as it presupposes a burning. Few people are on fire. It's more like a moderately filled balloon slowly running out of air. Yes, there is misery here too, just as everywhere else, and people live here who torment others, as well as people who suffer. Here, too, you occasionally hear of those pitiful old folks, who one day stumble over a piece of furniture in their apartment, fall and remain lying on the floor, too weak to call for help, who die of thirst in their own bedroom, unnoticed until a few months later, when they are discovered because a sweet smell has spread through the house. But only the dead are lost; as long as you are alive, you cannot stay undetected. Nobody can hide, and stories about people elsewhere who have been hiding from the police for years or even decades, like the crook who lived on a farm in southern Italy and ran his syndicate from there, writing his instructions and orders by hand on tiny shreds of paper in microscopic letters - which newcomer had been admitted into the organization, when a traitor had been killed, or how a territorial dispute should be resolved - such stories will always be met with astonishment and complete lack of understanding by the people of this city. A person who lives that inconspicuously would surely cause people to talk and soon such talk would reach the authorities, and the person would be exposed. We are watchful, but we shouldn't believe we are in command of some special awareness, or even have any particular interest in our city, or our fellow citizens - no, generally speaking, indifference is the name of the game, a carefully maintained and decent ignorance of a stranger's and one's own state. Even 160 years ago it was noted somewhere that people here had the ability to tell all sorts of fantastical stories and legends with the greatest precision, yet knew nothing about how it went down when their grandfather took their

grandmother. Much has changed since those days, the city has become a popular global destination, and all kinds of international business people spend a few years enjoying themselves here and living off the fat of the land without feeling the need to put down roots or make it home.

It was unlikely that a person like Philip would choose another fate and, within a few days, not to say hours, would bring himself from a solid, secure existence to the brink of his own destruction. You could imagine such incidents occurring in an area torn apart by internal tensions, where people are accustomed to such ruptures, passions, in a society where conflict is part of everyday life – but what can I say? That's just how it was, yet another inconsistency in Philip's story that I have to live with.

Mind you, circumstances were beginning to change in my city too. There was no conspicuous upheaval – on the surface everything remained as it always was, but doubt crept into people's minds. Confidence was gone, faith in the opportunities tomorrow may bring, the conviction you could forge your own destiny, take the next step on the path to perfection, all of these things had cracks. Few voiced it, but many people secretly expected a breakdown, and at the workbenches, in lecture halls, and in open-plan offices, workers, professors, and employees whispered about the coming disaster. It wasn't the bad guys or the potentates that people feared at first, not even the suicide bombers who blew themselves up in crowded squares. We knew about violence from before, we didn't come from peaceful times. But we had lost faith in the possibility that somebody could bend the course of history according to their will. Even the powerful seemed helpless and weak. Everything seemed random and arbitrary and although everyday life went on as usual, people felt surrounded by an enemy that rarely showed its face. For some it was the emaciated person on the outskirts of town, who after a long escape across the sea, lay tossing and turning from nightmares in their bunk bed, haunted by the memory of death and exile. For others it was the invisible men in back rooms plotting intrigues and concocting the next conspiracy. People were afraid of the future; the frivolity of not too long ago, which spread a plaid blanket over the blossoming spring meadow, had vanished. People read opinion pieces in the newspaper that said we

were on the threshold of a new era, the end of which, whenever it hit us, could mean only one thing: the end of the world as we knew it.

Philip stood in the sun and lit a cigarette. That March was unusually warm – already in February there was no sign of snow or cold. A southwest exposure drove the mercury up to 68 degrees, while southerly winds brought dull, muggy heat. All winter there had been no frost to finish off the vermin and an unhealthy whiff hung in the air, as if it was not spring being announced but a feverish disease. Seagulls circled over the lakeshore, which was dense with people, and ragged ducks covered on the feces-laden tarps of moored sailboats, reminding Philip of the unsettling news from the Far East. From one day to the next, people were getting sick, like that man from Guangdong Province who was sent to Hong Kong's Kwong Wah Hospital with a high fever, cough, and aching limbs. He had gotten infected by a slaughtered chicken that a member of his family had bought at the market in Kaiping. After a cytokine storm and pneumonia, his organs shut down. That was the fifth case in a short period that had ended fatally. The virus still only spread from animals to humans, but the doctors warned it was the deadliest pathogen since the discovery of influenza, and it was only a matter of time before the pathogen would mutate and then leap from person to person, sweeping away half the population with weak immune systems.

Philip was informed of this in minute detail, which he owed to his friend who was always at his side, and who he'd ask every two minutes whether something had happened in the world that could affect him. His companion was a smartphone which he used to write, read, and play games, and which only a few years ago had begun its triumphant march around the globe. The relationship with these devices was as yet unclear. Those who had developed them averred it was out of philanthropy, but we mistrusted them, considered them perpetrators of evil, involved in a project that aimed to abolish humanity. Nevertheless, only very few of us abstained from using these devices; in fact, we used them all the more lavishly, made room for them in more and more areas of our lives. Work was hardly imaginable without them, but we also allowed them to take over our leisure time, health, and even our love lives faithfully we allowed them to keep us on a leash, while knowing at the same time how unlikely it was that they would guide us to happiness. Yet since we had lost faith in our own freedom

and lacked the knowledge of what form our happiness should take, we stayed connected to these devices.

Every epoch possesses a tool that it is fundamentally dependent upon. The Industrial Revolution is synonymous with the steam engine, the Age of Enlightenment was changed by the printing press. and my era also hung on to a device, but it wasn't the smartphone as most people believed, it was the power supply with a charger cable, a small transformer with which to load the Lithium-ion batteries that operated those jack-of-all-trades. The power supply was small and inconspicuous, hardly anyone talked about it, but the moment it was depleted, these smart telephones starved to death, and people were rendered mute and deaf and isolated, quite helpless.

But Philip was still connected. He shaded his eyes so that he could see the keyboard on the screen. He wrote to Vera that he'd stay close by and if Hahnloser did show up, she should please let him know. While he was at it, he reminded her to check him in early for the flight to Las Palmas, one of the front seats, so he wouldn't lose any time on landing and would be punctual for a meeting with a group of pensioners in the village of Tejada, who spent their holidays hiking there and were interested in retirement homes. Philip wanted to stay on the island until Friday, take care of the paperwork with the notary, and obtain the last signatures on the contracts. He had already sold four of the twelve apartments, although they only existed as blueprints and in a ridiculous cartoon. It was the biggest project he had been involved in since starting his own business. The development had cost him time, money and nerves, and now it was only a matter of signing the contracts and cashing in on the profit.

Philip attributed his fatigue to having skipped lunch and the heat. In the hour that remained before he could show up at Belinda's, he decided to get in his car and take a short snooze. He walked up the promenade to the garage, which now seemed strangely deserted for around five in the evening. Not a soul was to be seen anywhere, neither at the cashier down by the entrance, nor in the stairwell, nor in the elevator. Most of the parking spaces on floor G were empty. It was incredibly quiet - even the aggression-inhibiting muzak that normally spewed from the loudspeakers had gone missing.

Philip wondered if he had missed a sign warning of an emergency shutdown, a police operation, or a fire that might explain why the garage

had been vacated, but as soon as he heard an engine and then voices on the lower floors, he calmed down and walked to his BMW. He unlocked the door, pushed the seat all the way back, reclined, stowed away the toy dinosaurs, and made himself comfortable. He turned on the radio, but all that could be heard was a hissing noise; he also discovered his telephone had no reception within the concrete walls of this building. It angered him, at the least they could have put up an antenna, now he was cut off from the world, and if Hahnloser showed up after all, Vera's message wouldn't reach him.

What exactly went through Philip's head at that moment is not clear. He must have weighed the likelihood of the deal still going through, maybe he considered driving away and finding a parking space outside, but around this time it was as good as impossible, he'd only waste valuable time.

So he was found a short while later at Bellevue, a few steps away from the café. Philip stood at the pretzel stand, dazed by the smell of fat, salt, and baking soda. He saw the masses streaming out of the department store on Theater Street. He saw the people he shared the city with, saw the businessmen with their shaved faces, the secretaries after work in the early evening, loaded with junk from China, which they would use to decorate their shacks on the outskirts of the city, saw the bliss in their faces. He smelled the teenagers, who stank of taurine and sperm, saw their hopeful eyes, numbed by illusion – they didn't know they'd long since been caught in a trap, long since enslaved by bank loans. And he saw a chubby cashier on a cigarette break, saw her tallow skin and felt her unfulfilled desire that she'd only relieve temporarily with her own badly manicured finger, he saw how between two drags she stealthily scrounged some Italian liqueur chocolates from the pockets of her polyester apron and shoved them into her mouth, then suddenly, upon tasting the burnt filter, awakened from her daydream and stamped it out like the butt of her cigarette.

And in the throng of the department store that the revolving door shoved out, he also saw a pair of plum-blue ballerina flats, two shy weasels, lost in the stomping, in the stampede of low shoes and heavy boots. That's all he saw, the woman searching for a path through the crowd remained invisible. Philip turned his head to see more of her. For a moment her figure looked small, delicate, vulnerable. He guessed she was in her mid-twenties. He couldn't see her face, but surely in

that moment her scent reached his nose, or how he imagined her scent, roses or jasmine. Her hair shined, a shimmer of powder, milk, and oil enveloped it. She gave her skin what this skin needed, not to please, she simply appreciated her body, which she gracefully and nimbly moved around the other, derelict bodies. And once she detached herself from the throng, Philip believed he saw a gesture of her hand, or of her head, a movement that lured him, that demanded he follow her, which had to have been an illusion, for surely she had not noticed him. But for Philip there was no doubt: she meant him, she sent him a sign. So he detached himself from the column and followed the young woman into the crowd.

*Translated by Zaia Alexander*

## Shida Bazyar



Born in Hermeskeil in the Rhineland in 1988, Shida Bazyar studied creative writing in Hildesheim. She now lives in Berlin and, alongside her writing career, works part-time as an educational consultant for young people who are undertaking a Voluntary Environmental Year in Brandenburg. She held a scholarship for the Klagenfurt Literature Course in 2012, and also received a student scholarship from the Heinrich Böll Foundation. *Nachts ist es leise in Teheran* is Shida Bazyar's debut novel.

### Publications:

*Nachts ist es leise in Teheran*, Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2016

Shida Bazayr, *Nachts ist es leise in Teheran* [At Night All Is Quiet in Tehran], novel  
Cologne: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2016, 288 pages

## Home in exile

Behsad, Nahid and their comrades can't rejoice for long about having driven out the Iranian Shah. Their devoutly religious allies act swiftly and replace the old dictatorship with a new, Ayatollah one. They throw the revolutionaries into the same prisons, torture them in the same way or make them disappear; presumably the "disappearing" is done in the same way too. When Behsad and Nahid's friends are arrested some years later, the couple flee with their children, Laleh and Morad, via Istanbul to Germany. In 2009 Morad reluctantly takes part in a student strike and, when a girlfriend shows an interest in him and his background, googles to find out when the Iranian revolution actually took place. Aha, that's right: 1979, thirty years ago.

The passing of time, albeit devoid of its usual healing properties, and an Iranian nuclear family provide the structural principles of Shida Bazayr's impressive debut novel. Each of the four chapters, which are spaced at intervals of ten years, is narrated by a different family member. In 1979 Behsad is a charismatic revolutionary whose comrades hang on to his every word. But he isn't quite sure whether comrade Nahid, who laughs loudly and loves books, has even noticed him. When the communists are forced to go underground, she becomes his wife. In the next chapter, "1989," Nahid relates her foreignness in German exile, where she is unable to help her daughter with her homework. She is astonished to hear from her left-wing acquaintances, who have experienced an environmental awakening since Chernobyl, that resistance in this country actually entails letting yourself be carried away by the police.

Another ten years later, Nahid dares to return to Tehran to visit friends and relatives, without her husband, but with her daughter Laleh and son Morad. In the chapter "1999," Laleh, torn between fascination and repulsion, tells of life in Iran. She is astounded by the heat, has her eyebrows plucked, and notices how you can hear a pin drop in the noisy capital when the topic turns to disappeared sons. Morad, a student who goes by the nickname Mo, has distanced himself the most from the

family. When his friends become politically active in a student strike in the last chapter, “2009,” he comes across the Iranian Green Movement. The short, hopeful epilogue is narrated by Behsad and Nahid’s third child, Tara, who was born in exile.

Shida Bazyar was also born in exile, in 1988 in Hermeskeil, a town in Rhineland-Palatinate. Her novel is unmistakably inspired by autobiographical events, yet she gives each narrator a unique voice and recounts the in-between nature of exile through situations that feel fresh. The exiles feel foreign in both their new and old homelands, and pass on this feeling of foreignness to their children.

Shida Bazyar has written one of the most successful German debut novels of recent years. *Nachts ist es leise in Teheran* was awarded the Ulla Hahn Author Prize and the Cultural Promotion Prize of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover. The novel was also, quite rightfully, nominated for two further prizes.

*By Jörg Plath, translated by Jamie Lee Searle*

Sample Translation: *Nachts ist es leise in Teheran*  
(pp. 11-27)

1979

BEHSAD

King of kings they called him, and said, We worship him, we worship his wife, Our Great Beauty. They said, We love this country, and then we said, We love this country. We had to celebrate the birth of his newborn child for far longer than we would have for the children of our brothers and sisters, this newborn child, far away in the Palace of Flowers.

Our parents had been told that oil, the Americans, the English, they all belonged together, belonged to the Shah, were against us. Our parents stopped going to work, went out into the streets only to come straight back home again; they were scared of the secret police, they didn't say anything anymore, never said anything against the Shah again. Sent us to school and said, We love this country, and you should love your school.

His proud gaze above the lectern, we learnt what we had to learn, we grew older and we decided that whatever was written in our schoolbooks, we wanted the opposite. We read *Long live the Shah* and we thought, Death to the Shah. We heard, *All work serves the King*, and said, The work should serve the workers. And when it said, *He ensures our prosperity*, we spat on his palaces, on the English, on the Americans, and smuggled in books, copied them, learnt them by heart, passed them from one to another to another. We read and we read and we read, we kept quiet at home and shouted loudly in the streets, we cursed our parents and died for our children. The Shah went because he was ill, the statues fell because the nation no longer believed. The revolution grows older every week and we love this country more than ever. The schoolbooks were changed overnight, we ripped the pages with the Shah out, we took down his photo. May photos of a single individual never hang in our classrooms again, says Peyman. May we soon be hanging up photos of the Ayatollah, back from exile, says his mother. May images of Marx and Engels, Che Guevara and Castro, Mao and Lenin hang in our classrooms, say Sohrab and I in our lunch break, now we even say it in the staffroom, say it louder than we ever could before. And we wait for the moment when we get to decide who will fill the empty walls.

The revolution grows older every week, and it has barely even got going. The Shah has gone and we're preparing for the beginning of a new era, of a new system, of a new freedom.

What remains is the turmoil on the streets, still euphoric, but becoming less and less so each week. What remains are the movement's meetings, the plans, pamphlets, teaching units, guerrilla exercises. What was once a secret is now becoming public, we're more sure of our own victory, are at times more cautious, at times more radical, but always keeping a close eye on those who call themselves revolutionaries and yet are also believers. And yet the real revolution is still to come – the nation overthrowing its institutions. All that has happened is just the beginning. Long live socialism, long live our homeland, our pearl, our Iran!

The revolution is one month old and Dajeh is making stuffed vine leaves. They are all sitting on the floor, my mother, my sisters, my cousins, my aunties. The wives of my older brothers. They have laid out the sofreh on the floor of the sitting room and covered it with bowls full of rice and mince, full of herbs, full of lentils, are seated around it and are folding vine leaves, one after another, putting them in a pan and talking and laughing and talking and laughing. When we were small there were just as many women but different ones. Dajeh would send me and my sisters out of the room, we weren't allowed to hear the women talking, to interrupt the neighbourly gossip. Don't disturb them when they're cooking, we were told, or we'd have to wait longer for the food to be ready, so we went outside and played with marbles or pretended we were gunning down the murderer of the great and most worthy Imam Hussain. That was Sohrab's favourite game. Sohrab, who had no siblings, who always hung around in front of our house in the hope that me and the other children would come and rescue him from his boredom; Sohrab, who will be waiting for me once again in a few hours' time. No longer driven by boredom, but by a sense of restlessness that we've carried with us since the beginning of the revolution, since its outbreak and for the whole of the past month, and that we know to keep hidden. Restlessness means uncertainty and our future leaders cannot show uncertainty. Only those who have known Sohrab since he was little sense it in him.

Dajeh no longer sends me out of the room although I can tell she wishes I would leave. Everything in her gaze, in her posture says I'm not welcome here, that I should only be there to savour, to comment

on the vine leaves the moment they land on the sofreh, hot and cooked and round and glossy, and that until that moment they are none of my business. Dajeh has a particular look just for me. For me, as I sit in the corner and smoke when I should really just go so the women can finally begin the interesting conversations they have been looking forward to for half the day already. Even as a child I realized fairly quickly that it was more interesting with the women. The men always discussed out-of-date politics or played cards, and I wasn't allowed to join in. The women, on the other hand, discussed real people and real problems. Which neighbour had fallen out with her mother-in-law, which daughter had got engaged to which son, in doing so revealing her indecency, which family had drifted into an American lifestyle, which vendor sold the tastiest aubergines.

My nieces and nephews cavort around among the women, knowing that the moment will come when first I, and then they, will be sent out and they'll have to find a new game to play. There isn't much to snack on while the vine leaves are being stuffed, the rice mixture is bland, the vine leaves don't taste of anything without their filling. If there isn't anything to snack on, we're allowed to have our say. My niece is the smallest, she wants the smallest dolmeh. My brother Mehrdad is the fattest, he wants the fattest dolmeh. The women give in, laughing, plant kisses on the children's cheeks. If I were a mother, a sister, an aunty, I would sit there and do the same, would use every opportunity to kiss these little creatures for being so happy, regardless of what happens outside, regardless of what they learn at school, regardless of whether their schoolbooks promote contradictory things from week to week, regardless of the fact that, not long ago, their parents were spending their nights on the rooftops and their days in the streets, only to return home with blood on their clothes. Regardless, the children spend their days laughing, questioning, eating, disrupting, sleeping. They have earned all the kisses in the world, I think, but perhaps the life that awaits them somewhat hesitantly, just around the corner, will be an even greater gift. I could sweep up my brother Mehrdad, the chubby one, could kiss him and say to him, Your new life isn't hesitant, we aren't hesitant, we just need a bit more time, that's all. But Mehrdad is presently pulling his sister's plaits, earning himself a fierce telling off from our mother. Only later will he understand what he has to thank us for, later, in a few years, a few decades, when he is living the free and just life he deserves.

When it is no longer his parents' simple house, but his own actions and knowledge that define his place in society, when his education is free from propaganda, and his thoughts can go uncensored, when he is working to improve our country without paying into the pockets of a dictator, when no one is above or beneath him.

Dajeh's gaze has changed now that I am no longer Behsad, the little snack thief. I was quicker to grab something to eat than my nieces and nephews are now, quicker to disrupt the group, I was always disruptive. Yes, he's disruptive, but what can I do, he's too smart for me to be angry with him, she would say. Dajeh had a particular look just for us children, a severe look that matched the upright posture she adopted. Her head was always a little raised, majestically, her furious lips pressed together at the same time, and in her large warm eyes there was a faint, gentle, almost unrecognizable smile. Now that I've lit a second cigarette, a second cigarette to show I'm not planning to leave just yet, she is looking at me, and her gaze is that of a woman who wants everything to be just right for her guests. But I am that speck of dust she missed when she was cleaning, the smell of food from the day before yesterday that she simply can't mask; I am the rumour that hangs over us and that no one dares to speak out loud. Rumours about the movement aren't there to be discussed during the day with the neighbours, they're not there to be tested for their truthfulness. They're there to be whispered, hand over mouth, in intimate circles, for no one knows what is yet to come.

Behsadjan, go and help your father in the shop, my mother calls to me. The women glance over at me, I laugh, shake my head, tap off my cigarette into the glass ashtray by my feet. And take the little ones with you, my aunty says with a pained expression that causes laughter to break out. Since when do we smoke while the food is being prepared, my oldest aunty says, not to amuse the others, but more to show just what she thinks of me, she who still hasn't stopped wearing her headscarf, despite them being banned by Reza Shah. The women continue to smile quietly into their vine leaves as they carry out their nimble, delicate wrapping movements. How many hands are wrapping in the same way, day after day, across the country? I ask myself. How many are kneading, how many are knotting, how many are digging, how many are shooting, how many are losing their fingernails in the fight for a name? The women's hands are small and nimble and wrinkled. My oldest aunty tucks her hair carefully under her headscarf, directs a pointedly

bored look at me and says to the group, Behsadjan, you still haven't said whether you liked my friend's daughter! I have brought her along twice now, such a polite and friendly girl, and I'm sure she's already hoping for a proposal from you. My aunties and cousins smile quietly into their vine leaves. Khalejan, I say, I have no idea who you mean, the most highly esteemed and honest women I know are sitting around this sofreh, how could I possibly notice another woman? My aunty grumbles to the rest of the group; I smile and say, Perhaps you should invite her again, and Dajeh clicks her tongue, Don't listen to him, she says, he only thinks about his books and his friends, no woman would want him, and the other women laugh. I put my cigarette out, get up, smooth down my army shirt, nod to the group and say, With your permission, and they hiss me out. It's detrimental to the struggle to appeal to romantic feelings, but if they really want to invite women round for me, then why not the woman with the serious eyes and the loud laugh, who I've recently been bumping into more and more often and whose name I am still trying to find out?

I put my shoes on in the courtyard, the old worn-out ones, Dajeh tells me off every time she sees them. What do you want from me, I say then, they're the same ones my pupils wear. And there it is, that new look in her eyes, every time. Though she's still standing up straight, she suddenly looks so much smaller than me, and it's no longer a secret that she really is much smaller than me now. I am twenty-seven years old and the only one of her four grown-up sons to still live at home, to bring in money, to look out for the girls, to give the boys a beating. She has raised her head proudly, like she always did, only now she does it so she's able to look at me fully. As if she wants to commit the way I look to memory, as if she wishes I would just disappear to another room and not out into the city streets, as if she's seeing all the blood, the blood we don't talk about but that she still knows exists. *Khodā negahdar*, she says, the way you would say goodbye, God bless you, but she doesn't say it like the others do, rather as if it is a new realization. She makes an effort not to look at my worn-out shoes and instead to look me in the eye.

Sohrab and I meet in front of the university. Our meeting points have changed, places we had never been to before have become more and more important for us over the last month. I spot him from a distance. Small

thin hands in his trouser pockets, the back of his army shirt covered in sweat, his hair a little longer than his mother would like. He turns around and doesn't smile. We don't show that we're comrades, that we're here together, that we're fighting side by side, that we were scolded by each other's mothers when we were younger, were taken to the barber's by the other's father. The pavement is full of jerrycans. People are queuing to get petrol – they meet up with friends and neighbours while the cans keep their place in the queue, a row of brightly coloured plastic. It's Peyman's turn to pick up the petrol today. He used to come round to our houses too, but somehow he was always slower than Sohrab and I. He took his shoes off more slowly, greeted my mother more slowly, came stumbling into the room more slowly. Peyman never meets up with anyone when he goes to fill up the petrol, he just stands there and picks up snippets of other people's conversations. Nowhere are people as open as they are here, he says afterwards, we can't always sit in our living rooms talking about the people when we don't really know them. I always give him a quick nod then and think, if that's what you need, Peyman, if you want to listen to all the rubbish that does the rounds and is spread by those who were denied an education from the very beginning, then be my guest, go and fill up with petrol and blend in with the crowd and listen to their idle chatter. That Mosaddegh was a member of the Tudeh Party, that the Communists want to share everything, especially their women, that the attack on the Ayatollah Khomeini only failed because his bodyguards all magically turned into him, you go ahead and have a good listen, Peyman. At the same time, there's an element of truth to what he says. We should be aware of what people are saying about the movement. But right now there are more important things to do. I mean, what nonsense! How could we not know the people? We *are* the people. Peyman's parents can't read, my grandparents live out in the countryside with no running water and my pupils get lice no matter how many times I shave their heads. Who are the people, if not us? Peyman, like so many others, wasn't politically active before the revolution. When Sohrab and I found new friends once our schooldays were over he wasn't interested in their ideas, when we read Gorki and Rousseau in secret he wasn't interested in books, when we wrote texts for the flyers shortly before the revolution he wasn't interested in the things they called for. He just smiled and said, We've got to make sure there's enough food to eat, that there's water to drink,

that the children can go to school, and then the people will be able to lead a revolution. We have to make sure there are books to read, I replied, books that tell us how others succeeded before us, and we need to make sure that the weapons don't remain in the hands of the soldiers. Peyman's smile - the smile of someone who has understood something but isn't capable of making it accessible to everyone else. And because he's queuing calmly and conscientiously for the petrol, it's just Sohrab and I who are going to the demonstrations at the University of Tehran today, and when just the two of us go it's different from going as a trio. Because even though everyone has somehow become politically engaged since the revolution began, even Peyman, it was Sohrab and I who became part of the movement first, and will be a part of it until we die. I approach Sohrab, he glances at me, looks away again, at his feet perhaps, the same shoes as mine, his leg has already healed.

We walk quickly during the demonstrations; we were also walking quickly the day before the day that the Shah was deposed and the revolution celebrated its victory. We said we would tell our children about that day, where we were, what we were doing when we found out that the Shah was leaving the country, we left our houses, as we did every day at that time, we went out with a fury that drove us outdoors, that still drives us outdoors; it's no longer a conscious decision, in a revolution the masses do away with individual thought, the masses replace any form of deliberation. Sohrab and I, in front of the house, I don't even know anymore if we had planned to meet, we looked the same as we always did, the streets looked the same as they always did, but a magic, a song, was laid over everything, a bit like at Eid Nowruz, apart from the fact that I've long thought it was a shame that Eid Nowruz simply reminds us of what it was like to be a child, the smell of the hyacinths, the magic of new clothes, the start of spring and the beginning of a new year. A revolution is different - everything in me cried - a revolution doesn't just affect our children. Sohrab and I, walking in step, we're walking faster and faster, always in a hurry, we bump into the others on the streets of our beloved city, men and women we hadn't met before from the neighbourhood, who became our brothers and sisters over the days and weeks in which everything became easier, in which everything was less secretive. Kisses and sweets being shared in the streets, and people hardly noticing the transformation from being together peacefully at

home to suddenly being part of the crowd, part of the churning, chanting crowd, part of the movement, part of the fight, and we threw our fists up towards the sky. As if we were being rewarded for all the times before, it was like a sprint that you're running for the hundredth time and you suddenly break a record, like beating the same man at koshti for the hundredth time, but this time he's not deliberately letting you win because he is your father or your uncle but you've won because you're finally old and strong enough to be a real wrestler. Sohrab's voice and mine punch through the rallying cries into the cold winter sky, our husky voices, no longer the voices of children, voices so used to resounding as one. I raised my arm and my arm was his arm, arms all around us, black heads in front of us, behind us, army shirts and sweat, beards and moustaches, headscarves and dyed hair, cigarette smoke and perfume, all marching in step towards freedom, no more questions, no questions anywhere, all around us the answer that we had been predicting for so long. I saw it coming, a voice in my head cries, I said it after reading the first page of Marx, I said it after reading the first page of Lenin and I'll say it until I die, until I end up burning in hell, or until they realize that there's no other way except the one history has chosen for us, that it's pointless to fight against us, that we're stronger. I held my fist up high, For International Solidarity! But suddenly Sohrab's fist was no longer my fist, suddenly Sohrab's fist was no longer in the air, and only then did I hear the sound of the shot reverberate, the shot that sent him falling to the ground. How small someone seems when they're lying on the floor in the middle of a crowd. He wasn't looking at me, he was looking at his leg, his face racked with pain, yelling, *Khodā!* I never mentioned it to him after, perhaps he'd forgotten it himself, that when the pain was at its worst he had called out to a god we don't believe in. If we learnt one thing from all those days spent on the streets of Tehran, it's that there's always a doctor about. The bullet to Sohrab's leg like a bullet to my heart, and all around me people with slightly frosted beards, Sohrab's leg wouldn't stop bleeding and for a second I thought, perhaps this is the moment when someone close to me dies, when the martyr we hold up in our photos isn't an unknown hero, and instead is just Sohrab. But Sohrab wasn't to be a martyr, Sohrab got up supported by strangers who brought him to a doorway. Comrade, Sohrab cried, go on, there should be more of us in the crowd. He said that even though his helpers could hear him, his helpers with their pictures of Khomeini. I nodded fervently

to the men, nodded to Sohrab, and hurried away. We are brothers, we are comrades, I thought, but the battle won't be won from doorways on side streets, and I went in search of the others, who had cleared out the barracks two days ago and were defending their barricades, and I thought, if I throw a grenade today, if I fling a Molotov today, if I get hold of a weapon today, then I'll be throwing, I'll be shooting, at the legs.

Since the revolution began we've been meeting in houses we had never visited before. In the past we met in living rooms, or sometimes in secret offices, sometimes in buses; we visited the movement in other cities. Since the revolution began it seems as if gates everywhere have opened to let us all in. Evin Prison, open to visitors. The place where we lost our brothers and sisters in the struggle against the monarchy, a place that was never really a place but a parallel world, a parallel hell, whoever made it out never talked about what went on inside, whoever made it out had talked inside, which was almost the scariest thing of all. Evin Prison, a place that swallows humans whole, a place that has been talked about too often to be true. Suddenly the gates were open. Suddenly we could go inside. Suddenly it was no longer a place of torture but an object of the greatest derision. The Shah will never return, every wall, every door cried.

But today we're at the university. Sohrab's leg has healed completely. He strolls proudly and unhurriedly along the campus paths, and I do the same. We never studied here, we did military service instead, because the state wanted us to and because our parents got money for it. We learnt how to use weapons and memorized all we were taught. We used everything the military could give us, we enlightened the other soldiers, we rebelled against our colonel, we celebrated the outcome: The army was no longer on the Shah's side, from now on the army would be neutral, for the army had been transformed from the inside out, and that had been our doing. We used the army to become teachers, to learn everything we wanted to learn, to be granted permission to go out to the villages to teach the children what we wanted to teach them. Every time we went we would stay as long as the SAVAK\* let us. We didn't need the university to achieve all that, but we do need it now, now that the gates are open and we can stroll along, proud and unhurried. I don't know if Sohrab walks like this because I do, whether we're both walking like this

\**Secret police service established during Reza Shah's reign*

because the rest of the movement walks like this, or whether members of other movements walk like we do, in actual fact I think I walked this way long before the others were a part of my life. Even before the car – a white, shiny Paykan – stopped in front of my school and a future comrade invited me to get in, and I wasn't suspicious because I felt, I sensed, that it wasn't the SAVAK who were driving me out to the mountains, who were with me as I looked out over the forests and said to me, think about it, comrade. To be honest, I would've been surprised if I hadn't been asked. The grounds of the university are vast and complex, we walk along by the walls, looking at the posters and pamphlets, the way all these groups suddenly appeared out of nowhere a few weeks ago. Telling us what should become of our country and what their goals are, their ideals, what kind of state should exist, now that everything seems possible. Sohrab and I don't show any reaction as we walk by and observe. The days when everything was underground are behind us but no one has fired the starting pistol, no one has said to the movement, Let yourselves be known, no one has given us their permission.

The writing on the flyers offers such a variety of opinions but the way they are expressed is always the same. I don't need to read them, I think, that's just as much a waste of time as going to fill up the petrol to listen to the latest rumours about us. We don't need to read when we can act; we have to keep fighting, fighting to create a new Cuba, a new Soviet Union. Sohrab calls the shots and I follow, Sohrab picks the groups we listen in on, the Ayatollah's followers, the Tudeh, the Mujahideen. They were our brothers and sisters in the struggle against oppression, against American imperialism. There were many of us, and we were strong. And that hasn't changed. Even though some of them believe in a divine power and a bloody conflict, and others believe in *The Communist Manifesto* and pacifism. The first step involved working together, but the next step involves *us* taking the lead. Sohrab listens to the speakers for a while, shows no emotion, walks on, I follow along behind, we leave the university. Outside we smoke a cigarette. How's your leg doing? I could ask, but we don't ask those kinds of things. What did you think of it back there? he could ask, but we don't ask that sort of thing. Which group did you think was the most convincing? I could ask, but we definitely don't ask that kind of question. We don't ask questions anymore. Since the revolution began it feels as if people were always asking us questions and the revolution was our answer. Does your mother tell you off about

your shoes? I hear myself asking. Sohrab looks at his feet. It's bourgeois to talk about clothing, he says, and he puts his cigarette out on the grey wall of the house. What actually happens after a revolution? I could ask, but we've answered that question too many times and it's not a question that needs to be asked again: class war, the overthrow of institutions, a proletarian dictatorship. But actually Sohrab and I have just spent the last few days walking through prisons and universities, my comrades and I have just held the same meetings over the past few weeks as we did before, and our songs and anthems were actually only played in public for a few days before every programme was suddenly full of the Ayatollah Khomeini. Driving out the religious leader was the Shah's greatest mistake, and now he is back and is being hailed as the leader of the revolution. My children can ask me what happens in a revolution and I'll hand them the answer on a silver plate engraved with a sickle and weapons. What will really happen after the revolution? I haven't heard anyone ask that question out loud yet. Dajeh made dolmeh today, I say. Sohrab nods. My mother loves him like a son. Peyman will have delivered the petrol to her by now. I'm hungry.

*Translated by Eleanor Collins*

## Milena Michiko Flašar



Milena Michiko Flašar was born in 1980 in St. Pölten, Austria and is currently based in Vienna. Her first novel, *I Called Him Necktie*, sold over 100,000 copies, was translated into numerous languages, nominated for the German Book Prize in 2012, and adapted as a play that premiered at the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin. Milena Michiko Flašar is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Elias Canetti Fellowship of the City of Vienna and a residency fellowship at Literarisches Colloquium Berlin.

### Publications:

*Herr Katō spielt Familie*, Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 2018

*Ich nannte ihn Krawatte*, Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 2012; *I Called Him Necktie*, New Vessel Press, 2014

*Okaasan – Meine unbekannte Mutter*, Residenz Verlag, 2010

*[Ich bin]*, Residenz Verlag, 2008

Milena Michiko Flašar, *Herr Katō spielt Familie* [Herr Katō Plays Family], novel  
Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 2018, 176 pages

## How to play life

Born in Lower Austria in 1980, Milena Michiko Flašar grew up speaking German, but her mother is Japanese, her father Austrian. Japanese film, literature and culture have thus had a lasting influence on her, to the extent that her books read as though they are works of Japanese literature that happen to have been written in German. This holds especially true for her fourth novel, *Herr Katō spielt Familie*, which is not only set in a large Japanese city; the subject matter also seems entirely “Japanese”. In it, we are shown us a society in which work, convention, and social position are so important that the individual becomes completely absorbed and lost .

The eponymous Mr. Katō is not spared from this experience. Perceiving his retirement as a kind of social death, he has no further contact with his colleagues, his necktie is superfluous, and he doesn't have a clue what to do all day. He hangs around and wanders through the city, dwelling on his thoughts and memories, while his wife, who is taking a dance course, goes her own unfathomable way. For him, their marriage has been “over” for quite some time, such that when Mr. Katō invents a small heart defect and she then begins to treat him with the care and affection that he had been so sorely missing, her new behavior only makes him all the grumpier. Fiction lays claim to its own truth, or, as the novel at one point states, between fiction and truth there is no wall or fence, but many loopholes.

Mr. Katō meets a mysterious young woman at the cemetery, and perhaps even falls a little in love with her. Mie, as she calls herself, runs an agency that hires people out in roles for all occasions. Mr. Katō lets Mie hire him out, first as a grandfather, then as a husband to a woman who, up until then, has been voiceless in her (real) marriage, to test out a divorce scenario with him; and as a boss, as whom he gives a brilliant speech at a wedding. Thus, their reality is transformed into a kind of theatre that the various customers wholly accept as real life, even though they have paid for it beforehand. Soon Mr. Katō's own reality is

transformed as well, but conversely, as just after Mr. Katō has tried out and grown fond of the role of grandfather, his daughter informs him she is pregnant and he actually becomes a grandfather himself.

Upon Mie's sudden disappearance, however, a slight suspicion creeps into his mind: Could it be that the whole thing had been staged just for him, and that he was the only one who didn't see through it? If one understands his suspicions to be correct, then Milena Michiko Flašar has effectively staged a Japanese version of the Truman Show in this novel. But whether or not she has performed this particular sleight of hand, the book a masterful and ingenious work with plenty of magic tricks and dark humor. In it, she gives an elegant account of a uniquely Japanese attitude towards life, which is that nothing is as it seems when people interact with each other – or, rather, that appearances are everything; but the power of social conventions is a universal issue that can certainly be understood in societies other than that of Japan. It is also a sad book, full of loneliness and melancholy, as, caught up in their roles and expectations, its characters reach out towards reality in vain. Perhaps love could offer a way out of this, perhaps the only way – but then Mie and her agency would have to be more than just an invention.

*By Jörg Magenau, translated by Zaia Alexander*

Sample Translation: *Herr Katō spielt Familie*  
(pp. 7-14 & pp. 22-29)

When they told him everything was fine – no irregularities, nothing to worry about – tiptop shape for his age – then apart from relief, he had secretly felt disappointed. He had hoped they would find something, and even if he had been barely conscious of it, this hope had given him a sense of importance. They would find something, and then they would take appropriate measures. A diet for instance. Sports. Three tablets per day. Measures he was looking forward to, and which, despite the thrill of anticipation, he would initially resist; then, slowly but surely, he would acquiesce, and finally would eagerly obey. But like this? What's he supposed to do now? They hand him the test results and he takes them. He could have let them know how difficult it is now for him to get up in the morning, but they have already escorted him from the exam room back to the waiting room, where he'd like to stay a while longer. It's nice here. They've made an effort. On the walls are photographs of babies sitting inside flowerheads and he would like – he'd very much like – to remain there sitting in front of them. He wonders how they have ended up there, the babies with their butterfly wings, and how they are attached to their small white backs? He could have mentioned this as well, the fact that he keeps on asking and asking and asking himself questions, without being able to make any sense of anything; and he wonders if it might not be symptomatic of an illness, that the questions refuse to leave him in peace, especially in the morning when he opens his eyes and the meaninglessness weighs so heavily on his chest. Is that normal? A symptom of aging? After all, it will take time until he gets used to having time, which he now has plenty of. He takes his jacket off the coat rack; it is dark grey, almost black. In the store where he bought it, he was told the color had a timeless elegance, that it was both classic and modern, and that the cut was of a simplicity that was especially fashionable, while also being traditional and – basically nondescript. Of course, he had kept that last part to himself, just as he had the thought that it was likely the last jacket he would buy, the last shirt, the last pair of shoes. These things, he thought, would suffice. He didn't need anything more anymore. And while it filled him with a sense of satisfaction that he could be this modest in his requirements, at the

same time it also filled him with melancholy, that he'd reached the point that he had always thought was so far away, that someday when he wouldn't want anything anymore. Now the time has come. Ludicrous. He realizes that now; and that he ought to consider himself lucky, that the main thing is he's healthy. Don't look at the clock, don't sigh, don't lift the corners of your mouth. It almost hurts, the smile he puts on as he leaves the practice: a slight twitch of his face, that's how he imagines the phantom pain.

It was his wife who had urged him to get himself examined from head to toe. She said prevention was better than the cure, but she didn't really direct it at him, rather she mumbled it past him into the void, adding: "At least that would keep you busy." At first, he turned a deaf ear to the insult. It was not until a little later that, already half asleep, he came to feel unjustly thrown together with all the others who had nothing better to do than go to the doctor once a month and talk to like-minded people about their little aches and pains, so that they could escape, at least temporarily, from the loneliness that lay at the bottom of them. He could just see them, merrily gossiping about their illnesses which, if you looked closely, were nothing at all, and they knew it; but they clung to them anyway, to their stabbing and burning and pinching. "Pathetic!" With this word, that he had hurled from himself, so to speak, he had tried to distance himself from them, but as often as he repeated it, the intensity dwindled along with it: "Pathetic! Pathetic! Pathetic!" so that it seemed to encompass him in the end. What offended him most wasn't only that he now belonged with them; rather, it was the loneliness that had caused it. That he was lying in his bed, next to the wall; that after hearing a movement on the other side of it, he knew precisely, owing to a creak, that his wife was still awake. That he knew nothing more about her than that, and that he didn't know what to call it. Just felt it. The estrangement that stood between them and was his only confidant was all they shared.

And now? He acts as if he has somewhere to go. He takes giant steps as he leaves, as if there is somebody waiting for him at his destination, and that it is of the utmost urgency that he should get there on time. Simply strolling around aimlessly, just for the sake of walking - he tries it - he can't. The problem is his hands; he doesn't know what to do

with them. If he puts them in his jacket pockets he feels like a student skipping school, and if he lets them swing freely, he feels like a runaway monkey longing for his cage. Going for a walk? What's the point? His wife says its to keep the bones in good shape. She sends him out the front door every day, and he is supposed to stroll around somewhere. What she really means is not to get in her way – he knows her that much. And that is why he has made a habit of it, and after all, it isn't such an awful pastime; except that he doesn't stroll, he walks briskly; this difference is important to him. If only he had a dog! Then, yes! A white haired Pomeranian to pull him along, an image that makes him forget to breathe for a moment because it pleases him so much, the thought of a taut leash. But okay, he gets it; his wife had made it clear to him. First of all: a dog costs money. Second: you get emotionally attached to it. Childish. Third: no more vacations. Fourth: Dirt. And five: at some point it's going to die, and then what? Thereupon, he contradicted her, because compared to money, love, and death, it was the least important, and because there at least, at least there, he wanted to be right – they never took vacations anyway. Whereupon she had laughed, and he also, and then suddenly she was quiet, and he also, and then they had both fallen into an awkward silence for the rest of the day. After that, he has not mentioned the white Pomeranian again ever, and has made every effort to think about it as little as possible. But sometimes he might just happen to think about it, for example at a meal, and his wife then seems to notice it, just from the way he asks for a little more salt. This is nice, actually: they are a well-functioning team. He thinks about something. She notices it. He notices that she notices. And without either of them wasting a single word over it, it's as if they are shouting at each other across the table.

But nobody is waiting for him, and it doesn't matter whether or not he gets back late.

After walking quickly around two or three city blocks, the sweat streams down his forehead and he finds it embarrassing that he's overexerted himself in this way, regardless of the fact he didn't have to. He could go and sit somewhere, lean back, let the clouds drift over him, but even that – he's tried it – he can't. His gaze gets caught on the power lines every time, how they slice the sky to pieces; and it's an image that makes him sad, the birds flying across the sliced-up sky.

So he'd rather endure the embarrassment, standing there and wiping the sweat away with the handkerchief that he keeps with him for such occasions. He, who no longer needs to sweat, is sweating more now than in all the years that he went to work without sweating at all, and he intends to look into this matter as soon as he gets home. Under the keywords "sweat" and "retirement" he will certainly find something – a hormonal disturbance which, based on the blood work results that he's carrying with him, is not easily identifiable, and he wonders whether he should go to the doctor's office tomorrow and get reexamined, or rather go straight to a larger hospital, find a specialist? No, first he will take the matter into his own hands and research it himself. There are things you need to deal with yourself, and things that take care of themselves. Sex, among other things, belongs in that category. Sweating, he thinks back on it. The last time – did it even happen? – is a faint memory of skin, or, just above, of gauzy cloth. He was drunk. Too bad. The girl had kicked him out right after. He remembers having stood on a brightly lit corner, and that he had simultaneously vomited and peed in his pants. That was just before his retirement. A couple of colleagues had challenged him. All people he has nothing more to do with; from one day to the next they have laid low. Or is *he* the one laying low, while they are flying high? From precisely the first day after he had left the office with a wheeled suitcase full of stuff, the photos and souvenirs with which he had decorated his desk, including a woodpecker that knocks against a log when you wind it up, not for a single second had he thought of getting in touch with any of them. He sees the faces clearly before him, as well as the corresponding extension numbers that he still knows by heart, but to pick up the phone, call, and say "Hello"? They'd likely think he was a ghost, and he was afraid of the silence after he'd say his name. "Um, *who* please?" The same old "It's me." It would get stuck in his throat.

Whatever happened to Itō, the former colleague who, already retired, had visited them at the office every first of the month, and if the first fell on a Saturday or a Sunday then on the second or third, to tell them about his motorcycle, and how he zoomed through the country on it? Into the sunset, the city at his back, where everybody was working themselves to death, and what for, anyway? His hypothesis: because they'd assumed that's the way it is, which, of course, was not true. In truth – and how tempting this sounded, coming out of his mouth – they

were “free.” In the beginning they had believed him, and one or another had even started dreaming: “When I retire, I’ll do it just like Itō!” And then slowly but surely, they had started to doubt him: how come he never appeared on his motorcycle? It was nowhere to be seen in the photos he proudly passed around, instead all they saw was a mountain or a river half covered by his thumb. He had camped here and there, no tent, no campfire. Here and there, he almost landed in a ditch. A road without any curves, dead straight. Itō’s stories, each more adventurous than the next, had turned him into a laughing stock. As soon as he left, shuffling out the door, slightly bent, they sneered: “Him, riding a motorcycle! At most he rides on a train, and with a bellyache at that!” And whether he had felt it or not was of no consequence, for they had barely missed him when, by the fourth of the month, he still hadn’t showed up. The sweet peaches he had brought them from one of his “trips,” as he had liked to say, were lying shriveled in a bowl on the table in the communal kitchen. Somebody joked: “I’m sure he bought them at the shop around the corner.” And they shrank by the day, brown and juiceless, until at some point the cleaning lady, grimacing with revulsion, threw them into the trash, where, among the leftovers from lunch, they looked like kicked-in heads.

He often thinks about Itō now. Especially when, just as now, he turns the corner and the wind suddenly blows into his face and tousles his hair, and he can’t breathe for a moment – panting, flailing, wheezing – bracing his torso against an invisible opponent. And every time he makes up his mind all over again to stop by his place; only not today, not that, he has accomplished enough for today; but soon, very soon, maybe tomorrow or the day after. He even wrote it down on his list. Right at the top: *Phone the children. Ask them how they are doing.* Then: *Repair the radio. Organize the records,* although he still hasn’t decided whether they should be sorted alphabetically or according to musical genre. *Repot the bonsai.* But he doesn’t know how to do that, therefore: *Read up on how to do it.* Further below: *A gift.* He didn’t add *for my wife*, but instead *for no reason*, because he had heard on the TV show which he actually didn’t watch that the best way of giving a gift is to surprise someone, just like that, without putting oneself in the limelight as the giver, which unfortunately is the case for most people, approximately ninety-five percent. Further: *Unpack the wheeled suitcase,* and with a smiley, *don’t*

*stumble over it anymore* ☺. *Visit Itō spontaneously!!!* He had added three exclamation points later, as you could tell by the different colored ink. *Get rid of the moss on the steps to the house. Have roof checked. Consider any modifications like for ex. an add-on.* He had immediately crossed that out. Just like the white Pomeranian, although he hadn't even written that one down in the first place, and what you don't write down, you can't cross out, which was a consolation since he wouldn't have to cross it out; and even more than that, it was a private triumph. "Ha, you think I'll just give him up, but you are wrong about that, ha! You're fucking wrong, my dear!" He catches himself saying things like that, but always very quietly to himself, and it is always a horrifying moment, as if he has only now realized to whom he is talking; and as if it were not he who was speaking, but somebody else he didn't know, somebody who felt like taking the entire house, including the stairs and the roof, including the add-on which hasn't been built yet, and stomping it to the ground.

(...)

So, head back home, no handkerchief, take care of the thing with the pants. But he takes a different path than the one he had taken before because he doesn't want to run into the homeless guy again, at least not as sweaty as he is now. He also doesn't want to pass that side street again, where the woman with the cane had smiled at him, nor past the corner where he always had to think about Itō. Instead he walks briskly along by the cemetery, which is right next to the tracks, and since there is a good hour left until lunch, he decides to try strolling again. After all, practice makes perfect. So, then. He goes through the cemetery gate, decelerates. After all, there are dead people here. The thought helps him concentrate on breathing. Up to the grave over there – a resolution. He intends to slowly – very slowly – walk over there. Relax your jaw. That's good. Turn your head until it cracks. The hands? Doesn't matter what or where! There is nobody around here he needs to feel embarrassed in front of. They should feel free to swing at his sides! The dead are enjoying it. "Yes, exactly! You guessed right! I am an ape!" He imagines them poking each other in the sides, their rickety laughter spurs him on. "You want more? Well, how about this?" He drums his chest with his fists, tentatively at first, then seriously, "U-oh!" and "U-ooh!" and "U-oooh!," during which the blood test result glides to the ground – and then suddenly he goes wild and tramples all over it, until it completely is covered in dust. A train rattles by. For a moment he thinks somebody

might recognize him, but by then his mouth has already opened: “You train passengers!” He screams. “Someday you’re all going to end up here!” And then he tramples – no, now he is dancing, unaware he has fallen into a dance step. Nimbly pitter-pattering in ever dwindling circles, he is no longer an ape – no, rather a dying swan, like in the ballet his wife had forced on him before their marriage, so he would know, as she had put it, “who I am.” He had sat in the dark, in that coughing auditorium, and hadn’t understood what she had meant. He had thought it was quite nice; the ballerina could have been a little prettier. The big mole on her leg that he had had to keep looking at, couldn’t they have removed it? Conceal it, at least? But for his wife’s sake, her profile, which he hasn’t forgotten, and the tear on her cheek when the curtain fell, he had done his best afterwards to show that he was touched as well. The first lie – the very first one. And she believed him, and was touched in turn by his being touched, and when he brought her home, she allowed him a somewhat more passionate kiss, and a somewhat more passionate hug, which is why the performance was memorable at all, because that night, for the first time, she had permitted him to reach under her blouse. “You’re serious about me, aren’t you?” He said: “Yes, truly!” and pressed her against the door. From then on, everything was decided. A little later they got married. When asked what they liked about each other, a question people enjoy asking young couples, he had answered: “Her pensiveness.” She: “That he bothers me while I’m thinking.” And they had enjoyed the amazement that followed and felt special, until people stopped asking them. Very soon they did stop, and just as soon their answers lost their freshness, if not sooner.

A last pitter-patter. He’s about to die. He throws his arms upward. With his fingertips, he touches the clouds which have momentarily slid before the sun, and when it bursts forth it burns like fire shooting through them into his chest. Burning, he sinks to the ground on one knee; extending the other leg, he lets his arms sink slowly before him, a last flap of his wings, and then is consumed by fire. Don’t fall now whatever you do, he thinks, and begins to totter slightly. Hold the tension. Don’t let go. Hang on as long as possible. He notices that there is plenty of room between the graves, enough space to stay out of each other’s way. He totters again. Somebody claps. He quickly gets up, blinded by the sun. He slaps the dust off his knees. Who could it be? He blinks. A woman. Not his? In

his confusion, he thinks it possible. From a distance, he thinks he sees a similarity, the way she steps out from the shadow of a tree, emerges from it so to speak, into the blazing light, as if to say: "I caught you!" – "I'm sorry," he wants to shout, but he only manages to clear his throat. The young woman – she's still clapping – stands erect before him laughing, on top of it all. "You're good at that," she laughs, "but a little more oomph! And besides that? You could perform at the circus." – "Thank you very much!," he thanks her, in fact. Now he's got to get rid of her, as elegantly as possible, turn the situation to his favor, bring it to a speedy end. He takes a bow: "The dance is over." – "No, what a pity!" She'd have liked to see more. "Next time." – "What, you do that often?" The sound of her voice, suddenly serious, and the way she sizes him up from head to toe, her tongue between her lips as if it will help her figure him out, oddly makes him feel at ease. Her gaze expresses ridicule, yes, but also a little bit of acknowledgment, and he attempts to weather it, looking straight into her eyes as openly as she into his, which is difficult because in her pumps she towers over him, and also she's wearing a tight top with the inscription, "*I'm up here!*" with an arrow pointing upwards. "Are you still there? Hello?" She waves at him with both her hands, as though she weren't directly in front of him but standing far away at the other end of the cemetery, and he hurriedly stands to attention again, mumbling something that he hopes will distract her from him, that will move her to leave him alone. Does he do that often? She repeats the question. He answers with a dry "No," and because he sees she's disappointed, he returns the question: "And you? Do you do that often? Hiding behind a tree and watching strangers?" – "Well yes, you might say it's part of my job." – "Uh-huh." He suspects that there is no easy escape from this trap. Just don't ask her anything now, he thinks. Just let it go. Show no interest. I'm not buying anything. But the young woman – she's probably in her mid-twenties, or judging by her self-confidence, maybe a little older – seems to enjoy pushing him into a corner. "Don't worry," she says, winking at him, a gesture he last saw in a Hollywood film from the sixties: "It's nothing indecent. I'm an actress, so to speak, and observing people is, so to speak, the hobby that turned into my profession. You learn a lot doing it. About yourself, too. In fact, mostly about yourself. When I saw you dancing, for example, I learned that I am inside my body way too little. You know what I mean?" He tilts his head to the side. "That's it exactly! That you act as if you are trying to understand me by

tilting your head to the side, yet you're not at all in your head, instead you're already thinking "No," your movement is nothing but an empty phrase. Do you follow me?" - "Yes," - he nods, so as not to make the same mistake again.

"Whoever's in here - look, here," she taps her finger on the tip of her nose, "is the only one who's really good, and by that I mean authentic. In my profession that's crucial. Otherwise you're busted." After pausing a moment, she adds: "That also goes for life, by the way." True? Does he see it that way too? "Please, excuse me." He attempts to be inside his body, stands erect so that he doesn't feel so small in front of her. "What you are saying is interesting, but ..." - "... I already know, you have to get going now. Just one more thing," and as she speaks, she takes a step closer, then another one, and another one, as she gets closer, begins to whisper: "The truth is, you don't have to go now. And at the bottom of your heart, here," she grabs his chest quick as a flash, "you want to know what I do, you just don't dare to want to know. Yet," she caresses his left arm with the back of her hand, "that would be something for you! Yeah, I actually think you would be p-e-r-f-e-c-t-l-y suited for it." And with that, she pulls her hand away again, takes three steps backward laughing and asks him, standing there looking stupid: "Well, how was it? Not so bad, right? My favorite role. The crazy lady. Unfortunately, she's not in great demand." Her gaze, cautiously scrutinizing him, reminds him of his wife when she wants to make something very clear to him, which he absolutely pretends not to understand, even though in reality he has understood it the entire time. The patience it showed: When'd he give it up? His defiance. The long wait for somebody who you know is going to come walking around the corner at some point.

"All right! I want to know. Please: What exactly do you do?" The young woman seems surprised. She bites her lower lip. Then, suddenly completely ingenuous and visibly relieved, she takes a deep breath and says: "I play family." A sentence, he knows it, which will remain in his memory. He knows the moment she utters it that it is one of those sentences that keep him up at night; when he tosses and turns endlessly, and he wants to say to his wife through the wall: "Come over here. Just leave it be. Enough of the inanities that won't get us anywhere." A sentence as simple as the realization that he never has gotten used to their sleeping in separate rooms. He longs for her to come to him

and steal his blanket like she used to, and now he wonders why they had argued about it; after all, there are more important things – for example, pockets come to mind. “Family?” he hears himself say, “But you can’t play that.” “Oh, yes you can. If you only knew. I get requests all the time. Like last night – some guy, you can tell on the phone that he wears ties with funny patterns. Anyway, he’s getting married and he needs a sister to tell stories about his childhood at the wedding. What a great big brother he was, always ready to bail me out. Once, just imagine, he saved me from putting on make-up with a tube of super glue. I was five years old at the time and I thought it was lipstick. And if he hadn’t been there back then, I couldn’t give a speech about him today. You see? I’m already his little sister. A little stupid, but sweet, also because when I’m nervous I start to lisp, a peculiarity he asked for. The guests are supposed to enjoy themselves.” – “And his parents? I mean, they wouldn’t go along with it?” – “Both dead. Some sort of accident.” She shrugs her shoulders. The second movie gesture, he thinks. “And his wife?” “She knows, and thinks it’s nice; a sister-in-law she can show around. Of course, she can’t look better than she does. But anyway, to prevent possible complications, I live abroad, somewhere in Hawaii, I think it was Kalahi or Kaluhu or something like that, I have to get that straight beforehand, in case anybody asks. We’re going to meet tomorrow, my brother and I, then we’ll discuss the final details. Things like names, places, family relations. I – the sister’s name, by the way, is Mie.” – “A beautiful name.” – “Yes, you think so? Personally, I’d have liked something more flowery, but well, that’s how it is, the customer pays, the customer receives. So, I’m Mie – nice to meet you.” She makes a curtsy. “But before that, I’ll be four other people. And after that, oh, the list is long! I’m a niece, a cousin and an aunt, sometimes on three consecutive days. Very rarely, a wife; occasionally the new one. Most often a friend. Just today I was a granddaughter. Yes, that’s right; before I came here, I was with a woman who booked me as her granddaughter. She said she simply wanted to look at the smooth skin of a young person again, and so we sat across from each other and drank tea without talking much. It was actually pleasant, but afterwards, I don’t know why, I felt like I was at a cemetery.” They laugh, he louder than she: “Your outfit is not exactly suitable for a granny.” – “Well, if she wants young, then this is really young, and she liked it, especially the pumps! Yeah, you’re making fun of it, but she even tried them on, and it was touching how tightly she held

on to her cane in them.” – “To her cane, you say?” He is thinking about the exotic lady with the cane from earlier. “Yes,” she blinks and quickly wipes her face. “She could barely lift her feet. But she still wanted so badly, at least once in her life, to stand in a pair of high heels. Just for the view, she said. From up there she could see Mount Fuji.”

*Translated by Zaia Alexander*

# Lucy Fricke



Lucy Fricke was born in Hamburg in 1974 and now lives in Berlin. Before studying at the Deutsche Literaturinstitut in Leipzig, she worked as assistant editor, and as a script/continuity supervisor on numerous German films and television programs. Among her other affiliations, she is a member of the PEN Center Germany. She has received several awards for her work, and recently held a fellowship at the German Academy in Rome and a residency at Ledig House, New York. Since 2010 Lucy Fricke has been organizing HAM.LIT, the first youth festival for literature and music in Hamburg.

## Publications:

*Töchter*, Rowohlt Verlag, 2018

*Takeshis Haut*, Rowohlt Verlag, 2014

*Ich habe Freunde mitgebracht*, Rowohlt Verlag, 2010

*Durst ist schlimmer als Heimweh*, Piper Verlag, 2007

Lucy Fricke, *Töchter* [Daughters], novel  
Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 2018, 240 pages

## Road trip to the fathers

An original and up-to-date variation on the literary road movie, a genre that German authors rarely dare to attempt, Lucy Fricke's novel *Töchter* delighted both critics and the public upon its first publication in spring 2018. The story begins in Rome, but before the bizarre adventure through Switzerland and Italy to Greece begins, there is a short excursion into the offbeat Berlin milieu that readers may already know from the author's previous works. The journey ends up being a passionate exercise in soul-searching for the two heroines, who have been best friends since they were teenagers. Betty and Martha, both just over forty, both come from "broken homes" and were raised without fathers; the fact that neither of them has ever really gained a foothold in life appears to be the logical consequence of each of their chaotic upbringings.

Betty, the first-person narrator, is living the single life after numerous failed relationships. She pops antidepressants and travels ceaselessly while renting out her apartment in Kreuzberg to partying tourists. Martha, on the other hand, has been trying for months to get pregnant by artificial insemination in order to give her marriage a new perspective. Her father Kurt, from whom she has not heard in decades, contacts her with an unexpected request: he is dying of terminal cancer and wants her to drive him to Switzerland so that he can commit assisted suicide. Martha, who has not driven since she was traumatized by a fatal car accident, asks Betty for help. Betty immediately returns from Rome, where she had been intending to look for the grave of her foster father's, an Italian musician named Ernesto, who was the only man among her mother's many lovers that she had loved and even idolized.

A tragicomic constellation, then, and that's not all: during the trip it turns out that the moribund Kurt has only used the assisted suicide gambit as a ruse to shack up with an ex-lover on Lago Maggiore. Slightly annoyed, the two friends travel on to Italy, find Ernesto's grave in a most unromantic mountain village, and discover that his alleged death had only been a trick to escape the mafia. Alone and furious, Betty follows the trail of her childhood idol to an island in the Aegean, where the novel

almost becomes a thriller before the bizarre and moving reconciliation of all involved takes place in Greece, during Easter.

*Töchter* is at once a fast-paced travelogue, an amusing and touching family epic, a story about friendship and the longing for salvation, a meditation on illness and death, as well as a reckoning with a generation of parents who were overwhelmed by their own freedom. Lucy Fricke's authorial strength lies in her mercilessly keen powers of observation and a tone that oscillates between cool self-directed irony and emotional warmth, between lightness and seriousness, all of which she holds in perfect balance.

*By Kristina Maidt-Zinke, translated by Zaia Alexander*

Sample Translation: *Töchter*  
(pp. 5-23)

## THE EYE OF GOD

I'd been stuck there for three days. By night rats scurried through the narrow streets, by day tourists piled up at the Trevi Fountain. There were guards with machine guns in front of the museums; in the darkness of the underground stations I could only smell filth, and for the Vatican I was supposed to register online.

I had spent the night at Babylon, a one-star hotel, where all those who did the drudge work were Koreans. Maybe it was because I'd never wanted to go to Rome, but I fell in love immediately. I'd always felt a slight admiration for places and people that proudly displayed themselves wasting away, who were so sure of their beauty they couldn't give two shits about the world. The city was a desolate diva, pure scum; it kept only the inside of the churches clean, while outside the pigeons covered every world heritage site in shit.

All I'd wanted to do was change trains here. From the airport to the end of the subway network, on to Anagnina, and then further on by bus to this little town in the mountains, where there was somebody I had wanted to visit for ten years. He knew nothing about it; he wouldn't have cared, he was long since dead. But you have to say goodbye to the dead also, and especially to the dead, and unfortunately I was stuck on this man, and not in a good way; pretty much idolized him. At some point something like that can become a problem, just as everything at some point turns into a problem, especially love, especially men.

So I hit the road. After ten years, one might consider finally hitting the road, I'd thought, and now I was stuck here. I had been standing at the bus station the day I arrived and had seen people boarding this vehicle they called a Pullman, that always seemed to come too late, that had been on the road for decades; a vehicle in which the very last row of seats was missing, and the windshield wipers were as well. But I'd once been carted through a jungle for days in the bed of a pick-up, had climbed – in the truest sense of the word – aboard drafty propeller planes, and sat on the back of a motorcycle whose driver had assured me he was on the most awesome LSD trip of his life, while turning around

to stare deeply into my eyes as we drove. Fear was not one of my more obvious characteristics. So why, then, didn't I manage to leave the city? Was I lazy, stoic or just a coward when it came to accepting realities and truths that didn't, by any means, suit me, such as the death of this man?

So I asked myself, as I was staring upwards into the dome of the Pantheon, through the center of the hole into the gray sky over Rome, into the eye of God. A few feet away, a pink balloon had gotten snagged, they'd been handing them out in front of every Victoria's Secret store in the city the last few days. So there was this fucking lingerie ad hanging in the dome of the Pantheon, dancing a little closer towards the exit with every draft, towards freedom. Hundreds of degenerates did nothing other than watch this spectacle: all eyes on the pink balloon, they turned on the video function of their telephones, and when it finally floated out into the Roman sky, the people began clapping and cheering as if the Messiah had appeared.

While mine was vibrating in my pocket, the loudspeakers announced "strictly quiet, please" in four languages. I answered anyway and it was Martha on the other end.

"Where are you?" she asked.

I looked up to the dome as if I had to re-convince myself before I said: "I'm in the Pantheon."

"You're on the phone in a church?"

"This isn't a church, it's the hugest tourist hell on Earth. You can't take a single step. Anyway, I can't get out of here."

"Please try," I heard Martha say quietly. "I'd like a moment alone with you, somewhere quiet."

"I'm in Rome, there's no such thing as being alone here," I said, trying to find a path through the masses.

"What are you doing in Rome?"

"Nothing, I just thought it was something you needed to see in your life."

"You're getting weirder and weirder."

"At least with age, my crises are getting more cultivated," I replied. "Actually, we're having a really great time together right now, me and my crisis."

I walked past the biggest door I've ever seen in my entire life. It was at least twenty feet high, and made of bronze on top of that. If heaven had doors like that, I'd never make it inside.

“Are you still there, Martha?”

What followed was a yes so dangerously frail like I'd never heard from her before; there was something so ominous in that yes that I didn't hesitate for a second. I didn't ask any questions, we knew each other long enough to know when the other was on the verge of a breakdown. Martha would start crying on the phone, and crying on the phone was even worse than crying alone in the backseat of a taxi. You can't hold anybody on the phone, a voice is barely more than a little finger to hold on to. I would go back immediately.

When I hung up the phone, a pigeon shat on my head. I knew by then that it did not mean luck.

## SETTLED EVERYTHING

I'd taken the very first flight. The night was so short that it basically hadn't existed at all and now, on a Monday morning at around half past nine, I was dragging my suitcase across the Warschauer Brücke, where the party had just finished. The guests were now lying in bed, lying in vomit or still dancing at some club. I passed empty bottles of champagne, smashed beer bottles, and a forgotten amplifier. Shards cracked under the wheels of my suitcase. Around the next corner, directly next to the construction site, was my apartment. The staircase smelled like a wine cellar full of broken bottles. The only silence here was deafness. The house had conformed to its surroundings of revelry: if you wanted to survive the noise, you needed a house in the provinces or a job abroad. If you wanted to continue paying the rent, it was advisable to sublet your place at every opportunity to people from gloomier countries, who then behaved as they never would dare to at home. We lived all mixed up together, slept on sofas, lived upstairs or downstairs at the neighbors while in our own apartments the party tourists peed on the floor.

I financed myself by getting out of town. If I needed money, I went away to areas that were cheaper than these, and there were plenty of them. “*Kill your inner investor,*” I had read the other day on the wall of an apartment building in Kreuzberg, and then given it the finger for all to see. I've been living in this neighborhood so for so long I had the feeling I deserved a piece of the cake; that I myself basically was the cake. And so like most people, I sold my home for eighty euros per night.

And on Thursdays we stood with our coffees-to-go at the demo to save the veggie shop from getting pushed out, if not the whole neighborhood, together with people from out of town who had linen bags hung over their shoulders with silkscreened protest slogans on them. And then there were artists from Charlottenburg and Prenzlauer Berg who came as a show of solidarity, a few texts, a few songs protesting the rising rents and the sell-outs, and yet the demand on Airbnb grew by another twenty percent. The tourists bought the bags and carried them through New York, Barcelona, and Lower Bavaria. Nobody bought veggies.

The face in the mirror looked exactly as old as it was, just over forty. Meanwhile, the wrinkles stayed white in the sun, as if I'd bashed my face from the inside. I'd only been beautiful in the past. Age came overnight, and kept coming. Years ago I had grown in my dreams, and soon I would shrink in my sleep. The day would come when I awoke smaller, until I disappeared. Sometimes I wondered how I was supposed to survive until then, and every day there was more hair on my face.

The boy from Spain had vomited next to my toilet bowl. The volume on the stereo system was set to maximum. A jar of peanut butter, a piece of Swiss cheese and a bottle of beer in the refrigerator, and three butts stamped out on the wooden floorboards. *José, 24, place of residence Madrid.* In the bedroom, the picture now hung upside down. José was probably a real joker. I was glad I'd never met him.

It took me two hours to clean the apartment; to free it, to scrape the Spanish youth out of the cracks. Afterwards, I opened José's beer, sat at the window and looked out to the Spree. It was the middle of April, so the river was still a river and not a party mile. In six weeks at the latest the techno-steamers would sail here, with their lasers pulsating all over the walls of my workspace. I'd look out at hysterical bachelor parties, half-naked men and even-more-naked women who believed this was the best time of their lives, and they were probably right about that, a fact for which I felt increasing pity.

When I got to the bar, Martha wasn't there yet. Nobody was there at all, except for a bartender who was polishing the glasses and who I'd never seen before. Martha had suggested the place, her former hangout;

whether out of helplessness or sentimentality, I didn't know. It seemed like a lifetime ago that we had spent our nights here together with Henning, who she had kept trying to leave, until she finally married him last year. Together with Jon, too, Henning's oldest friend, who we hadn't been able to save, who had chosen this bar counter as his best and last pal and left his money and his will there, until everything was all used up. I didn't often think about Jon anymore, we hardly ever spoke about him; all three of us had gotten a lot quieter after his death. Whether the silence was due to age, or pain, if there was any difference between the two, I couldn't say. We just carried on, and carrying on was less difficult than I had thought.

I glanced at the door - Martha had entered like a shadow. Listlessly, she caressed my shoulder before sitting down with a moan. She hardly had looked at me, just the bottles on the wall.

Martha only went out when it was absolutely necessary, and for her the necessity always came from inside, and never from outside. She had had no need for the outside for a long time now. For over a year she had kept getting pregnant, and then in the fourth week, the sixth week, the eighth week after the miscarriages we went drinking before everything started all over again. That she hardly had changed during these hormonal tortures seemed kind of creepy to me.

Martha was the strongest horse I knew. If we went drinking during her unfertilized weeks, she ordered the most expensive liquor, usually straight up. If you're gonna do it, do it in style, she said, and usually got sloshed after three glasses.

This was a change that continued to confuse me. In the beginning I had felt downright abandoned by Martha. At this age, in this stage of life that I could find no entry to, there were fewer and fewer friends who could remain sitting upright next to me at the bar counter. My nights were as long as other people's days. We lived out of synch, I barely heard of anybody being hot on my trail, and the few people I met frightened me. They were lost men, hanging on to my ankles by their teeth.

Martha had ordered an eighteen-year-old double whisky and then turned to me looking exhausted. We hadn't seen or spoken to each other in over a month. That wasn't unusual, I was always on the move, she always at home, since a long time now. We didn't have to assure each other we

were thinking about one another. We were there and we would stay. Like old men at their favorite bar by the factory gate, we sat together and kept silent. I ordered myself a beer, a big one. It promised to be a long quiet evening.

“What did you want in Rome?” she finally asked.

“Just because,” I lied. “Every few years I think it might help to be religious. Then for a whole day I sit in every church that comes my way and imagine how much better it would be if only I could believe in God. I sit there, silence all around me; darkness, this damp coldness, crosses and frescoes on the walls; this devoted suffering, as though everything had a purpose. Sometimes I linger there for hours, because I know the second I walk out, it will all fall apart again.”

“You went to Rome to sit in a church?”

“Nowhere else can you find as many churches, each one better than the next, and they’ve got a Caravaggio hanging in every corner. When you throw a euro into the slot the lights go on, and you can even see the Caravaggio. Besides, I finally understand the nuns. The Italians make Jesus look completely different. Not like our suffering, emaciated Jesus; no, he’s hanging there on the cross with serious six-pack abs. Practically lascivious. Anybody would join a convent for a man like that.”

I babbled on to give her time. Besides, I didn’t want to talk about the real reason for my trip; something about it embarrassed me, and anyway this wasn’t supposed to be about me, not tonight. She ordered another whisky and still said nothing.

“What’s the matter, Martha?”

“First tell me why you really wanted to go to Rome, other than to worship Jesus.”

“I didn’t want anything in Rome,” I admitted, “I wanted – actually I wanted to go to Bellegra, an hour further south.”

She looked at me inquisitively.

“I wanted to visit my father’s grave.”

“Your father’s dead?”

“Not that one. The other one.”

“You have so many fathers, I never know which one you’re talking about.”

Martha was exaggerating. Basically, there were only three. The good

one, aka The Trombonist, the bad one, aka The Pig, and the biological one named Jochen. My mother had disappeared from his life so early with me that he had degenerated into a nice uncle, towards whom I tried to be as polite as possible. Every once in a while, I met him for dinner.

I had never felt anything other than pity for him, not even when my mother got married to The Pig who, in just two years, had wreaked such devastation upon my prepubescent soul that for years to come I had had to struggle with all sorts of psychic and sexual problems.

The only ray of hope in the quagmire of men that my mother had dragged me through was The Trombonist. An Italian gambling addict, a macho of staggering attractiveness, who had carried me on his shoulders through the good half of my childhood, and who I had loved like crazy.

So I said, "The Trombonist."

"And he's buried in Bellegra?"

"That's where he came from."

"Have you ever been there with him?"

"No, he never wanted to go back there."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Yeah, me too."

"No, I mean because I've stopped you from going."

"I've stopped myself from going for ten years, and for three days in Rome. That's the good thing about a grave – it waits."

"Yes," Martha said and gazed into her glass. "Yes. That's why I called you. That's sort of why. My father," she took a big gulp, "is a fucking asshole."

"I know," I said, "you mentioned that before."

Martha's father had distinguished himself by the fact that he had never been around for the first thirty years of her life, not even when she needed him. Even less so when she needed him. She had told me cruel stories from her childhood: that father was a slap in the face. Her mother had left him early on, whereupon he turned into a drunk for a couple of years before remarrying, and during the course of that marriage, he almost completely forgot about Martha.

Our childhood stories resembled each other in this one regard, even though we had dealt with it very differently. After countless failed attempts to escape it all, Martha now wanted at all costs to start a family, to do everything better, to do it at all; to be happy, to go for it. My childhood, and more importantly my adolescence, had driven away

any yearning for family so thoroughly, from the very marrow of my bones, that the mere prospect of it triggered an anxiety attack.

In recent years, since her father had grown old and become a widower, he had called Martha once a week. Twice a week, since he was diagnosed with cancer. She probably had spent a thousand hours on the phone with him by now, and five of them even had been worth it. There had been debates, truths, and excuses, even declarations of love – on his part, of course.

“Actually, he wasn’t such a bad guy,” Martha had once said to me. He hadn’t had it easy either. Once you knew where someone came from, which fights they had won, and even more so, which ones they had lost, then the channel was open and love came rushing through.

But the problem remained: What were they supposed to do with each other, now that everything had been said? In the end, you sat there with the circumstances set in order, drank beer together and babbled about politics. With a little luck, you enjoyed being silent together.

“Until his dying day, he’ll only think about himself,” said Martha. “The trouble is, he needs my help for that. Yesterday morning he calls and says something about ‘everything taken care of,’ and such. ‘I’ve got everything all in the bag now,’ he says, ‘I got the green light.’ Then he starts in with ‘sweetie,’ and ‘one last request.’ And ‘you can’t refuse that to your sick father.’ I mean, sure, who can refuse a last request? At least that’s the end of it.”

I didn’t understand what she was trying to tell me.

“He wants to die, Betty. And I’m supposed to drive him to it.”

“What do you mean, drive?”

“To Switzerland. The appointment is next week.”

“Why an appointment? So suddenly?”

“It’s not sudden. Apparently he sent them his files months ago, MRI images, diagnoses, everything. He joined this club and he has paid a ton of money, that’s why he was always bumming money from me. I was wondering the whole time why he couldn’t get by on the money anymore, figured he just drank too much. Instead he’s used my money to finance his exit, as if that’s not totally perverse? First he gets his daughter to pay for his death, and then she’s supposed to drive him there on top of it.”

While almost all of our friends were slowly enjoying the pleasures of house-inheritance, even if it was only half, and getting all worked up

discussing wills and inheritance taxes over dinner, Martha, who had been helping her father to get out of various dire straits, as he called them, for years, had sat there smiling mildly. Nobody escapes their parents' poverty, the stench sticks. Even her bearing betrayed everything, despite every attempt to suppress it; so upright, stiff and proud, lacking all casualness.

"And he didn't say anything about it to you? He didn't tell you for that whole time?" I asked.

"He didn't want to trouble me. That's what they say after they knock you over with a ton of bricks, 'Sweetie, I didn't mean to trouble you.'"

Martha took a cigarette out of my pack, which she only did when she was drunk or desperate - usually both together - and smoked, her way. She stared into the void, inhaled deeply, contemplated. Martha set deadlines for herself, and also for thinking. When she stamped out the cigarette, it meant she had made a decision. For particularly difficult decisions, she bought herself a cigar. I put my pack next to her glass.

"No, thanks," she said. "That should do it." She knitted her brows; I had a feeling what that meant for me. A request was hiding within that wrinkle, something she found difficult to say, that she didn't know how to put forward. Finally, I took the burnt filter from her hand.

"I can't do it," she said. "I can't even drive anymore. I can't handle it, with my father in the passenger seat, the last hours together."

Since the accident, Martha had never dared to drive again. The accident that all four of us had survived, or so we had thought at first, and that had changed everything. That had torn up Jon's face and ended up costing him his life. Martha wouldn't let anybody talk her out of taking the blame, which was not hers to bear, and at some point she had asked me and Henning to stop trying.

"But Henning can drive," I said.

"Henning despises my father, you know that. He'd have to clench his teeth on the steering wheel so he wouldn't scream at him the entire time."

"Got it," I said.

"Besides, I can't put my father through that."

"Through what?"

"Henning."

"You're married, happily married. You want to have a child together. Besides, Henning is the best man ever." At least, that's what I thought by

now, and for the simple reason that he loved Martha. In a way, he had made a decision for her that was beyond any doubt, and ultimately love was just that – a decision.

“My father thinks he’s a loser.”

“I don’t know, Martha, none of that’s true. Maybe it would be good if the three of you did it together.”

“No!” Martha had gotten loud. “You have to do it.”

I’d seen Martha’s father only once, other than a clammy handshake, and that was over ten years ago. I didn’t remember anything.

“We’re driving him there, he drains the cup, then we drive back home.”

“Without him?”

“They’ll take care of everything, he said, sending his remains back and stuff.”

Even if it was as Martha said, I had no idea how it was supposed to work. How do you drive somebody to die? What are you supposed to talk about on the way? What do you eat? Was he even still able to eat? Were we allowed to listen to music? Think that a beautiful landscape was beautiful? What the hell was one allowed to want in those last days and hours?

*Translated by Zaia Alexander*

## Sandra Hoffmann



Born in 1967, Sandra Hoffmann initially worked in child psychiatry before studying literature, medieval studies and Italian in Tübingen. Since 2003 she has been a freelance writer, worked at the Literaturhaus München, taught creative writing, and written for radio. She won the Thaddäus Troll Prize for her novel *Was ihm fehlen wird, wenn er tot ist*. Her latest, *Paula*, was awarded the 2018 Hans Fallada Prize by the city of Neumünster. Sandra Hoffmann lives in Munich.

### Publications:

*Paula*, Verlag Hanser Berlin, 2017

*Was ihm fehlen wird, wenn er tot ist*, Verlag Hanser Berlin, 2012

*Liebesgut*, C.H. Beck Verlag, 2008

*Den Himmel zu Füßen*, C.H. Beck Verlag, 2004

*Schwimmen gegen Blond. Eine Erzählung in zweiundfünfzig Tagen*, C.H. Beck Verlag, 2002

Sandra Hoffmann, *Paula*, novel  
Berlin: Verlag Hanser Berlin, 2017, 160 pages

## Suspicious about Paula

Sandra Hoffmann's narrative style is incredibly dense and clear - no words are wasted. Her novels may be characterized by their concentration and their slenderness. Hoffman's 2012 novel *Was ihm fehlen wird, wenn er tot ist* [Things he'll miss when he's dead] tells the story of a Polish forced laborer in Germany during World War Two, and his great love for a woman named Paula, and the subject of Sandra Hoffmann's latest novel is Paula herself. We can assume Paula is her own grandmother; she's certainly the grandmother of her female narrator.

The narrator's grandfather is unknown to her, and us, however, because Paula had steadfastly refused to say who he was in her lifetime. Her grandmother long since dead, the narrator tries to solve the mystery by picking up old scents, rummaging through Paula's possessions as well as her own unreliable memories. This is the mystery of her origins, and it won't let her rest. Much of the mystery must now remain unsolved, and so she fills the gaps in her grandmother's story with her imagination, picturing how it might have been. The story is ultimately a universal one, which might be understood throughout the world.

Grandmother Paula has left several boxes behind her that contain photographs as well as cards announcing births and deaths. For the narrator, these are tiny anchors that she drops into her own memories, although she is well aware that memories are inventions too, even while they led her to draw unexpected conclusions: "Fiction is always genuine but not always truthful," as she observes at one point in the novel. The narrator comes to confront the question of her ancestry with a multitude of suspicions about Paula. She reconstructs her grandmother's life, conjuring it up in all of its possibilities, sometimes gentle, sometimes fairly extreme. The process results in a complex portrait of a woman who had settled into a convenient silence. The characters of the grandmother, daughter and granddaughter allow Hoffmann to explore and describe a range of female figures, as well as the provincial West Germany of the 1970s in which the narrator grew up. Hoffman's superb feeling for the atmosphere and fashion sense of those years brings this period

back to life, allowing for insight into the country and its emotional condition at the time. *Paula* is thus several things at once: it is a book of remembrance, a coming of age novel, a family saga, and above all a powerful sequencing of memories, in the process of which the narrator may be witnessed tackling a personal history as if it were a difficult arithmetical problem.

*By Shirin Sojitrawalla, translated by Steph Morris*

Sample Translation: *Paula*  
(pp. 7-23)

Silence is not the same as stillness. Nowhere, not even when you reach deep into your pocket to find the coin you've been turning between your fingers, or the shopping list on a scrap of paper, do you come to rest. From somewhere or another, from somewhere within you, you hear even the dark sounds of muteness turning against you. You hear them as a murmuring, a muttering, a continual rumbling and chuntering somewhere distant yet close, too, as if all the unspoken words were looking for ways out of the mute bodies into the room and towards you. They rob you of peace and they rob you of sleep. The silence of when someone living close to you remains silent, stubbornly swallowing every word, leaving nothing for you or for anyone else. The silence at the table, when the knives and forks clatter, when someone – just one – says, “Could I have the salt please?” and someone passes it. And above all, the silence which feels like it has engulfed you and all your fine summers and less-than-fine winters, as if joy will never return. And you hear the sound of legs in tights under the table, and the dog brushing the table leg, of a throat being cleared and a noisy gulp of water as a larynx tenses. The noise of bodies spreads through the room till there's nothing but compression, pressure against the walls. This silence, which eventually infiltrates every crack in the house, which radiates and emanates, which makes a house into a fortress, knows only finality as release. You can stay and die, or go. In its stillness, even the sound of a tractor on the road outside would be a nice sound, a sign of hope: someone is mowing the meadow for the first time this year. There's some daylight left. The world is still there. There is brightness and speech.

On 10 November 1997, my grandmother Paula died at the age of eighty-two. She never talked about herself, not even at the end. She took her whole life with her to her grave, all of her secrets as well as her pain.

When I run through the park in the morning, circle the lake and hear the swans and ducks cackling – when I watch the Mandarin ducks lit up like bright lights among the other ducks, I often think of my grandmother, who has been dead for eighteen years, and I think of my parents. I would love to show them the park, the dogs I meet on my

runs, the pretty places along the side canals of the Eisbach river, the surface sometimes brushed by a willow branch. The men lying on the ground at the feet of their personal trainers, doing painful exercises or hitting small punch bags hanging from the trees, again and again and again, to make them strong for whatever reason. I would like to show them the yogis saluting the sun, the Japanese lady who makes strange arm movements as she walks. I see the surfers on the Eisbach wave, and sometimes I stop for them. I watch the strangers and I'm happy they exist, that I can make my way among them, knowing, without needing to talk to them, that I like them being there. I would love to say to my family, "Look, this is where I live now. This is how it turned out, and it turned out well." But my grandmother is dead, and my parents have no interest in anyone's life that is not directly connected to theirs. Still, I talk to them as I run. I show them this world in my thoughts, and every time it leaves me feeling sad.

The silence has been passed down the generations.

According to the Chinese calendar, 1915 was the year of the wood rabbit. Franz Josef Strauß was born in that year; Ingrid Bergman and Edith Piaf, Frank Sinatra and Pinochet. The First World War was in its second year. In The Hague, the Women's Peace Congress met for the first time. Albert Einstein talked in public about his theory of relativity, and Virginia Woolf's first novel came out. On All Souls Day, in a tiny village in the midst of Catholic Upper Swabia, Paula was born. She was the first child. She grew up with two sisters, and a brother who died at the front in the Second World War. She told the story of his death again and again, more often than I wished to hear it.

"He died in the war."

That was her story. It consisted of five words.

When she died, it was the end of the life of a woman whose history I barely knew. She had lived through a world war and raised two children. She had benefited from the German economic miracle, yet she had no education, and so it was as if she was a migrant worker in her own country. Her profession was "cleaning lady." Sometimes I hear her voice. I listen to her the way I used to listen to her sister Marie. She is dead too. I listen to her the way I used to listen to my mother, who has long since ceased to talk about her mother's silence. I hear all their voices. They don't form a whole. They come and go. They like to hide.

When I get too close to them they flee, or at least so it seems. I think that with their help it might be possible to tell Paula's story. I want to get to the bottom of it.

She was my grandmother.

I am an unreliable narrator. I have laid on the analyst's couch; I reflected on my life. I attempted to retrace the paths I'd taken, to understand the storms which once raged inside me to prevent them in the future. I got good at it. You can rely on me. Yes, you can rest assured that everything I've forgotten or never knew, but really want to know, I will make up. How else can I unpack the things I don't know alongside everything I know only too well? How can one describe things which keep returning in dreams, describe nightmares or fears or the dark suspicion of a threat which overshadows one's life today? How can one describe something which steals in as an image by day, and slips away again? And why I haven't been back to the cemetery for seven years, or only once, in secret?

Some things I don't need to invent: how my grandmother's skin felt, like a violet petal, almost translucent, as if untouched. No furrows meandering through it, just fine lines. I can still recall her smell today; warm and not sour, mild and not coarse. Her scent was better than she herself was, softer and more gentle. She never smelled old. If I try, I can feel her warm grandmotherly body and the wall with the woodchip wallpaper. I can see myself lying there, between the two, after the nightmares. Grandmother's rosary moves through her hands and she lights consecrated candles. Sometimes my face brushes hers.

"I love you and I hate you" is not something children say in the same sentence; children say one or the other. "I love you" is not a phrase from my childhood, but nor is "I hate you." Nothing was clear then except for the fear of dying, and that at some point I didn't even want to shake my grandmother's hand.

In a drawer in her chest of drawers, under the songbooks – some gilt-edged, some not, and all manner of booklets and pictures of saints, there was a colourful cardboard confectionary box, a robust wicker box and an

album, probably homemade, that was blue with red and white appliqué on the cover. They were each full of photographs. In the photographs are people of various ages; a lot of them men, many of them soldiers. Men on motorbikes, a man by a car, men on pitches. Men in front of ships, tanks, woods and fields. Men's names on crosses. Men in posh cars with men. Only the occasional man in a car with a woman. Some of the men wear outfits I recognize from documentaries on forced labour. Many wear military uniforms. There are men in elegant suits, men with ties and men with bow ties, men with monocles, men in leisurely attire. There are dark-skinned men in uniform too, probably Moroccan men, undoubtedly in fact. Men with cheerful faces. Priests in black-and-white robes, servers. My father, beaming and handsome at his wedding to my attractive mother. No real family photos, except for families I don't recognize at all. Women: Paula's sisters, Marie and Theresia. The three sisters with a child. Theresia's daughter and my mother. My grandmother Paula in a small lake, using a rubber ring. Paula next to a handsome man in a meadow, in long white gloves and a flowery dress. Paula with the same man on a large motorbike. Paula at the grave of a man who was once her bridegroom. Paula and five other women at a kitchen table, happy. Women in group photos, arranged like a gymnastics troupe. Paula with her mother. Paula with an unknown woman and her unknown children. And so on. Paula at her daughter's wedding, the way she looks at the sight of the beautiful, fairy-tale bride: grim, joyless. The grimmest thing: her eyes in her tight face. Paula with a handbag in a meadow of flowers, a dark look, daisies in her hand. Her grey bun tightly wound, her bandaged leg under her dress. Alongside her, my mother in a pencil skirt, short, backcombed hair and sunglasses. Very Audrey Hepburn as ever, the way she strode along a country footpath as if it were the Champs Élysées. I recognize myself, a girl with a boy's haircut in a little green dress, refusing to play to the camera. My grandmother Paula on the leather sofa with Marie, my mother and me. My mother looks like she's stepped out of a trendy new fashion magazine: Marlene trousers, a blouse which would be retro today, that hairstyle, the painted fingernails. She is twenty-six, and so pretty I can't take my eyes off her. And then I see it: my mother doesn't feel right in this place. I see that dark, melancholy look. I see that she isn't really there, where she's sitting. And I see Paula and Marie looking after me, the child with her doll and, for once, her badly

cut hair. They're looking after things, as ever. I'm six years old in this photo. I know that because when I was seven and eight my hair was longer, and with that shoulder-length, shiny Mireille Mathieu hair, which I was only briefly allowed, and in real clogs and a denim pinafore on the Isola Bella at Lago Maggiore, I was for once allowed to be a girl like my mother. Then my hair was cut again.

My grandmother was born in a village called Aßmannshardt which effectively ceased to exist after the Thirty Years' War. Its inhabitants were killed off through murder, manslaughter, hunger, plague and rape, and then the village was burnt to the ground. The new settlers came from the Montafon valley in Voralberg, Austria; from the other side of Lake Constance, in other words, for whatever reason. This was the village my grandmother grew up in. Her mother was a strict, cold woman, my mother says, but in the photographs I've seen of her she looks soft and thus young, even though she must already have been quite old. Her father, my mother's grandfather, lived to be very old, and was the most lovely person you could imagine, my mother says. "Good cop, bad cop!" That's what I say. "He was a surrogate father." That's what she says. And what would she have done without him! Life without him would have been unimaginable.

There's no system to the boxes of photos, just picture on picture, hundreds; some small, some larger, some which look as if they've been turned and twisted again and again in someone's hands; others which are yellowed maybe, but otherwise untouched. There are several prints of some shots, as if they were intended to be given to people. And of course the photos start to live lives of their own in my imagination, as if they're turning to me over Paula's head. "You can tell our stories," they say, "however you want. We're here."

They're seductive. They act as if they'll willingly reveal all and yet they resist. Wordless. Paper.

And if I'd asked my grandmother? Can I still do that?

She was no storyteller. She was someone who prayed, someone who stayed absorbed in herself. She would not have answered. She would have said no by not saying yes.

She explained the rosary to me, with its five decades. Her rosary beads lay still on the table the whole time. She explained when you must say the different mysteries, when to pray joyfully and when sorrowfully. I kept forgetting it all.

She herself said it countless times each day, and undoubtedly at night too. As she said it, her hand moved in her apron pocket like a little animal which doesn't want to show its face at work. And yet her rosary was nothing more than a string of pearls with a cross attached. Nothing more and nothing less. Not true: the number of pearls was prescribed, along with how and when you prayed. And when you believed in it, it helped, she said. He watches you from up above. He's good to you when you're nice. He forgives everything if you just turn to him fully, she said. Life and God's love depended on how often and how well you prayed. I understood that as a child. If you pray wrong you're in danger. If you pray too little you can easily die. If you don't pray away your sins you're done for. So I prayed too, I prayed that I would wake up again the next day if it was a nice day; that I would still wake up again the next day if it was a bad day because I had secretly thought something bad about someone and secretly sworn. It was perfectly possible to pray without rosary beads. At night in bed, legs bent, torso stretched over them, forehead leaning against the wall. In yoga this is called child's pose. Twenty Our Fathers and twenty Hail Marys were needed for a confession, with contemplation throughout both, and in between the plea that God would forgive you. I prayed that I would wake up again if I fell asleep and prayed too little as a result, and I prayed that my mother and my father and my brother didn't die. I didn't know if God was watching me or listening to me, I just didn't want my grandmother to die. But also I wished she should leave me alone with the prayers she claimed to be saying for me; really she was saying the prayers to ward off her fear. Later I did want her to die. The point at which I stopped wishing that was when she died.

What constitutes a person? And how does one fill up, flesh out into a living character, someone who has done everything in their power not to reveal anything of themselves? The voice, the way a character's voice finds itself. The way you have to try to get as close as possible to it in your thoughts, so that you can feel it, hear it; that inner whisper, that

silent conversation, the thoughts during prayer. Feeling your way, the impossibility of getting close if you don't enter the memory yourself. The impossibility of inventing the truth. The duty to precision. The duty to fiction, to fill the gaps between one image and another, one fragment and another. Coping with the constant ruptures of memory, the break-offs in your relationship to her, as if she were still managing to say: "You cannot know about me, you cannot tell my story." How far do bans extend? How far does silence? Her refusal extends even to memory: her ban on your inventing her, Paula, even after her death. The command to stay silent. And then, how the unsaid can turn into words.

If we were sitting round a table, we would tell stories. We would talk all night, happy and sad. Maybe a life would then be fleshed out.

But Paula's unspoken life has remained unspoken. Like a virus, the silence crept through our family life, from person to person and from generation to generation.

And you thought - not just as a child, later too, you thought that maybe it was only animals who could adapt to these silenced zones. Maybe it was that their bodies could beat a track through them, maybe it was their fur which protected them. Maybe it was their other languages, the mewling and grunting, the howling and meowing; the way the birds sound in spring, in summer, the way that they die down in winter. You suspect there are animals who transform silence into silent speech, and some who have no effect whatsoever on human beings.

I am seven years old. I am walking on the wall, trying not to tread on the moss. If you tread on the moss you die and fall into the grave. It's not a game. From my great grandparents' grave I walk along the wall over to the water tank, pump once and drink from the tap. Then I pump three more times. Water runs into the trough. It makes a nice sound. Three is a good number. It's secure. I walk back along the wall. I can only do that because there's no one else in the cemetery. The moss on the wall is black and brown and yellow and red. And green, but only in a few places.

"Why is that?" I ask my grandmother. She doesn't give me an answer.

"It's to do with the age of the moss," my uncle Gustl says.

After I've counted to twenty exactly nine times and once to three, I reach the grave. From the wall I can look down at the grave.

My mother says there's another child in the grave. He doesn't have a name. He's buried beneath my great grandmother and my great grandfather.

"Why doesn't he have a name?"

"He had a hole in its back," my mother says, "spina bifida." Her aunt Marie, grandmother's sister, told her that. Although it might have been the other sister, Theresia.

I wonder how I should picture that. Is it a back that isn't closed up, so that you can see everything inside the person? Like in the illustrations in the textbooks at school?

"Why did it have a hole?" I ask.

"Anything's possible," my mother says. If you have spina bifida it means you also have brain damage. So the boy who would have been my mother's brother had brain damage.

They were as stubborn as each other, Paula and her sister Marie. If they didn't want to speak, they didn't speak. They wore the same bright aprons as if it was twenty years earlier and they were still living in the village where everything was grubby. It wasn't grubby in our house. Aunty Marie and her husband fulfilled all kinds of wishes for us. You didn't have to do anything and you didn't have to stop doing anything. My brother and I were the godchildren, and for them you did everything if you didn't have children of your own. From Aunty Marie and her husband Gustl I learned the names of animals, and how you stroked a deer. With them I visited all the animal pens and adventure playgrounds you could reach in a Goggomobil within a day if you wanted to be back before dark. From them I learned the names of flowers and stones and how the Swabian Jura was first created. I learned to distinguish between clay, limestone and marl.

I sit on the back seat of the Goggo and my Aunty Marie sits next to me, and when my uncle speaks to us my aunty says, "Keep your eyes on the road!" Because she doesn't seem to have noticed that he isn't looking at us at all, or only in the rear view mirror, winking at me through his thick glasses. I sit in the back and the landscape outside looks exactly the way the good Lord wanted it to, as my Grandma Paula would say, who isn't here luckily. Aunty Marie smells of 4711 and I don't think it stinks, but I'd rather she didn't snuggle up to me. I don't want to smell of it myself. I'm wearing my green dress with the long sleeves and the white trimming.

I've grown right out of the dress, because you grow a lot before you start school. The dress is too warm for a day like this with no clouds in the Goggomobil. I look outside and although everything looks so nice, I'm not pleased. And not happy. I'm worried something could happen because I've had a bad thought and I mustn't under any circumstances think it again or say it again, and if I don't pray right now, it'll happen. I can say Our Fathers and Hail Marys in my sleep, just as well as my bedtime prayer. I try not to mumble as I pray. I stare out of the window and think the prayer silently inside me, because no one needs to know it, because it's my secret. If I can say two Our Fathers without interruption, nothing will happen. God is responsible for my sins. The mother of God is responsible for my hope. Sometimes there's no real difference, because I hope for things which are not nice.

But now I hear my Aunty Marie saying, "Look at that huge tree," and I nod, not letting myself lose the thread.

"Look at those black cows," my aunty says. By now I've already said one Our Father.

"Have you ever seen such black cows?," my aunty says, and I can't answer because I won't make it otherwise. I nod and she says, "Really?"

And my uncle in the front says, "Of course. Last time we drove past."

I get further through the prayer. That's good. Meanwhile I gaze out of the Goggomobil window, concentrating on the cows, which don't recede very fast because a little Goggo doesn't go very fast.

"I'd forgotten that," my aunty says, true. "Of course," she says, "you've seen them before."

I nod.

She strokes my hair, which my mother has cut short again because it's more practical. But it would make me look like a boy if I wasn't wearing that dress. My mother says I should have been a boy anyway, and anyway that's how the women look in Paris. My mother worships the Parisians, and looks a bit like one herself. I take a deep breath once I've made it to the end.

I say, "I've seen the cows before."

"They have black fur like you," Aunty Marie says.

"I don't have fur, I have hair," I say.

I don't yet know that I'm already sporting the Gabriele Krone-Schmalz haircut my mother would later rave about.

In front my uncle laughs and my aunt strokes my hair again. I can't relax.

"Why doesn't grandma have a grandpa?" I ask. I've been giving it a lot of thought. If you put it that way it's not such a bad thought. It's better for me not to think that there aren't any men who like grandma. I've put a lot of thought into it.

Now my Auntie Marie strokes my hair much faster, so fast it's as if she wants to iron it flat. And then she says, "There was no need for that."

And my uncle says, "You've got us, haven't you?"

"But mum doesn't have a dad," I say. I can still remember it as if it were today. And I remember the answer too.

"She does," my uncle says. "He was a gypsy!"

A gap is an empty space, and it may remain an empty space, never filled, not with the best will in the world. Because no one says: "I know the missing variables, I have the fingerprint to explain the mystery, the PIN, the PUK." Because there is no formula and no password, because someone whose cells you carry inside you remains a nobody. Nameless, stateless, without a photo, a passport, no entry in the register of births your mother signed. A person, a man, who certainly wasn't pale-skinned and blond, but not black-skinned either. But that's it. And precisely for that reason, or because you can tell you are carrying something inside you which you don't know, you gaze, you stare at it, this nothing, wishing it would reveal its secret if you keep turning it, keep circling it, like hyenas circle around their prey. First you ask questions, then you imagine things. A lot is possible, not everything.

*Translated by Steph Morris*

# Felicitas Hoppe



Born in 1960, Felicitas Hoppe lives and works in Berlin. Following her 1996 debut *Picknick der Friseure*, she has published numerous novels, short stories, children's and young adult books. She is also the German translator of Dr Seuss's classic *Green Eggs and Ham*. Her work has won her many awards, including the Aspekte-Literaturpreis awarded by the German public television channel ZDF; the 2012 Georg Büchner Prize, one of the most renowned literary awards in the German-speaking world; and, most recently, the Erich Kästner Prize for Literature. Felicitas Hoppe has held guest professorships in several German cities as well as at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, and Georgetown University, Washington D.C.

## Selected publications:

*Prawda. Eine amerikanische Reise.* S. Fischer Verlag, 2018

*Hoppe*, S. Fischer Verlag, 2012

*Grünes Ei mit Speck: Das Allerbeste von Dr. Seuss* (German translation of *Green Eggs and Ham* and other titles in a single volume), S. Fischer Verlag, 2011

*Der beste Platz der Welt* (short stories), Dörlemann Verlag, 2009

*Johanna*, S. Fischer Verlag, 2006

*Paradiese, Übersee.* Rowohlt Verlag, 2003

*Picknick der Friseure* (short stories), Rowohlt Verlag, 1996; a selection of the stories was published in English translation in 2014 by Readux Books as *Picnic of the Virtues*

Felicitas Hoppe, *Pravda*. Eine amerikanische Reise [Pravda. An American Trip], novel  
Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2018, 320 pages

## Hunting down the truth

In September 1935, the Russian writers and satirists Ilya Ilf and Yevgeni Petrov left Moscow for a trip to America. Their tour was far from a junket: Ilf and Petrov were traveling on an assignment for the newspaper *Pravda*, which of course translates as “truth,” and the truth expected of them in Stalin-era Russia was a report on a country utterly contaminated by capitalism. Yet the two wayward writers had other plans than meeting the Soviet state’s expectations. The reports they wrote in the USA overflow with distance, humor, and with also approval for certain aspects of the American way of life.

The Büchner Award-winning author Felicitas Hoppe decided to follow in their footsteps, setting out in September 2015, exactly eighty years after Ilf and Petrov. The resulting book is called neither novel nor travelogue, bearing only the ironic title *Pravda*. If there’s one thing Felicitas Hoppe is not interested in, it’s writing a realistic depiction of her travels; Hoppe is a player who takes the game seriously. The traveling companions we encounter in her book make up a curious crew. We have the first-person narrator, who gives herself the significant name of “Frau Eckermann,” after Goethe’s confidant; an artist from Kiev who goes by the name “Foma,” for whatever reason; the photographer Jerry from Halle, a young German woman with a stipend for the US; plus, the ideal companion, the literary scholar MsAnnAdams, who smokes a lot, needs little sleep. And off they go.

At first, the Russians’ itinerary serves as the book’s geographical orientation, with Hoppe unbridling her imagination at each place along the road. And those stops are ideal for depicting American everyday life: the Ford factory, Michael Jackson’s Neverland villa, Sing-Sing jail. Culture, too, rears its head, as Tom Sawyer plays a significant role and the Simpsons get a cameo appearance. Then Hoppe leaves the planned route to discover a fascinating place in the middle of nowhere, in Death Valley Junction, a town surrounded by desert. In 1964 the New York singer Marta Becket got stuck there with a flat tire, discovered the

dilapidated Corkhill Hall, and converted the theater into her Amargosa Opera House – another character Hoppe would have had to invent if she hadn't existed.

Directly after the trip, Felicitas Hoppe published a journal of sorts on a dedicated website. It includes specific recollections of certain places alongside quotes from her own books, lyrics by Reinhard Mey, excerpts from Kafka stories, and links to newspaper articles reflecting the political ins and outs of 2015. Here, Hoppe grants the present day the space and validity she refuses it in her book; literature awakens other potentials than politics. Yet still, the most astounding thing about Hoppe's *Pravda* is the atmospheric impression it gives of a country where Donald Trump is on the campaign trail. Hoppe turns life into literature – and literature encompasses all of life.

*By Christoph Schröder, translated by Katy Derbyshire*

Sample Translation: *Prawda. Eine amerikanische Reise*  
(p. 9 & pp. 96-110)

3668 Ilfpetrov is a minor planet discovered by the Soviet astronomer Lyudmila Georgievna Karachkina and named after the writing duo Ilya Ilf and Yevgeni Petrov, who, in the thirties of the slowly descending last century, were sent by the *Prawda* newspaper to spend four months travelling the United States of America, under the guidance of Mr and Ms Trone alias Adams, whose story cannot be told here, over sixty days and across tens of thousands of miles, from East to West and from Southwest to East. After that the two men boarded a ship, went back home and wrote a book. This journey is dedicated to them.

(...)

A day later, I was wrapped in a blue plastic bag at the foot of the thundering Niagara Falls, still hearing Walter's voice in my mind's ear. It floated audibly above the waters, effortlessly asserting itself not only against the roar and the cries of women and children, but even against the voice of my travel companion MsAnnAdams, who stood unbendingly at the ship's rail and stoically recited the ballad of John Maynard, that staunch helmsman who held out until he reached the shores: "He saved our lives, our noble king. He died for us; his praise we sing."

For even the greatest helmsman of all time can't compete with Walter's voice, no more than the thousands of tons of water plunging, according to Ilf and Petrov, from the height of a skyscraper into the depths. Tamed nature, pure backdrop, fantastical scenery on a stage where the same play is acted out over and over two times an hour, with tourists as its protagonists, under the guiding hand of a director who does not wish to be named in the program. We're all in the same boat after all, under the strict rule of free will, all pulling together, from the captain down to the ticket collector.

Masters and servants in one, we simply play along, playing ourselves at our own expense, each immersed in pure self-observation with our cameras until the short trip is over at last and we are released back into real life, to a living landscape of souvenir stalls and trash, the margins littered with blue plastic coats no one needs any more. I was the only

one who folded my blue bag with care and then stuffed it in my backpack for later, perhaps at the Pacific, while the others were busy stocking up on souvenirs, postcards and key chains hung with tiny seals made of fake fur.

But the show must go on for it's only two thirty, so everything's still possible and doable before we head to a motel to freshen up in a pool so small one has to kill one's time in it standing up, until we're allowed to part ways one last time: to the restaurants of Niagara or a brief visit to the House of Frankenstein? Above its entrance hangs resplendent a gigantic mask, and from its mouth issues the voice of the all-American monster: "The fear starts here!"

It really does reside here, the petty tourist's dirt-cheap fear, directly at the entrance to the ghost train, on the thin line of dawn and dusk between Canada and the United States, guarded by two fire-breathing dragons, a vampire with double-whitened fangs and a double Frankenstein, a long queue already forming behind him. The general public's desire for utter horror.

Don't get me wrong: I love general public queues; I queue too, and have done for years. I too am one of those who go along for the ride, through a world full of overweight and underweight phenomena, besotted with the ridiculous blue raincoats and the cheap umbrellas of their servants and bearers. I'm besotted with the mirrored sunglasses, with the scent of my bargain-price sun cream and the childlike laughter with which we board the pleasure ships that take us to the shores of democratically administered miracles of nature for a dearly paid for half hour.

I adore the cheerful cries when the cold water comes down from above, wrapping our bodies in a mist that blurs us for a moment, mercifully. I really do love it, this human community for sale, its carefree intrusiveness on our brief joint journey through a world occupied all day long with making our true nature disappear. Not to mention our ghost, still speaking in Walter's voice at the entrance to Frankenstein's house, a voice intrusively carrying off the queue of waiting tourists into a warm world of artificial horror behind which the real world may disappear at last, because we still dream of rescue and homecoming, of a rise that will never take place because we'll never understand that no one is interested in human destinies, not in the great land of visions and dreams.

Three cheers for all the world's tourists, always tortoise and hare rolled into one. As soon as I want to go from A to B to cast my gaze, as

undisturbed as possible, upon the good, true and beautiful, the others have always got there before me. I simply don't get it, I simply don't get there, I simply don't get through, neither to the good nor the true, to say nothing of the beautiful. They're always pushing in between with their giant bellies, their half-open greedy mouths, their never-ending hunger for breaks and vacations that can't be sated with the best will in the world, no more can their longing to take part in a world that is constantly doing business with them but never sharing the profits.

For the true America belongs not to the masters of good taste, not to the pharaohs of yesteryear and even less to the masters of true feeling, but to the auditors of interior progress who wear neither coats nor blue hoods but slightly faded T-shirts, long since on the opposite shore, on the warmer side, on the golden coast where no one gets cold, while we're still at the Cavalier Motel Niagara, run for years by a tired Chinese couple who sweep the drive with a birch broom, lost in dreams half-asleep in the mornings, to get better Wi-Fi.

When we clambered, all four of us, into the brightly lit Ferris wheel not far from Frankenstein's house, whisking us up above the pool and the borders, we were suddenly reconciled with it all, with the landscape, the light, with the northerly border, even with ourselves. All at once everything was in the right place. Foma's arm over Jerry's shoulders, the view of the waterfall breath-taking, and the world of the ticket-collectors quite far away. Purest close-ups and long shots of happiness, as over Lake Erie the swallows took flight.

While making sandwiches for our journey, our last hostess Elly had recited Fontane's ballad by heart down to the last verse, her husband Dan speaking - with the typical pride of a mayor of yesteryear - of a magnificent monument to the greatest helmsman of all times, erected with great sacrifice by German emigrants on the shore of the lake: a John Maynard rising to the heavens, hewn from marble by the sweat of a brow, his outstretched golden arm pointing the way to a better future. Except that, the morning after, there was not emigrant nor monument to be found on the banks out at Buffalo until Foma finally spotted the flat plaque of plain bronze, nothing but the faint memory of a ballad from a German lesson he'd never had himself.

Write that in your notebook, dear Ms Eckermann, and add that AnnAdams grew briefly melancholy at the sight of Lake Erie. For the water was radiant and warm, the imported Oktoberfest mid-bloom, and

Fontane's poem seemed to her so beautiful and moving that I declaimed it repeatedly at full length from the backseat of my Tocqueville Bay on the drive to Detroit, with her interrupting me every time I failed to perfectly match the original.

Write this too in your little notebook: that emigrated Europeans make poor tourists because they're constantly arguing with themselves beneath the burden of their education, although by now we're heading inland for Detroit in a red Ford Explorer that will fly us to our next destination, into the heart of Henry Ford's workshop, a man who decided a century ago to make not only a few of us but humankind as a whole mobile and happy ever after. For the purpose of our labour, and I quote the master himself, "is an automobile specially designed for everyday wear and tear - business, professional, and family use; an automobile which will attain a sufficient speed to satisfy the average person, at an exceedingly reasonable price, which places it within the reach of many thousands."

The master emphasizes the following points in particular: Quality of the material. Simplicity of construction. Quality of the engine. Reliability of the ignition. Automatic oiling. Simplicity and ease of control. For Mr Ford believes in a different God, in a mobile God with no desk and no office. Mr Ford is a free man, after all, with a calendar free from appointments, his head still held high in the billows of progress, a man one can never get hold of because he always enters the room from the back. Which is why his business flourishes as if by magic, through the pure presence of his absence.

That's his secret, the tiny key to the controls of the great planetary transmission, with a prospect of domination and great profit: never be where people expect you to be, always be elsewhere, always be busy, always be ready for surprises, as though every day were wonders and wassails! For Henry is nothing but pure promise, never where the others look for him, a God who disguises himself from his worshippers while he builds Tin Lizzies and risks his neck on weekends as a racing driver. After his battles are won, he plays the violin in the evenings and has a flourishing model village built, the likes of which the Soviet peasant-improvers can only dream of to this day: forests, fields and clean rivers, air fresh as dew, contented cows and pardoned turkeys strolling through the front gardens of single-storey houses in which a community gathers in the evenings, a community that no longer dreams of anything. Not because it doesn't have the energy, but because everything is already

in the right place, while the production rolls effortlessly on and leaves every vision of the future behind it.

The capitalist as a storyteller. Rural life with urban earnings, that was the master's motto, that car king and anti-Semite occupied for the rest of his time with bringing the world into line by means of journalism. When the young Master Ford rode out to town in his little carriage – so they say back here in my Tocqueville Bay – he had his pockets full of bric-a-brac until he really (in actual fact) managed to construct a watch of his own at the age of thirteen.

That was only the beginning. In the meantime, we're pulling together worldwide and all sitting at the round table of unstoppable progress, which knows no more head and no rulers, but at which we're still not all equal because not everyone has the opportunity to make something out of their talents. The peasant-improvers knew that better than I do, when they came out to Dearborn some eighty years back, led by Solomon Trone, to meet Mr Ford in person.

But the prophet was not there, for – see above – Mr Ford likes to circulate. To kill their waiting time productively, Ilf and Petrov were sent for a few hours to Greenfield, the aforementioned museum and model village, in search of the New Man of whom the Russians still dream to this day. Just like the old museum attendant who received his guests with eyes aglow in an old wooden house with creaking floorboards and soot-stained walls still hung with icons of Thomas Alva Edison. Tears came to the man's eyes as he showed the Russian guests the first light bulb and acclaimed, still tear-drenched: "Let there be light!" And: "Without Edison, there would be no science!" Then he wiped off his tears and began to glow himself, as he said quietly and clearly: "Write only what you think. But write for the whole world."

While Ilf and Petrov go on writing unmoved, commissioned by *Prawda*, the world now dreams of quite different things, not of light bulbs but of databases that light up our interior veins, of a car that needs neither driver nor ruler because it drives all on its own these days. No more fighting for places or power or the keys, neither Foma nor AnnAdams at the wheel. Becky has liberated herself from her flat cage on Foma's lap and is out and about of her own accord. She's in touch with the whole wide world, while we, back in my Tocqueville Bay, devote ourselves to the great thoughts of yesteryear, to the reading of books we haven't quite managed so far, as they're simply too thick.

But as the car now drives all on its own, steered and commanded by a third party, we are at last on the right road to really (in actual fact) being free, free people and free readers, freed from steering, braking and accelerating. We are free and safe, with no duties or wants any more. At a reliable average velocity of sixty-five American miles an hour, we ride off like Ivan the Fool on our fairy-tale stoves, reading the world from back to front and conscientiously writing down everything that can be noted through the misted window of the Tocqueville Bay as we drive past, timeless advertising slogans on a fence of posters extending across the Midwestern landscape.

I'm simply trying to write down what the world out there has to offer: I spy something green. Chocolate garden. Your doctor is currently in class. Catch the wave! Bite into a legend! Largest fireworks in the world! Bikers get cancer, too! Grill an' chill! Always wear your life jacket! Beautiful homes! Wonderful communities! Advertise here! Ford. It's McRib season - let's feast. Welcome to Ford. If you don't know whose signs these are you haven't travelled very far.

But those who want to read make slow progress on a highway supposed to take us to a city Radio John warned us about back in Brantford: "Watch out for the neighbourhood - Detroit is Black, the most dangerous city in America, full of slaves on demand. Write that in your little white notebook, Ms Eckermann, but write too that the Black peril is ancient history now because the investors are on the advance, as is easily spotted by the reliable presence of their vanguard: the artists."

The artists, you see, with their sensitive noses, are always there before the business people; they smell the rat of the future immediately. Always prepared to make premature sacrifices, they nest briefly in the walls of the crumbling structures of yesteryear, walls long since sold but not yet humanly cultivated. Thus they live, in the damp chinks between yesterday, today and tomorrow, hungry zeitgeists haunted by a secret desire for the palaces of yore, for fame and fortune, myriads of cheap, conscientious slaves in the service of art and of the commentary of a progress that they - apparently at the peak of our times, but always desperate and underpaid - attempt to illustrate over and over. No wonder their pictures of the present day so rarely work out, for they despise the laws of time differences.

One of them was my fellow traveller Jerry's friend Becca, First Artist

in the Wall, an invited guest of the Henry Today Foundation, a talented blonde string bean from the east of Germany. She did in actual fact live in a wall, some four metres wide and one-twenty high, in the attic of a damp house slated for demolition. A small cave with no window or door, reached only via a rickety ladder, with little space for heads or suitcases even when bowing down to her sponsor. The whole scenario seemed familiar. It smelled of mould and drugs, of late-onset anarchy, of the ceremonial cattle-driving of the avant-gardes of yesteryear, of that small musty gap between art and the real world provided by some benefactor who still believes they're aligning art with real life.

Becca was merely one proof among many. When she crawled, on the morning of our arrival - friendly, hungry and unkempt - out of the sponsored hole in the mouldy wall, which threw no light upon art but quite a lot on the life of artists, it suddenly became searingly clear to me that we're all artists on demand, not just Becca and Jerry but also Foma the gardener and I. With the exception of AnnAdams of course, who possesses an academic pension with the right to appreciate art, of which art has had no share to this day.

Yet in the end it was AnnAdams who, with determination, freed Becca from her cave and shoved her on the back seat between herself and myself, to drive to Dearborn at last, where the five of us boarded a bus that took us directly to the Ford works one bright Saturday morning, to a model workshop for tourists and Russians, a workshop for all those who still believe in the new man and wish for nothing more dearly than to see him with their own eyes at long last.

The bus was stuffed full of families and children, all excited and in the best of moods. Above the Black driver at the front of the bus was a gigantic screen on which the bust of an attractive white man appeared shortly after our embarking, a man who introduced us, from above, with a voice as gentle as it was imperative, to the great story of the master, a story composed of nothing but virtue and underlain with high-pathos symphony music which took inescapable effect upon me.

Oh yes, I'll admit, I was literally in the symphonic grip of that great story, for Mr Ford likes to circulate and I turn circles too. I too suddenly wanted to be great and progressive, possessed by a true vision that would make me a truly great artist one fine faraway day, no doubt about it, with a cow of my own in a field of my own in the boundless Midwest, with a firm of my own and a hobby that's all mine. I saw myself sitting at a flying

golden desk, flanked by scores of conscientious bonded scribes, all thinking, writing and imagining for me around the clock and in changing shifts, inventing ever more stories that will make me immortal forever, because they stick to reliable poetological ground rules one can only learn in Europe: Quality of the material. Simplicity of construction. Quality of the engine. Reliability of the ignition. Automatic oiling. Simplicity and ease of control of the planetary transmission. Quality of the execution.

While I was still under the spell of imperial timbres and occupied with drawing up fantastical contracts complete with dizzying fees, the bus had long since reached its destination. The voice on the screen fell silent; we disembarked and found ourselves in a magnificent hall, only to become the tail of another snaking general public queue, its forked tongue politely asking us to pay up.

The fear starts here! We paid up fearlessly without batting an eyelid, before we were instantly pushed to the end of a second queue under the strict commands of the attendants and guards, all of them Black beneath bright orange T-shirts. This queue number two moved slowly but surely up an escalator to the next floor, where we were finally granted a first glance of our own at Henry Ford's famous workshop, of the model conveyor belt on a model factory floor, where nobody knows who's watching whom: are the tourists eyeing the workers or, in actual fact, the weekend workers eyeing their Saturday tourists?

From our bird's-eye perspective the work seemed simple, the workers calm and collected. Instead of the grey overalls and masks of Dr Brecht's theatre, they wore cheerful everyday clothing, bright T-shirts and late-summer pants. Now and then they'd stop and look up, as though keeping a lookout for stars between two working procedures. Otherwise, nothing seemed to disturb them, least of all the streams of visitors, firmly convincing Foma they were not workers but actors, merely playing the role of model workers.

He was probably right; presumably the whole thing was nothing but a project, a dress rehearsal for a sentimental paying audience. For who if not Henry, the all-American monster who considered himself the inventor of the first pocket watch, would ever have thought of replacing unemployed workers from Detroit with unemployed actors from Hollywood, miming the simple man on the factory floor for the tourists of the world, acting out the little man before his lunch break who dreams of other, bigger roles, until finally the bell tolls and he can make a dash for

the cafeteria. The perfect performance achieved its objective: I pressed my forehead against the ship's rail of the visitors' balcony and began to cry, not knowing why. Aside from me, though, no one cried, neither AnnAdams nor Jerry nor Foma and least of all Becca, who instead had the audacity to take real pictures of the scene, even though a huge sign above the entrance clearly cautioned: "No pictures to be taken."

She had obviously come along to perform practical resistance against her existence in a Detroit wall. She shot from the hip, *verboten*-ly mobile, while I was still trying to distract attendants and guards, to start a conversation with Radio Orange about wages and shifts and to transform the facts of the matter into quick-fire poetry. But the attendants and guards didn't listen to me, not only because their ears were plugged and their frozen smiles left no chance for conversation, but also because the workshop was simply too noisy.

Yet then all of a sudden, as if to disprove the theory of the New Man, there rose an objection in human form, in the shape of the third mechanic from the left: he simply lowered a right fender, raised his head and sent a challenging look up to me, up to the windy gallery where I was now standing between AnnAdams and Becca, who simply couldn't stop shooting from the hip. The mechanic saw that all too well and paused for a moment before his gaze shifted shape to a swallow, flew, unexpectedly, from down below up right through the workshop and settled, between two flaps of its wings, on the railing beside me, where it shape-shifted again into a pointer. For that mechanic had recognized me. Before he dashed to the cafeteria, he put his hand to his cap in friendly greeting to wish me luck for my travels. Then he raised his phone and pressed the shutter button. I never saw that picture, but I know all too well that ten thousand pictures from Jerry's Brides by the Roadside series could never outweigh that gaze of a single mechanic, not even if I ever do end up marrying. Standing at the prow from Detroit to Hollywood, wherever the wind blows me, I shall always remember that swallow, the gaze of a man in blue pants, that tells me Foma's not right after all, because the artists will never understand what master they're really serving and who secretly provides their daily bread, while the third mechanic from the left knows only too well at whose expense he consumes the spongy white bread, unsung by poets to this day.

*Translated by Katy Derbyshire*

## Angelika Meier



Born in 1968, Angelika Meier studied political science and ethnology at the University of Marburg and the Freie Universität Berlin. After first obtaining her PhD, and working as research assistant to the Freie Universität Berlin's chair for contemporary German literature, she has dedicated herself entirely to creative writing since 2007, and lives in Berlin as a freelance author. Angelika Meier's novel *Heimlich, heimlich mich vergiss* was longlisted for the German Book Prize in 2012. In 2016, she was awarded the Literature Prize of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

### Selected publications:

*Osmo*, diaphanes Verlag, 2016

*Stürzen, drüber schlafen*. Kleine Geschichten und Stücke, diaphanes Verlag, 2013

*Heimlich, heimlich mich vergiss*, diaphanes Verlag, 2012

*England*, diaphanes Verlag, 2010

Angelika Meier, *Osmo* [Osmo] novel  
Zurich: diaphanes Verlag, 2016, 272 pages

## A chaos of mirrors in the desert

At the beginning of this novel, a judgment is pronounced: not imprisonment, nor freedom, but exile. Not hell, but not heaven either; the defendant is sent instead to a kind of purgatory, into the heat of the desert. At a solar power plant near the small Californian town of Blythe, Mary Lynn Osmo must do penance for having claimed to have committed a crime that never even took place.

The name of this plant is Solariana, and its structure resembles something from science fiction: Numerous immense mirrors are directed at a 150-meter-high jet-black tower in order to feed it with solar energy. A solar energy plant with this very name was once in fact supposed to be erected near the real-life location of Blythe. The project failed, however, just as the power station in *Osmo* fails to completely fulfill its purpose. For instead of transforming the light concentrated in the tower into energy, it sends it back to the sun in order to pay off the debt we have amassed to our star as “the leader of the plant,” as a certain Dr Schreber explains.

This Dr Schreber bears some similarity to Daniel Paul Schreber, who gave his name not to solar energy plants, but allotment gardens (known colloquially in German as *Schrebergärten*). However, the historical Schreber was also a long-term inmate of the psychiatric institution Schloss Sonnenstein (Sunstone Palace).

The sun is, after all, the real protagonist in this pointedly perverse, incredibly fast-paced novel, Angelika Meier’s third. Just as the white of the whale in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* is presented as the most genuinely sinister color, the color of grief and death, in *Osmo* it is blackness and darkness that have a bad reputation, in the sense that they don’t even play a role, because everything in this novel is penetrated by dazzling brightness.

The only resident who lives between Solariana and Blythe is, by the way, Jimmy Two Crow, “the highest counsel of California’s indigenous population groups,” and as he proudly shows Mary Lynn, the “margin of the soul” runs across his property. Like the figure of the judgment

without a crime, like the fade from the worldly to the otherworldly court, this margin too can be found in the writings of Franz Kafka: “The observer of the soul cannot penetrate into the soul, but there is a margin where he comes into contact with it,” he wrote in 1917 in an octavo notebook, and on the very next page: “Art is a state of being blinded by the truth: the light on the distorted face as it flinches away is true, that and nothing else.”

The search for the dark core of the soul, the black heart of darkness, seemed futile even to Kafka, almost a hundred years ago. After her psychiatric novel *Heimlich*, *heimlich mich vergiss* and the college farce *England*, in *Osmo*, Angelika Meier now portrays the glaringly distorted face of truth *à l'américaine*, and it is not Kafka or Schreber that first come to mind when reading this dizzying and screamingly comical novel, but Thomas Pynchon.

Like Pynchon in his California novel *Inherent Vice*, here in *Osmo* Meyer employs a virtuosic variety of criminal elements. A resolution of the non-existent case is, of course, out of the question. The reader of Meier's *Osmo* doesn't fumble around in the dark, however, but rather staggers through the radiant brightness of this novel, at times in shock, but always fascinated by the play of light in Solariana's mirrors.

*By Tobias Lehmkuhl, translated by Jamie Lee Searle*

Sample Translation: *Osmo*  
(pp. 7-18 & pp. 97-101)

1.

“Defendant, you have the last word.”

“I would like to say that I’m very, very sorry for everything, and that would like to apologize to the relatives.”

“To whom? The victim didn’t have any relatives.”

“Oh, er, no, I mean, of course ... mine, of course ... my relatives.”

Mary Lynn finally lifted her head, looked steadfastly at the judge for the first time since the trial had begun, then, spurred on by having had the courage to face up to her own truth in the disconcerting four-eyed mirror that was the bespectacled judge, turned just as resolutely towards the hall, where the barely containable mob of the preliminary hearing had given way to a few elderly people, scattered here and there on the benches like the last pieces playing in a senselessly long game of something or other. The clock above the judge’s head buzzed twelve, just one long buzzing sound, similar to the one with which the chip-card lock of her cell door was always opening unexpectedly, except quieter and a little more friendly, and inside Mary Lynn’s half-deaf head it buzzed “Buzz, buzz, buzz, bees buzz around” and then “Buzz buzz buzz goes the bumble bee ...” In order to tune out the idiotic buzzing, she tried to focus on the snow-white handkerchief which the man in the front row was wiping at an attentively slow pace across his clown-like dome. In truth, though, he didn’t have a clown-like dome, for that would require the presence of a wreath of comically long hair around the bald patch. Any minimal growth still existent on this head, however, had been razed down to the scalp, so the dark ring of stubble on his pate – two to three days post-shave at most – and the ridiculously clean white handkerchief would have to be comedy enough for Mary Lynn today. He could only really be wiping his freckled half-orb due to what was currently a mere lexical knowledge of the August sun climbing to its blazing zenith outside, because inside, here in the windowless hall, the air conditioning had everything in its frosty grip.

Mary Lynn registered with slight unease how her lawyer, who had stood up with her in robe-clad solidarity for the brief moment of the

pronouncement of the verdict and – it was to be feared – the not-so-brief judicial summary of her story, had grasped her hand and was pressing it, yes, squeezing it valiantly; and this phony, clammy pressure led her to notice, with indifferent appreciation, how wonderfully succulent, cool and soft the ball of her own thumb was. Like the fresh leaf of a gum tree. Such a disconcertingly pleasant encounter with one of her own body parts would once have been cause for minor desperation, but now it helped with her animalistic contemplation of the faces of the onlookers around the hall, which looked as though they had been painstakingly emptied in order to take in the closing judgment, and also distracted her somewhat from the judge’s educational discourse. What would be the point of listening closely, anyway, when the verdict had been clear from the very first day of the trial? Because, exactly, “Never has this court encountered anyone more eager to confess than this defendant,” yes, that’s precisely my point, and “never have the walls of this hall heard the voice of anyone more accepting of their punishment,” well then, and what else? And yet “doubts remain,” and maybe they do, but now she wants him to come to his conclusion regardless, the quiet voice of doubt. She briefly closes her eyes, but doesn’t let herself switch off; still she probably falls into a brief, deep sleep while standing bolt upright and is forcefully awoken by the lawyer, who is no longer squeezing her hand, but pressing her entire upper body joyfully to him, and only then do the judicial words join together in her drowsy head, and indeed “for the first time in history,” no, not hers but the court’s – a precedential case, therefore, in the history of the state of California versus, for the first time ever a pronouncement of judgment must, despite a confession, yes, despite a *complete* confession, begin with the sovereign set phrase of defeat: “Due to lack of evidence.” This lack, however, doesn’t mean acquittal or impunity, or at least not entirely, because the *in dubio pro reo* has to be balanced with the common good, weighed against it, so to speak, and the word of the defendant must be taken into consideration too, after all, even if it isn’t that trustworthy; but a certain dignity of blame cannot be denied a person so determined to take it, the blame, or rather the punishment, neither death nor eternal imprisonment, but simply “Exile.” And of course the judgment, in this case, is made without the possibility of an appeal.

The lawyer is still rejoicing, the eldest spectator in the hall offers his congratulations in the name of all “ordinary trial-goers.” Mary Lynn

expresses her thanks with a captivatingly bewildered smile, leaves the room while nodding shyly, regally, and walks straight outside into the dazzling sunlight.

The palm-lined square in front of the court bungalow is completely empty, as though it were a Sunday, allowing the hot sand to twirl waltzes undisturbed on its smooth, bright flagstones. Mary Lynn blinks, half affectedly, half genuinely blinded, puts on her Ray Bans, which are patched up with a sticking plaster on the left arm, and thinks with a sigh that only now does she grasp the vastness of America.

“Too late, Osmo, too late.”

She should whip around in shock, but doesn't; you can't spend your entire life whipping around in shock, widening your eyes and making little sounds, even if it is something you can still do really well. This moment, here and now, was precisely when there had to be an end to that and everything else she could still do so well, and so she answers the voice behind her in an obliging but unmoved tone: “It's never too late for me.”

“Oh dear, picked the wrong fortune cookie, huh?”

Only now can she turn around calmly. There's no one there, of course, but the remaining trial participants and spectators are coming out of the court building now. Most of them linger on to chat beneath the far-reaching, outstretched awning, which still hints at the fact that in the middle of the last century, in the carefree days of the unending flow of through-traffic, the court's lobby was once one of the most beautiful gas station diners in the area.

The group gradually disperses, the judge shakes the hands of those setting off and eventually makes his heavy-footed way back into his court. Only Mary Lynn's lawyer and the old court attendant stand there, still smoking, in the shade of the pastel yellow concrete canopy. The court attendant is talking unexcitedly but incessantly at the lawyer. Mary Lynn can't make out what he's saying, the wind makes the words zoom off like Frisbees from the short distance from him to her, but she knows anyway, it's always the same old story, the old man is complaining about how much trouble the “leaky rooms” here give him. It's almost too much to bear. “Where does it start and where does it end? There's no telling anymore, man. Where does someone come from and where are they going? There's no telling anymore, man. Sometimes you're in the middle of your life and sometimes ... ” the lawyer mutters and nods at

regular intervals by way of response, as though wanting to help the court attendant maintain his up-hill-and-dale rhythm.

The stabbing pains in her temples intensify, the dizziness slowly gathers pace, but only when the lawyer looks up and urges her by means of vigorous gesticulation to get out of the damn sun, to come and join them under the canopy, does Mary Lynn finally realize that she's standing in the open air, and all of a sudden and for the first time in her life the ground literally falls away from beneath her feet. The last thing she hears is that "it's no wonder really," something with which she would declare herself to be in complete agreement, were she capable of declaring anything. But perhaps it's simply not the time for declarations. Later. Perhaps.

For now just concentrate on coming around again, in the judge's kitchen, one thing at a time, especially when everything seems to be happening at once. Careful, both hands clasped around the cup, the hot coffee. Hot: good, alone: bad, together: good. Poor little head, gigantic; it created a monster. Slurp, but as quietly as possible, while the judge, his rounded back turned to Mary Lynn in a motherly fashion, busies himself over an immense frying pan at his stove, and the court attendant laboriously sets the table. For every glass, every plate, every set of cutlery, for butter and toast, he shuffles his way back and forth between the table and the cupboards. But the routes in the small kitchen are short, after all, and in actual fact barely existent, so why should he overload himself unnecessarily, possibly even let something drop, instead of taking that one extra step? Only the lawyer is still sitting with Mary Lynn. He checks her pulse at her wrist once again and stares through her dejectedly, from time to time stubbing out his cigarette on the saucer, an act he seems to enjoy more than smoking it, and then lets his gaze drift past the judge through the narrow window above the kitchen counter to outside, where a half-grown pear tree, suffering from the heat, silently droops its leaves. All three of the men are silent, even the court attendant has shut up, and there are no other sounds to be heard either, to the extent that Mary Lynn is starting to wonder whether there might be something wrong with her ears, until the judge lets out a unguardedly cheerful "Right then!" He loosens the tie of his apron, pulls it off his grey suit like a dead hide and throws it over the chair, everything in one captivatingly nimble one-handed movement, the kind that can only result from decades of practice, then distributes the scrambled eggs on the plates.

“No toast, Larry?” The judge looks at the lawyer’s plate in amusement. “Still on the low carb regime?”

“I promised Barbara,” the lawyer shrugs with a smile. “I make an effort with the carbohydrates, reduce my evening wine intake to an apparently much more enjoyable single glass, and in return she lets me smoke in peace. Apparently. At some point. I hope.”

“Marriage is an eternal compromise, huh?”

“Easy for you to say, judge.”

„Yes, well, it’s easy for a bachelor to say a lot of things.”

“About everything between heaven and earth,” the court attendant adds earnestly, without even taking a pause from eating.

“Well,” the judge waggles his head cheerfully, “minimal retributive justice for the silent torment of karstification. Although every now and then I wonder whether it’s really any compensation, this freedom, and not an additional punishment.”

He laughs, but the court attendant mutters gloomily amidst his chewing: “It’s a curse, a curse. That’s what it is! Because no one here knows anymore where the heavens begin and the earth ends, and in between everything’s so disastrously rampant, it just grows and grows, yet everything gets narrower, it doesn’t need the cold, or any breath of air, it’s almost too much to –”

“Okay, Walter, that’s enough,” the judge gives his court attendant a good-natured pat on the back, “eat, Miss Osmo, we need you to get your strength back, that’s the whole purpose of this exercise.”

“Yes ... yes, thank you,” and indeed, she has barely touched her scrambled egg, “when ... what are your thoughts, judge, on when the execution will be carried out?”

“There won’t be an *execution*, it’s not like we’re giving you the injection. Eat! You’ll simply get a move on and leave the state of California.”

“Leave, but for where? Can I decide where I – ”

“Of course. You can go wherever you want. Outside the territory of California, you’re a free woman.” he spreads a piece of toast with a generous layer of butter and casually places it on the edge of Mary Lynn’s plate, “go to Tokyo or Paris, or just stroll the few miles across to Arizona as far as I’m concerned, across the Colorado River, then stay there for the rest of your life, spitting over at us – whatever you want.”

“Really?”

„Of course!” He gives her hand a sympathetic pat. “You’re not just being expelled, remember, you’re being exiled. Have you ever heard of someone choosing to live in the place they’ve been exiled from?”

An answer was so obviously unrequired that Mary Lynn automatically, albeit far too apathetically, begins to wonder whether she might not perhaps have heard something along those lines. Wouldn’t it be possible? After all, there’s an exception to every rule. Although it’s questionable whether an exception in this case could be considered a proper, rule-reinforcing exception and not instead represent, on the contrary, a rule-invalidating precedent. Yes, an exception, perhaps even the mere possibility of an exception, would be equivalent to a nullification of the rule in this case, the first and perhaps only nullification. It’s possible, for it’s so easy to invalidate, but perhaps such an exception would even be a definitive breach, and therefore a new rule, a new day, a new boundary. Doesn’t there have to be a precedent for everything on some day or another? Doesn’t everything good in this country, after all, still begin with a “No, Your Honour, I cite the state of Illinois against Owen Ponte, 1984,” or something like that? It’s not impossible. But no further questions to the judge for now, instead she shoves the whole egg into her mouth in one go with a contented sigh, mumbling only an accusatory “It’s gone cold,” as though it were the others’ fault that she’s only starting to eat now. Then the lawyer follows the judge’s rhetorical question up with: “Which for you has the major advantage that you don’t have to apply for asylum anywhere.” He gives a brief encouraging smile, then his expression darkens again. “Because you hardly need me to tell you what your chances would be.”

“Yes – no.” She wipes her mouth and stands up, swaying a little. “Could I use your bathroom, judge?”

“Of course! It’s the door on the right across the way. But don’t give yourself a fright. There’s a mirror in there. It is a bathroom, after all. They tend to have them. And seven years are seven years.”

“Don’t worry. I’m prepared.”

As she goes out she only pretends to shut the kitchen door, then lingers outside it and eavesdrops; forehead and nose pressed against the wall next to the door, toes pushed against the baseboard, hands clasped loosely over her behind, not interlaced, with the foremost palm open, as though she were expecting an accomplice to put something in it. You can stand as straight as a rod and still let your arched shoulders droop at

the same time, for hours on end, if you have to or want to, which over the years amount to the same thing, if your aim is to avoid, for a few hours, dangerous to-ing and fro-ing in tight spaces, and for a moment she pictures with a smile the court attendant having to spend his entire life setting the table in the judge's small kitchen. The to-ing and fro-ing, but likewise the sunken sitting on the plank bed, the painful sinking into it, should be strictly avoided, the latter almost more dangerous than the muttering to-ing and fro-ing. So stand instead, motionless, for as long as possible; legs and pelvis hold the forehead in position. Over time the posture makes you meek and sluggish. But she can't keep standing around out here and eavesdropping like this; in any case, she can no longer hear anything. The conversation in the kitchen seems to have fallen completely silent.

Only once she detaches herself from the wall and creeps over to the bathroom does she hear the judge begin to curse under his breath, about the idiots in L.A. and the idiots at the Federal Court of Appeals in San Francisco, who, in their united idiocy, saddled them with the damn case, and then about the idiots in Sacramento too, who, to make matters worse, even though they were the ones who demanded this trial in the first place, wanted to push for the verdict to be overturned, and for the last three days he's been hearing that the governor would immediately take all the necessary steps. "Immediately, for the last three days!" It seems everyone everywhere thinks they're prize idiots they can say anything to. Prize idiots in their pathetic desert backwater, so why should the governor treat them with any respect? Even once Mary Lynn is turning on the light in preparation for the picture in the mirror, nervously holding her breath, she can still hear him cursing. He's right, after all, seven years are seven years, and they can't just pass without - oh, but it seems they can. There's no trace at all, although "there must be evidence of some kind, if you're telling the truth!" - nothing, even though for a moment she doesn't recognize herself, and she isn't recognizable, after all, but that's only down to the altered frame. She was prepared for that, and had even expected a stronger impact. Because, given that for years now her hair has been cut short, meticulously side parted and, of course, is no longer dyed light blonde, she knew without even seeing it that she must look a little like a strangely exhausted twelve-year-old boy. And if you spend years on end running the palm of your hand over the back of your head, out of habit, without even realizing you're

doing it anymore, yet actually not feeling anything but that, and without knowing whether the lovely hand is trying to comfort the poor head, or whether instead the poor hand wants to let itself be comforted by the lovely curve of the head and the feel of the short, soft rabbit-like fur, then you no longer need a mirror to know what you look like, you just know – it no longer interests you. But the thin white cotton blouse which they gave her this morning is so beautiful, completely soft, so soft it's almost inconceivable. She strokes her beautiful, soft blouse sleeve, grips her elbow and cradles herself, even humming softly a little, and doesn't feel ashamed, not even when she hears her lawyer say once more in a casually triumphant tone: "No body, no case. You don't have a case here, District Attorney."

2.

She pushes the shopping cart through the aisles at a snail's pace so that the court attendant in front of her, despite his doddery slowness, can comfortably fling all manner of things into the cart from the shelves to the left and right as he passes. He must be very proud of the nonchalance with which he drops things, inattentively, indiscriminately even, into the cart. Because it suddenly occurs to her that she too, without ever having known it, had once been proud of these unnoticed accomplishments, in life's casual moments. No big deal, any of it. Just like her, he must have seen this picture of himself in the aisles at Safeway a thousand times already, even though, if questioned, he certainly wouldn't be able to recall a single film in which it was even close to featuring, in which he himself was close to featuring. But the mirror is always there, circular, round, *always around for you*, at an angle above our heads, even though the cameras have long since rendered it superfluous. It hangs there for only symbolic reasons now, but as a subliminally stimulating deterrent it is more than deserving of its subsidized retirement, because even nowadays, and so it will be *till the end of time*, people surreptitiously try, like the court attendant is now, like she herself used to, to let their own image accompany them along these aisles, even though, if confronted over it, he would certainly claim not to understand what on earth she was talking about. He would pretend to be deaf and keep walking in front of the cart, as assuredly as a sleepwalker, or hopelessly lost in a

daydream, and what's the difference? When he goes shopping he always dreams of another life, and yet at the same time only of what really is. He's always worrying, always troubled by something else, and yet what really matters is the perfect curve with which the melba toast lands in the cart. He exchanges his freedom anew each time for this melancholy errand and immediately receives it back in the exchange, his melancholy is a broad subject, an expanse wider than the prairie, and king size is not some kind of compensation for the exchange of the prairie for suburbia; it doesn't even need any reparation, if one silently and quietly wages war against oneself. No, king size is rather the oldest root word for the size of the king, for the superhuman dignity of the self-abasement with which he follows his lonely path this side of the grave, in the beggar's robes of the customer. All of a sudden he turns around to her and holds a glass of mango purée beneath her nose, on which a cartoon mango with huge white teeth is laughing like a deformed sun:

"Do you like this?"

She shrugs her shoulders: "No idea. Anything's fine with me."

"If you ask me," he rotates the glass talks thoughtfully in his hands, "the stuff looks like baby shit and probably tastes like it too, but women tend to like this kind of thing."

"Well," she smiles, "then I guess I should like it too."

"Good."

He carefully places the glass in the cart and nods several times in reinforcement, as though content to have reached an amicable agreement with her. After they finish shopping he lets Mary Lynn drive the short route back home over the West Hobson Way, to the rear side of the court complex, where the judge is spraying the outer wall and the asphalt in front of his apartment with cold water from the garden hose to cool it down a little. When he sees her, he quickly turns off the water, giving her a concerned look through the windscreen, and to her it seems like he feels guilty that she caught him making such a criminal waste of precious water. But that's not it. When she gets out, he announces in a firm voice: "The governor called."

Of course. He had to call at some point, after all. Except that after seven days in the judge's house, hope had perfidiously crept into her that the people in Sacramento had perhaps forgotten about her in her miserable desert hick town, and she could simply stay here.

"You can stay here for the time being."

“With you, judge?”

“No. No,” shaking his head stiffly, he pushes his glasses up on to his head and wipes his forehead and eyes with his rolled-up shirtsleeve, “not with me. But here in Blythe. Well almost, just a few miles outside. But very close. Walter and I can come and visit you if you want – isn't that right, Walter? ... Hey, Walt!”

“Where, Sir ... what ...?”

“On the solar farm. Good God, Walt, wake up! The old fool is always falling asleep in the damn car like a baby, you should count herself lucky if he only dozes off in the passenger seat ...”

“Solar – what?”

“Until the verdict is final, you'll work in the sun fields.”

“Sun fields? Is that supposed to be a joke?”

“I doubt it. Don't just stand around now, Miss Osmo, let's bring in the shopping first.”

(...)

10.

Shut them again at once. Too much light. And that's not all. Every time she cautiously opens her eyes the image of a white golf cart on the dusty path moves a little closer to her, and with this shakily approaching image on peaceably small wheels, she suddenly also sees what she can't actually see at all, only feel behind her, and from one moment to the next it spreads all over her – that she is alone.

But of course she can see it too, she saw it coming, certainly for the last thirty seconds anyhow, on account of there being nothing to obstruct her view of the approaching golf cart, which is down to Jimmy's car having disappeared. And along with Jimmy, Paul has disappeared too. One thing is connected to the other, that's how things are, and because Paul has disappeared, she is now no longer lying beneath a starry sky, but by the edge of the road.

She stands up shakily, briefly forgetting that she is naked, leans over to get the blanket, swaying even more now, wraps it around herself as best she can and turns slowly in a circle, protecting her eyes beneath the trembling shield of her hand. On the curved horizon, only

shimmering light. The golf cart has a red roof, the seat next to the driver is empty, naturally. She turns once more towards all the points of the compass, a little slower on account of the dizziness. The landscape is deserted and bleak. She vomits with a sudden jolt but barely notices, he didn't even leave her his jeans and pullover, only her own clothes lie around in the sand like napkins, and her bag is still there too. She wishes he had taken it with him, at least then she could be lying robbed by the side of the street -

“Miss Osmo?”

The young man, practically still a child, smiles uncertainly, swings himself with an equestrian-like agility out of his golf cart and hurries towards her with large steps that convey his eagerness to be of service. A small red sun shines resplendently on his white overalls at heart height, and diagonally above it, like a signature in dark blue old-fashioned script, is the word *Solariana*. Once he is only a metre away from her and already stretching out his arms obligingly, Mary Lynn holds up her index finger:

“Yes, okay, just give me a moment.”

She vomits once again, hurriedly wipes her mouth on the blanket, signals to the young man by making a circling motion with her index finger that he should turn around briefly so she can get dressed; collects her clothing from the dust, but then throws the underwear back into the sand and pulls on only the blouse, white yesterday, grey today, and the now equally grey Capri pants; tries in vain, on account of her dizziness, to pull on a sandal while balancing on one leg, then falls back into the dust and decides to not go voluntarily with the boy yet after all. He turns around, sighing impatiently or sympathetically, squats down with elastic gait and, with an embarrassed smile, puts on her sandals for her.

“I'm sorry that we're only coming to collect you now, that you had to sit it out here in the heat for so long. We were expecting you on the other side and weren't informed in time about your arrival. Okay, up we go! You okay?”

“Yes, sure, no problem. Wait - my bag.”

“I've got it, I've got everything.”

The bag is neatly fastened to the tailgate of the little vehicle and Mary Lynn stowed on the passenger seat, supplied with a white *Solariana* baseball cap and a bottle of water. The boy puts on the same cap, playfully grips the high, small steering wheel, opening and closing his

hands contentedly a few times, gives Mary Lynn a brief but firm nod, as though they were about to launch into a duet, and finally lets the whirring electro-sedan chair scoot in a sinuous arc back in the direction from which it had come.

“We have to drive a little way, over to the west wing. There’s no entrance at the back here.”

“Mm-hm.”

“Are you really sure you’re okay? I mean, you look pretty bad, your face ...”

“ It’s burning like fire, yes.”

“Here,” he pulls a white tube from one of the many pockets positioned at angles across his overalls, and holds it towards her, “this should help.”

She listlessly smears the yellowish salve on to her face, which for a moment burns even more intensely, but then the salve sucks the heat out of the skin like a medicine man sucking snake poison out of a bite wound. The pain completely disappears, and her skin, cooled with a wondrous gentleness, as though a balmy, northern latitude May breeze were dancing around it, relaxes with a sigh.

The boy smiles proudly: “Doc Liberty’s special salve, the stuff’s over a hundred years old, but there’s nothing better. It’s actually for inflamed cow udders, but works wonders on sunburn and pretty much anything in fact. No, no, you keep it, I’ve got loads of the stuff. Put some on your shoulders too. Go on!”

She obeys, surreptitiously sniffing her hand, and the boy chortles with laughter: “Yes, unfortunately it really stinks. But otherwise there’d be something shady about it. Because every really good thing has a catch, doesn’t it?”

In response to this precocious insight, Mary Lynn merely gives him a benevolent, blinking smile, at which the boy, slightly disgruntled, frowns a little and testily straightens his cap, but then, instantly brightening up as though something funny has occurred to him, cries out: “I haven’t even introduced myself!”

She had hoped he wouldn’t. Armed with a name, people can slip more easily beneath the chain-link fence into your life, and here, at this interim end of the road, there should at least be an end to all that.

“I’m Lindsey, Mort Lindsey, but everyone here calls me Morty Mouse or just Mouse.” He sighs deeply. “I figure it’s better I tell you right away before you hear it from the others.”

“Aha. And what would you like me to call you?”

“Hm,” he says, scratching his head, pushing back his cap, his dark hair clinging to his forehead, looking like a monk’s tonsure, “what about Mr Lindsey?”

“Okay, Mr Lindsey, sir.”

“I was only joking!” He gives another chortling laugh. “You can call me Mouse too, of course.”

“Okay. And what would you like me to call you?”

He turns his head all the way around to her in astonishment and stares through her for a moment with his small, marble-round, light brown eyes; no, not through her, he has a slight squint.

“Call me Mort,” he says, nodding a few times for emphasis and then smiling earnestly, “yes, I think I’d like that.”

“Great. It’s nice to meet you, Mort.”

She holds out her right hand, then quickly pulls it back because of the pungent salve on it. Both of them laugh, the golf cart lurches from side to side a few times, and Mort grasps her hand cheerfully: “Don’t worry about it, some days I’m smeared with the stuff from head to toe, so I’ve gotten used to the stench. Sometimes I even like it.”

“Mm-hm.” Better not to ask any more questions, none at all for now, Osmo, do you hear? “I’m guessing the work is pretty hard here?”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” he says, shrugging his shoulders all the way up to his ears, “it’s just work.”

*Translated by Jamie Lee Searle*

# Terézia Mora



Terézia Mora was born in 1971 in Sopron, Hungary, and grew up speaking both Hungarian and German. She has lived in Berlin since 1990. Her literary work has been translated into many languages and she has received many prestigious prizes in the German-speaking world. For her debut short story collection, *Seltsame Materie*, published in 1999, she was awarded Austria's Ingeborg Bachmann Prize and the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize. For her novel *Alle Tage* she won the Leipzig Book Fair Prize and for *Das Ungeheuer* the German Book Prize. She won the Georg Büchner Prize in 2018 and is one of the most distinguished translators of Hungarian into German.

## Selected publications:

*Die Liebe unter Aliens. Erzählungen*, Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 2016

*Das Ungeheuer*, Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 2013

*Der einzige Mann auf dem Kontinent*, Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 2009

*Alle Tage*, Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 2004; *Day in Day Out: A Novel*, Harper Perennial, 2007

*Seltsame Materie. Erzählungen* (short stories), Rowohlt Verlag, 1999

Terézia Mora, *Die Liebe unter Aliens* [Love Among Aliens],  
short stories  
Munich: Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 2016, 272 pages

## How to make a move

Love involves getting close to someone and that's just what Terézia Mora's characters can't stand. Yet they are driven by their longing for affection. That was the case for Abel Nema, the linguistically gifted foreigner, in Mora's debut novel *Alle Tage*, and it's the same for the characters in her short story collection *Die Liebe unter Aliens*. The title story is about two lost souls who cling to each other. Tim, an apprentice cook, has lost his mother; he suffers from tremors and can't exist without his lover Sandy, who is just as enigmatic as him. The two of them, still more or less like children, set off on a journey in the direction of the Baltic. They never make it there, because on the way Sandy vanishes and then Tim disappears while looking for her. You can't save them all, their motherly friend tells herself, which becomes the message of these beautifully sad tales. There are people who live among us like aliens, birds of passage, travelers without destination, without home, and without lifebelt.

It may well be the case that Terézia Mora knows what it's like to be an outsider. This may be to do with her personal biography, but it is also an existential topic for readers of all kinds of backgrounds. Mora grew up on the border between Austria and Hungary, speaking both German and Hungarian, and from an early age experienced living in a repressive society. It was not so much socialism that restricted her as Catholicism and the traditions of the farming community. When the border opened in 1989 she gained access to the world. Since her debut collection *Fremde Materie*, which made her famous overnight, she has published three novels as well as two collections of her lectures in poetics. In *Die Liebe unter Aliens* we meet her short stories again, which contain all the elements that make this writer so fascinating.

There is Tom, a father who lives separated from his wife and children. On the way to the cemetery he thinks about the "other Tom," a childhood friend whom he hasn't seen since then – until now, after his death. There is a man, a marathon runner, no longer in the first flush of youth, whose money and key pouch is ripped off him by a boy who runs off with it.

The marathon man pursues the thief until at some point in the chase he forgets why he's following him and mixes him up with somebody else. There is the hotel receptionist who meets his half-sister in secret once a year, because their parents have forbidden them from seeing one another.

There are variations on the theme of leaving and not being able to arrive. Time and again there are love stories in which desire somehow gets lost, in which tiredness or grief or fear thwart all attempts to get close to someone. The tone of Mora's narration is as casual and matter of fact as it is possible to be – objective, but still warm and sympathetic, because her protagonists' unhappiness is so impenetrable that they themselves are not aware of it. It is only in the telling of their story that their suffering becomes visible, even if the causes of this suffering remain hidden. "Storytelling means finding out how to make a move," Terézia Mora once said. She continues her investigative work in this quiet but striking collection of short stories, even when they deal with characters who don't succeed in making a move. With Mora's narrator, they are in good hands.

*By Jörg Magenau, translated by Mandy Wight*

Sample Translation: *Die Liebe unter Aliens*  
(pp. 109-27)

### GOT LOST IN THE WOODS

In the summer, during the high season, he works from sunrise to sunset. Drives there while the sun is rising, comes back as it sets. It's lovely, the drive takes exactly the same length of time as the rising and the setting does. They start out together, they arrive together: the young man and the sun. Unfortunately it's always behind him, though, because he drives west in the morning and back east in the evening. Of course you can tell just by looking at everything around that the sun is rising or setting, but he can only see it himself when it appears in one of the car's mirrors. That's how he drives: with his eyes on the mirrors. Wing, rear view, other wing. Every day a shift of a few seconds and meters, but there are several places where it can always be seen. After the bend, on the left, next to the little wood above the hill. At certain points it's in two mirrors at once and for a second he's blinded. Sometimes (more often than not) he then briefly shuts his eyes. One, two. Imagines that it appears in all three mirrors at the same time. This doesn't mean a thing. He just likes to imagine it. This is not without risk, since the roads are full, morning and evening, however he can't help but trust that nothing bad will happen in those two seconds.

He sits inside during the day. You can see the lake from the hotel reception desk. Not the water, but the reeds on the bank. The movement of the reeds, the reflections of the water behind them, the clouds above, the cloudlessness. That too is all very lovely. The summer is lovely. It gets very hot, but the hotel is air-conditioned. Then in the evening, as he goes outside, he can feel the stored-up warmth in everything streaming out and then once again, the sun in the mirrors.

In the winter, on the other hand, he sees almost nothing but darkness. Drives there in the dark, it's just as dark at the end of the journey as it is at the start, does his job, drives back again in the dark. Many live like this. What's more, when he started out at the hotel, he'd only done night shifts, that's how the position was advertised, evening clerk required, and he'd wanted the extra two hundred euros that was on offer, but then it got too much after all. You simply need more light, said the doctor. He

mentioned the two hundred euros. I see, said the doctor. In the end, he did ask his boss if he could have the day shift at least from time to time.

Giving up the constant night shifts would have done wonders for his social life too. He had a lot of friends and in actual fact he still has them, only they hardly see each other anymore because of the night shifts. They used to get together almost every evening for a game of something: pool, darts, skittles, badminton, at the weekends football and tennis, and they'd have a good meal along with it, pizza, burgers, toasted sandwiches, they used to drink shandies. A cheerful bunch, guys and girls mixed. With the daytime shift he could have had all of that again, but somehow it wasn't to be. I don't know. I don't know when exactly anymore, perhaps during the lonely nights behind the reception desk and sometimes standing in front of the door to listen to the rushing of the reeds and the lake, perhaps owing to the sunrises and sunsets, but a stillness enters him, which he doesn't have the heart to break. He drives home from work, lies down on his bed and reads poems, like he did when he was a schoolboy (and indeed, from the anthologies they used at school, which he still has), but not always; the stillness that has developed is not always stable enough to let words in. Sometimes not even music. (The whirring of the washing machine, by contrast, hardly ever gets in the way.) In the two or three hours before he lies down to sleep he then concentrates on not breaking that stillness. There are worse ways to live your life. It's clear, however, that his friends don't understand what's up with him and that he wouldn't be able to explain it to them either.

On the day that this story takes place, though, there was no tranquility to be had from start to finish. To begin with, he was almost involved in an accident. The linear village where he lives lies on a hillside, his house on a bend; it is particularly dangerous in the winter when the road is icy. Those coming down out of the bend skid here directly toward the house. Fortunately, there is a ditch in front of it, no one has ever crashed right into the house. And as far as he can remember, only three have ended up in the ditch. But now it is summer a tourist, not knowing the area and preoccupied with the view, as one inevitably is as a tourist (you might think they'd be going slowly, but no, at speed), someone ended up on the wrong side of the road, exactly where he, still somewhat bleary-eyed

himself, was moving the car off the drive. Screeching tires and eyes wrenched open on both sides. They were stationary there, no more than a finger's breadth of space between the bumpers, blocking both sides of the road, for a minute that lasted an eternity. Then both of them, without getting out or saying a word, reversed a little, and they were then able to drive past each other. With minimal effort he'd come away unscathed, yet when he arrived at the hotel his heart beat still hadn't got back to normal.

Later on, during lunch break, the boss asked him for a word.

To cut a long story short (she always says that: *Hello, to cut a long story short*): you are one of our best employees. Upstanding, focused, polite, loyal. I have complete faith in you.

Thank you, he said.

In short, she wanted to ask him if he could envisage becoming the reception manager. Which had been her job up until now, but she would be moving up to the next rung. For him it would mean being responsible for four members of staff and taking home an extra 350 euros each month.

Thanks, he said. Can I sleep on it?

Of course, said the boss. A little puzzled (or was that already disappointment in her voice?). Not because he'd asked for time to think - that is perfectly understandable - but because his expression had remained unchanged throughout the conversation. 350 is just 150 more than the night porter earns, but that only came up right at the end. And even before then: no surprise, no joy, no excitement, just politeness, as ever.

For the rest of the shift he went outside every time his colleague came back from her cigarette break. She - cigarette in one hand, cell phone in the other - organizes her life outside the hotel, or is simply living it, not refraining from doing so just because she's at work, a cheerful girl with long hair and red lipstick. The boss doesn't like all of this texting, or the girl's attitude, or the girl herself. He doesn't criticize either of them, he simply doesn't smoke or text, doesn't have to immediately inform anyone of anything or ask for advice. He just stands there next to the ashtray, his face turned toward the lake, both hands in his trouser pockets.

On the way home the sun blazed more brightly than he'd ever experienced before, draping everything in peony-red light. In-all-three-

mirrors-at-once wouldn't have stood a chance against it, against this deluge. As if it were a great river, the existence of which we had no idea about until it burst its banks. He had trouble seeing and became very tired. But he couldn't go straight home. He'd arranged to meet someone.

She's always too early, he generally runs a little late, he didn't have time to go home and change his shirt, he had to go as he was, in his receptionist's uniform, the tie stuffed into the breast pocket. I smell of sweat, of course. The blazer was on the back seat, and now that he had to give someone a lift, he could also see what a mess it was in the car. Mainly scrunched up sweet wrappers and fast-food packaging. He was really hungry now too, but he picked her up first.

She was standing by the edge of the pavement in the once-again soft residual light of the evening, wearing a short, tight-fitting dress and white high-heeled sandals. As he drew close to her, the last few meters, a nearby street lamp came on and her copper hair lit up. She was beautiful and cheerful and well-rested, as she always seems when he sees her. Every time he sees her she's on holiday and he's working. She comes precisely once a year, in the summer, and not for a long visit either. Because he can't make suggestions, she says when and where they meet and what they should do. This time she said she wanted to go to the big watchtower up on the mountain (in truth only a hill, not even four hundred meters high), that wooden monstrosity that she remembered from her childhood. A not insignificant number of compulsory trips led there (school and other grown-up things), and with each visit it became more and more dilapidated: engraved names, rusty nails, in the end the steps were blocked off. There's supposed to be a new one now. Let's drive to the tower and look down over the town by night.

Let's grab a sandwich first, he said. I'm starving.

He got himself a toasted cheese and ham sandwich at a takeout joint.

You shouldn't eat that stuff. Do we not want to go out for dinner instead? Or, something that unfortunately only occurred to her now, she ought to have brought a picnic basket. An outing, a picnic basket. A night-time picnic with a view of the town. It would have been lovely. The planning is all wrong, she accepts responsibility.

Never mind, he said. I've got this now.

She couldn't just sit down next to him and wait until he'd finished eating, she offered to drive, which was fine by him, he was very tired. He slid deep down into the passenger seat, his knees pressed against the glove compartment, the greasy sandwich near his mouth, ready to take a bite. A blob of cheese landed on his shirt. That'll never, ever come out, the shirt's ruined. Never mind. She drove the unfamiliar car choppily and at speed, he felt the bends in his stomach. When she changed pedals, her legs gleamed. In spite of the heat, she was wearing sheer tights. Shiny legs, shiny hair. She's older than me and looks younger because she makes an effort and I don't.

We don't want to make a great mystery out of the unusual relationship between the two of them, quite the contrary, we want to see the absurd situation for what it is; namely, that they are half-siblings with the same father, and that neither the father, nor either of the two mothers, wants them to see each other. She is thirty-three, he is thirty years old, and they meet up secretly once a year in the town where they were both born. He lives in an outlying village, in the same house as his father, an early retiree, and she, when she's there, stays with her mother in town. When they go out, they are asked where they are going and who with, so they say something or other, all it costs them is a smile, but it's absurd all the same. On account of this he always agrees to meet her, regardless of how tired he is, regardless of whether he was actually supposed to be doing something with someone else (there was a time when this might have been the case).

It was around 10 p.m., in principle it was dark, but of course towns are illuminated. They drove past the municipal park, through the underpass, which is too deep and gets waterlogged during heavy rainfall. The people who live on the mountain then have problems getting down to the town. It's the better-off who live on the mountain. The swimming pool is there, the tennis club, the town's best hotel. After the hotel there are no more houses, just the woods and the road to the watchtower.

Do I need to turn off here?

But she'd already turned. The wooded road is no longer illuminated, it's narrow, the tarmac rough, chipped off at the edges. She whistled the tune of a nursery rhyme, *Hansel and Gretel / got lost in the woods*, and laughed.

How are you? Are you doing OK? At work and everything?

Yes, he said. I've got the day shift again. (Tired, yes, but reasonably well-rested. No longer has to forgo sleep to be able to meet up with her. To sit sleeping with his eyes open on the grass at the shore of a bathing lake, while wasps drown in the juice bottle and she turns her shiny body back and forth in the sun.) It's much more convenient. Apart from the fact that you have to do more overtime. Today, for example, a group of Italians arrived just before the end of the shift and could only speak Italian. I had to stay because I'm the only one who has any knowledge of Italian, but to be honest mine leaves a lot to be desired. It worked somehow or other, but it wasn't very good either. Now I only speak it like someone who can't actually speak it. Even though it used to be my favorite language.

She consoled him, it wasn't his fault that there's no one here to practice with. Italians rarely come by this way. When were you last in Italy?

He was too tired to work it out. A long time ago, that's for sure. There's bound to be some refresher course on CD that could be listened to on the way to work.

He said, and knew that very second that he would never get himself such a CD.

Whatever he starts, he gives up on long before the end. He looked at his knuckles because he was reminded of how, during one of the apprenticeships that he'd abandoned, he'd learned how to cut vermicelli. The knife, the knuckles. That too would need to be re-examined one of these days: if I can still cut vermicelli.

The tower appeared on the right-hand side. It was made of light, yellowish wood. A short wooded path led to it. As if there were a couple of wooden picnic tables with benches in the darkness there too. She left the car parked out on the road. In white high-heeled sandals over the dark forest floor. She laughed at herself. This is so weird. After a while her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness and her feet discovered that the path was strewn with mulch so she didn't have to worry too much about tripping over stones or roots. All around the trees creaked and there was a rustling in the treetops even though there was no sign of any wind. Dark rustling, too dark for everything, it was a new moon. The sister looked up. Where she lives it's always so bright, most of the time she only sees a couple of stars. She is used to the fact that here by contrast there are always a great many. Just not today. A few low white-

colored cirrostratus clouds, and that was all.

Before they even reached the tower they began to suspect that it would be shut up. But they couldn't just give up straight away, they had to try. Of course: Shut up. Wooden tower, wooden steps, iron railings across the doorway. The space around it wasn't all that cozy either. Take a seat on the wooden railway in the children's play area? On the see-saw? She would. If she said to him, come on, let's have a go on the see-saw, he would play along. He himself would never make such a suggestion. Playing on a see-saw with his sister in the pitch-black woods. But she didn't suggest it. They got back in the car. Let's just sit here for a while. Be nice to sit in the car and talk.

Once again: How are things? With her this time.

Same old, same old. Things are going well at the office that she runs with her husband. Not much stress, and when there is, it's productive. The question of children is on the table, not so much because of their own desires, but because so many people around them are now becoming parents. They themselves are still undecided. (She is afraid of becoming ugly and unhappy. But she doesn't tell anyone apart from her husband that.)

And, how are your parents?

She asks, of course, because she wants to know what it is like living with their father, but every time he mainly tells her about his mother, who by now has also divorced the father and subsequently become ill, who is fighting to have her incapacity for work acknowledged, moved in with another man and then moved out again and bought herself a car, this one here, but then she couldn't pay the installments, so he sold his old car and took hers off her hands, he now pays the installments and if she wants to go somewhere, he drives her, but she's not pleased with this, after all he's out all day and at her age it's rare for someone to want to go anywhere at night.

She smiled. He forgot to give an account of their father, and he never asks her about her mother either. The woman his father left to take up with his mother. She's doing well, thanks, thought the sister. She has her health, a job and enough money to live on, and doesn't have a husband who drinks too much or snores. The only thing that you mustn't do is remind her of the man she divorced over thirty years ago because then she gets into a rage and only calms down when I spend a night somewhere else and she's relieved to see me the next morning.

(We'll outlive them, she told him last year.

Who knows, he said.)

And then, the other thing that happened today: I've been promoted.

Really?

She lit up with enthusiasm right away. Her hands, hair, legs were set in motion, everything about her began to glow. It's good to get promoted, to build a career, or at least "make something" of yourself. Seizing chances, making the most of opportunities. Within a given framework, or going beyond it, creating new frameworks. That's really good!

He hadn't really understood the part about the frameworks; he had already realized, as soon as the word career came up, that he didn't want it. He didn't want to become head receptionist. Four people under him and 350 euros more. Career. The very word.

I don't know, he said tentatively. I'm not sure it's worth all the stress.

Again she mentioned so-called positive stress. There's such a thing a positive stress, you know. He nodded. Of course. Sure. I know.

(The flying changeovers between one hobby and the next. Football kit off, shirt on, the others are already waiting at the pool hall, there's one girl there that you know a little, who's a possibility. He still thinks of them as "girls" but of course they're women by now. Some of them already have a marriage behind them. Some of them have a child or even two. It's never gone as far as him meeting the children.)

Maybe more stress is just what you need, she said next to him.

Suddenly he was so angry that he felt hot all over. He pressed his lips together. The remnants of the greasy cheese on them. I've gone red, no doubt. My red head above my white shirt collar. Thirty years old. My hair's already beginning to fall out.

She's not completely insensitive, she waited for him to calm down. Looked out into the dark wood, bid her time, and only then did she ask:

What's your dream for that matter? What would you most like to do?

(Nothing at all. To watch the sun rise and set. I would like to not live for longer than those few minutes of the day. Not to have to eat, nothing. To sleep, like a mythical creature. It sleeps, it wakes to see the sun rise and set, then it sleeps again. Always the same, in perpetuity.)

He said out loud (and only to stop his rage from getting out of hand, to be able to continue talking to her): A sandwich shop. Like the one we were just at. Toasted sandwiches.

And she, of course, was right behind him. Enthusiastic, as is her wont.

A sandwich shop, yeah, why not? But of course what would be really good would be if it weren't some run-down greasy spoon, like the one we were just at, but like an Italian bar. With a posh espresso machine, the kind you have to spend half an hour at closing time cleaning because that's the only way to get good coffee out of it. And of course there'd be tramezzini or toasted sandwiches as he called them, but there they'd be called tramezzini. And there'd be one sort with grilled vegetables and they'd call that tramezzini with antipasti. The odd Italian tourist would come into this bar and he would be able to speak to them in Italian. In time, the word would spread, the Italians would tell other Italians and somewhere along the line traveling Italians would make a detour into this picturesque little town, which is worth a visit anyway, especially for his bar. One day the town would even be twinned with a little Italian town of a similar size, the Italian men would fall in love with local women, the local men would fall in love with Italian women, just like he would, and I would end up with Italian nieces and nephews.

She laughed again and because she shone so nicely, her eyes, her lips, her cheeks, he stopped being angry and started to smile a bit too.

Or have you already got someone? (A woman, that is.)

He stopped smiling and said: Not at the moment.

Pity, she said and sighed. And then both of their minds turned to someone called Andrea, who had been his girlfriend for seven years and then even his fiancée before she left him.

She left him because he worked nights and slept during the day and when he was awake, he hardly said a word and actually for most of the small amount of time that they could spend together he was busy being at the beck and call of his fickle parents, not to mention the money they always needed for this and that, medication, sick notes, consumer products that proved to be completely useless. Forget it, although things would always go right down to the marrow. What if we ever have children?

At the time she said that she could understand Andrea's point of view.

He said then and still says now: A partner is supposed to tough it out with you.

No matter what it is? No matter how long? And if it goes on forever? It wouldn't have gone on forever.

Seven years is a lot. And by now it would be ten. And that's just what's already behind us.

(She only wants to get revenge on her father, who wasn't there for her, he thought and asked: Can we talk about something else?)

They sat in the car in silence. Ten seconds, or twenty. In the darkness of the wood, of the sky.

Then, suddenly, out of nothing, no, from below, from the direction of the town, the sound of an engine howling at high speed and very bright light. A great big car was coming toward them, they could see it, its headlights, that it was coming *right* at them, not just vaguely in their direction, but that was surely just an optical illusion, it would pass them by, even if only by a hair's breadth and furiously fast. But that's not what happened, instead it continued coming at them, swift and loud, and before they understood what was going on, it struck them with a murderous bang. It shunted them away, down off the road. Not to where the mulchy path led to the tower, but to the side, down the slope. The handbrake was on, but they slid all the same, even though she had also reflexively slammed on the brakes. Fortunately they didn't slide far, a tree soon stood in their way; they struck it and settled there. Above them, spun lengthways across the road by the force of the crash, super-bright headlight still streaming: a huge jeep.

The engine was still running when the driver jumped out. He shielded his eyes and called, Hello?!, but he stayed close by his own car, didn't come toward them, turned in fact, ran round the jeep to the passenger side, opened the door and spoke to someone.

Everything OK? the sister asked her passenger. Are you hurt?

He wasn't injured. Neither was she. They were able to open the doors too.

Hello?! shouted the jeep driver. Standing there again like he was a moment ago, shielding his eyes. Shaven head, white trousers, a shirt with some slogan on it. A textbook cliché.

Would you mind switching off your headlights? cried the sister. Switch the lights off! We can't see a thing!

The bald man switched off the engine and most of the lights, emerged again from the car, and started shouting.

You were just there in the middle of the road! Slap-bang in the middle of the road! No headlights! You must be out of your minds! No headlights in the middle of the road!

Is that the only thing you can think of? The sister, shaking debris from the forest floor out of her shoes. Can you not see what's happened

to the car? The first thing you do is check whether anyone's injured. Are you guys injured?

Doesn't look like it.

The driver's girlfriend continued to stay put, sat trembling behind the windowpane. The driver of the jeep called the police.

The young man now also got out of the car. His side was lodged further down the slope, he had to brace himself against the car to stand. He groped his way forward to see the impact site. The tree, which was deeply embedded in the bonnet, as if it had grown like that. A write-off. The car's a write-off.

Everything alright?

I need it to get to work tomorrow, he said.

Are you insured?

Am I insured? he shouted. Well, what d'ya mean? Am I insured? Am I? Insured?

He inched his way along the car, used his hands to help, dug his fingers into the slope, proceeded on all fours up to the road and, having reached it, stomped off straight away down the mountain.

She shouted for him to wait, the jeep driver was shouting too, where was he going? he should stay put, the police would be here in a minute, but he: continued running down toward the town. He could still run fast. He didn't train anymore, but all the same. Going downhill is hard on the knees after a while, never mind. She doesn't stand a chance of catching up with him in her high-heels, but she gives it a shot. Up the slope on all fours, twists her ankle treading on the edge of the tarmac as she takes her first step back on the road, re-finds her balance and runs after him.

The driver of the jeep couldn't believe it. What the two of them were doing. Fleeing the scene of an accident! Are you completely ... ?

Her high-heeled sandals on the steep road. Sometimes tapping, sometimes shuffling and stumbling. On and on until she started to skid so much that she slipped and fell. Her feet slid forward, she sat down on her backside. Felt her tights tearing at her calves and bum, the skin beneath grazed. The backs of the sandal heels too, that goes without saying. They've had it, while the cuts on her skin are hardly worth mentioning. The little stones that stick and then fall off again. She sat on the road, her skirt bunched up around her waist, and called after her brother. He was already out of sight. But the jeep driver was coming downhill toward her. He wasn't running, perhaps he just wanted to help.

Sitting, she removed her shoes, took them in her hand, pulled herself together and continued running down the slope. The rough tarmac cut into the heels of her feet, but she'd only really notice that the next day. The jeep driver had stopped, perhaps his girlfriend had called to him not to leave her there alone, perhaps he'd realized: there's no point following that pair.

She ran down to the T-junction of the main road. She had stopped calling his name (it's Peter, and hers Petra, can you imagine), she didn't have the lungs for it any more. The street was brightly lit and deserted, she pulled down her dress enough to cover her knickers. Shoes still off, she continued down the mountain.

She found him not far away, standing by the railings of the swimming pool. From there you could see the town a little, but he wasn't looking at the town, rather at the outdoor area of the swimming pool, which had already closed for the night. Next to it is the tennis club. He'd played at one like that as a teenager. When he was still a talented hopeful.

He was lost in contemplation of the blue water. It is blue because the walls of the pool are tiled blue. Perhaps he had even forgotten her for a moment, she certainly hadn't been audible for a while. He only saw her as she came to a standstill next to him, shoes in hand. On the road behind her two police cars were driving up the hill.

(You just have better luck, he thought. You just have better luck. Of course, I can't hold it against you, but it's all very well for you to talk.)

I can lend you money, she said. Not a fortune, but something or other.

No need. I can use my cousin's moped for the time being.

(The sunrise on that moped.)

What time is it?

Just before 11 o'clock.

(Still seven hours to go.)

Your shirt's torn.

(So it is. How did that happen? Never mind. Was already on its way out anyway. Tramezzini prosciutto formaggi.) Never mind, he said out loud. It's just a thing.

He looked at her standing there in torn tights, her hands dirty. She still looked radiant. Sleek, well-rested. He wasn't angry with her. Why should

he be? She was simply alien. (I'm sorry, but that's the way it is. I don't have anyone who's like me.)

It'll be alright, he said. I'm only thirty. My best years are yet to come.

He said it with a smile because the thought of the morning sun in the moped's rear-view mirror had made him calm enough to realize that for all intents and purposes they were complete strangers here, and realizing this had, in turn, liberated him enough to forgive her. Even though there wasn't actually anything to forgive.

He said: I'd probably better go back up there.

She said: I'll come with you.

Don't you want to put your shoes back on?

*Translated by Frances Jackson*

## Melinda Nadj Abonji



Melinda Nadj Abonji was born in 1968 in Becsej in Serbia and moved to Switzerland with her family in the early 1970s. She lives in Zurich, working as a writer and musician. She has received numerous awards for her writing, including a scholarship from the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin and a Grenzgänger Scholarship from the Robert Bosch Foundation. In 2010 she was awarded the German Book Prize and the Swiss Book Prize for her novel *Tauben fliegen auf*. In 2018 Nadj Abonji won the Zurich Cantonal Bank's Schiller Prize for her novel *Schildkrötensoldat*.

### Selected publications :

*Schildkrötensoldat*, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017

*Tauben fliegen auf*, Jung und Jung Verlag, 2010

*Im Schaufenster im Frühling*, Ammann Verlag, 2004

Melinda Nadj Abonji, Schildkrötensoldat [Tortoise Soldier],  
novel  
Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017, 173 pages

## Tasting the world with words

The summer is blazing hot and the sky cloudless. Somewhere in the Balkans, in front of his parents' run-down house, a nine-year-old boy is playing with his dog. He throws an egg into the air, the dog doesn't manage to catch it, and ends up licking it off the ground. Next time you'll do it, says the boy.

Later, he'll be the one to need this sort of encouragement. Because he's different. Different from how his parents want him to be, different from other young men, and different from his fellow soldiers. Zoltán's not right in the head. He's not an idiot, but someone who's hesitant in his speech, who listens carefully, who attends to what he hears going on inside himself, who sees a meaning in words and things that people around him just don't see.

The main character of Swiss writer Melinda Nadj Abonji's third novel is an anti-hero with a disability, an introverted, sensitive outsider. Zoltán had an accident. He fell from a motorbike driven by his father, a railwayman. Since then he often has the shakes, he's easily scared, and can't stop the "fluttering of his thoughts." He can only find peace when he's solving crossword puzzles or lovingly tending a small garden. His sensuality is vegetative, and that which others take to be a stammer is the tasting of each individual letter. Nevertheless his parents feel great disappointment. They'd pinned all their hopes on their only son. He was meant to bring light to their lives, whereas now they're mired in their misery – drinking, cursing, and fighting.

Zoltán becomes an apprentice baker. He's exploited and abused, downgraded to a baker's assistant and finally, as the civil war in Yugoslavia looms on the horizon, gets called up. This offers a final glimmer of hope to his parents, the hope that their useless son could be made into a man, and maybe even a hero.

But there's hardly anyone less suited to a system that is both strictly regimented and contemptuous of humanity than Zoltán; they shave his head, which he retracts like a tortoise when he's repeatedly bullied

and ridiculed in the barracks yard. He only survives the torment with the help of his imagination and another outsider, who becomes his friend. But when the friend dies after a grueling forced march, Zoltán breaks down. After an epileptic fit he's discharged from the army. This spares him from the battle to come, but his life cannot be saved. As a consequence of his ordeals and the wrong medical treatment he dies a quiet and unremarkable death in his parents' kitchen.

The novel takes place in the 1990s in Vojvodina, the area of the former Yugoslavia in which Nadj Abonji was born. She spent her first years there among the Hungarian-speaking minority community before moving with her parents to Switzerland at the age of five. The experience of multilingualism lies beneath the novel like an undercoat. Like her protagonist, the author traces the meanings of words and combines them with one another, inventing new connections and opening up surprising fields of association to spell out the world anew. A distinctive poetic voice emerges, which is able to reflect raw reality but also to resist it. The language of Nadj Abonji, who is also a musician, has an unusually rhythmic composition, whereby even individual letters of the alphabet are played with in order to create its particular cadence.

Alternating with Zoltán's narrative voice, there is a second voice – that of his cousin, Anna. She is on her way to Zoltán's grave, and her memories and commentary link the past with the present, an interior perspective with an exterior view of a short life. They form an epitaph for the novel. Although *Schildkrötensoldat* excels at precise descriptions of milieu and landscape, the characters and their experiences are not tied to geography. Rather, the novel is about the understanding of reality through narration, about the power of naming, the support that words can provide when everything around you is collapsing and you can no longer build on the goodness and reason of your fellow human beings.

*By Carsten Hueck, translated by Mandy Wight*

Sample Translation: *Schildkrötensoldat*  
(pp. 7-22)

He stood there next to the chicken coop, he might have just drunk an egg or something that has nothing to do with eggs or water or milk at all. Zoli must have drunk the cloudless sky, its endless blue. His eyes were alert, wide open on his broad, pale face. The snot stuck to his nose – he made no move to wipe it away. He liked chickens, cats, pigs. He avoided dogs, except one called Tango. Every morning an egg for his Tango. Zoltán stood there next to the chicken coop, holding the egg that was still warm from the chicken. “I have a warm, fresh egg for you. I have something wonderful for you, Tango!”

“Zoli, wipe that snot away! Stop talking to the dog!” his mother called from the garden.

“Tango, I’ll give you a whole world to eat!” and Zoli did not move. His snot glistened in the sun. Tango whirled around like a dervish, barking as he went. His high-pitched yapping roused even the washing line that was suspended across the yard. Zoli held out his hand with the egg on it – an egg as white as his skin, as the washing that hung on the line. They put on this show every day. A dog spinning round as if demented, a nine-year-old boy delaying with impossible calm the moment when the egg is snatched, the dog’s shaggy black legs, the boy, grimy and majestic. The sun, around which the dog ran, anticlockwise, clockwise.

“Give him the egg, just get on with it, what are you waiting for?”

Zoli stood there, he didn’t even blink, didn’t react at all, not in the slightest. Only a small smile played at his lips, and the corncobs had eyes, the chickens applauded, the dust whirled up in excitement. Zoli waited. Until a small, fiery demon bit his calf and he threw the egg into the air at last, up into the blue sky, and Tango the dog immediately stopped his circles; in one leap he snatched at the egg – the world – which exploded a moment later on the paving slabs with a sharp, harsh sound. “Next time you’ll do it, next time you’ll definitely catch it in the air,” said Zoli, as the dog eagerly licked the egg from the ground.

“Isn’t that right, Hanna? He’ll get it next time?” Zoli looked at me, and I was so surprised to hear him talking to me that I couldn’t answer, and he came over to me with his wide eyes. He stood right next to me. I felt dizzy as he said: “I know exactly what it feels like for my dog when his tongue licks the egg off the ground, I know just what that’s like.”

Zoltán. My aunt Zorka’s son.

The last time I saw you was years ago, or was it yesterday, when you appeared to me again during the night. No, it wasn’t a dream. Dreams can be cast aside, written off as “only a dream.” I talk to you, but you don’t answer. I know – where you are, people are usually silent. Or am I deluding myself? Maybe I can’t hear you? Is it possible to train the ears to hear what can’t be heard? To detect sound waves that are reserved for bats, or even just for moths whose ears are in their chests, two cavities that are covered with membranes and are so delicate they can detect the highest frequencies with no trouble – the quietest noises, which could be magnified ten times and we humans still wouldn’t be able to hear them.

I am not a bat, nor a moth, but I see you, you appear to me. Appear, what a word. You look at me with the same expression you used to wear when you looked at me, when we were children. But perhaps you were never a child. Although I was older, I was always slightly afraid of you, and yet I still allowed your lips, sticky with sugar, to touch mine, that spring day when we were sitting on your bed eating *palacsinta*. “We’re getting married,” you said, although marriage between two cousins is the highest sin according to the church. “Why don’t you close your eyes when you kiss?” I asked you. “Do you know, Hanna, it’s definitely true that I sleep with my eyes open too.” And there it was again, my slight fear of you, my desire to kiss you again.

We didn’t kiss again, ever, not even on the cheek. We often stared at each other, silently, and I was always the first to give in. I should use another word, as “give in” implies a fight, but we never fought with our gazes, or at least you didn’t. I looked away, and you talked. You told me, for example, that school was an obstacle made up of numbers and letters. And it definitely wasn’t useful to know that two and two equals four; after all, no one could ever say that two chairs are the same as two nuts. Whenever Zoli asked a question in class everyone just laughed, and the teacher said that Zoli should keep his incessant questions in his

head, so from then on Zoli only asked anything when he did so without noticing, when his mouth seemed to start speaking of its own accord. "But Hanna, you know what I'm talking about, don't you?" I knew and I didn't know.

We sat on Zoli's bed, a sofa bed. "Funny creatures live in their bellies," said Zoli, and plumped up the cushions before offering me a padded seat, one summer's day when I dropped round unannounced. Every time I knocked on the shabby door, when Zorka's loud voice invited me to come in, every time I opened the door that was left ajar, took off my shoes and cautiously lifted the mosquito net, not just on that particular summer's day, I felt the need to let the stained and patched-up fabric fall down again, to put my shoes back on and disappear.

As if I sensed even then that this house smelled not only of cigarettes, coffee, sweat and iron, but of fate – however grand and terrifying that sounds – fate, irreversible, huge, acts of providence sent by God; and how dishonest to pin everything on a power that guides human life, which has nothing to do with individual responsibility, with our own small lives, and to hide behind the Almighty whenever we are required to give human answers to human questions. I know now that we often talk about fate when what we really ought to do is to stop talking. Or to tell stories. No, at that time I never thought about fate. I was just afraid of what awaited me behind that curtain, and I probably sensed that poverty always had consequences.

P-L-U-M-D-U-M-P-L-I-N-G-D-A-Y

I fell off the motorbike that day like a sack of potatoes, my father rode on without me, it took him ages to notice there was no one behind him, as I lay in the road, fresh bread in my satchel

vrrrrrrrrm

my father came riding back, I heard him clearly even though I was unconscious, as they all said later, my father came back into my world, which was orange, red, turquoise and purple, there were flowers in every corner and along every border of my world, and these flowers smelled like bread, like the white bread that lay next to me in the dust, and I

heard my father calling my name, and I heard his voice, it sputtered over the flowers, shook me by the shoulder, *Zoli, Zoli!* and I sent my Papa a plague of locusts, whistling mice that would make his knees knock, I called the neighbour's dog to come and lick his calves – he hates that so much – there's nothing I didn't wish on him to make him leave me in peace

why would he do that? well I'll tell you, if you're patient, and of course you are, Papa tugged on my earlobes, son, get up, it's plum dumpling day today, remember? and there was another voice as well as papa's, and this voice hissed, sent my flowers spinning, your boy is bleeding, look, here, his head! quick, we need to call a doctor!

I must say I knew then where my flowers came from, when the whispering voice said I was bleeding I knew straight away that my flowers were growing out of the blood, yes, out of the bleeding hole in my head, and I swear on my life I've never seen such beautiful flowers, they weren't carnations or roses, nor irises or gerberas, tulips or even begonias, they weren't flowers at all, they were birds' heads, oh no, I'm not making this up, I'd have to say they were bunting heads, shaped like flowers,

but they weren't brown, weren't bland or banal like buntings are, instead, behind my eyelids the buntings gleamed a colour red that exists only in our imaginations, in the shape of flowers but they dragged me from my paradise garden, a garlic-doctor pumped me up with his air, patted me, took my wrist, he lifted my eyelids as though he could see something there in my eyeballs, yes, yes, the warped world, and then they heaved me into a vehicle, he's heavier than he looks, they said, all these hands around me, all this sweating from the exertion, just let me be, why can no one hear me? so much fuss, they all kept talking at me, leave me alone, I screamed, but no one, no one heard me, and my flower-birds grew smaller and smaller, thinner, and once the red was all washed out again they flew away, because of the raised, crazed voices, they left me behind, and that, that is the reason I cried as I opened my eyes, look, he's crying, said the doctor, the nurse, and my father's face appeared above me, son, you're bawling like a baby, and us? we're sick with worry, and my father smacked a kiss on my skin, where's my bread?

they all gawped at me, he's asking for his bread, listen to him, he wants to know where his bread is

and at that moment, that's when I jumped up, grabbed the doctor by

his coat collar, puked my words on his white righteousness, disturbed his perfectly parted hair with my rage, and I screamed, told them why I'd cried, that because of them, my flowers ... the birds ... and my colours ... and I was lying in the gold

dust ... and the doctor's help, which stinks of money, which he spirits away in his coat pocket ...

and my Papa gapes at me, Zoli, is that you, it can't be you, you've never talked like that before, Zoli, what is this devil inside you?

the Zoli devil!

the dust devil!

the gypsy devil!

P-L-U-M-D-U-M-P-L-I-N-G-D-A-Y- oh yes, the day we get to eat plum dumplings, usually on a Friday, I love to free the plums from their doughy potato coats, to take the plums, still hot, almost too hot, and make them vanish into my mouth, and I can easily eat seven to ten dumplings, every time.

B-A-S-T-A-R-D-B-L-O-O-D

That's when it all started, I found out later, too much blood bubbled out of my head, blood doesn't bubble, I said to Papa, but you didn't see it, how it all came out, your blood, a proper fountain shot out of your head, I tell you, and Papa grabs the garden hose, sprays me between the legs, you see, like that!

and I don't bother telling him that he just said "the blood shot out of your head," shot or bubbled, Papa doesn't care at all, he just wants to tell me again how I fell off the motorbike like a sack of potatoes - although he didn't even notice that I was no longer sitting behind him, so how does he know I fell off the bike "like a sack of potatoes"? - Father wants to tell me again that this day was the beginning of the end, and I have to take the hose from him, because he has no idea how much drinking water my flowers need, on that day I became as thick as a pistol, he says

P-I-S-T-O-L-

and he sits down on the bench with a sigh, aims a gob of spit at a ripe blackberry, stop that, I tell him, they don't like it, your spit, but he starts

to moan, pulls at his bristle, you could have been something, Zoli, damn goat shit, damn pig manure, damn iron taste in your mouth, you could have saved yourself from this shit, instead you let yourself fall off the motorbike, lying in the dust like a dead person, and when you finally wake up you grab the doctor by the collar as though he's ruined your life, Zoli ... and my Papa burps carbon dioxide in my face

fatherly love, dammit!

and Papa hands me the bottle, I bring it to my lips, the fluffy clouds high above me, oh, this weather, it robs my garden of all its water, and I turn away, towards my trees and bushes and flowers, and my father starts to howl, rams his railway shoes into my calf, I slump over, the hose falls from my hand, aims its jet into the blackberry hedge, but the bottle's belly remains unscathed in my right hand, behind me Papa, who can no longer hold back his loud wailing, you could have saved me, me and my heart, Papa sobs, making my head shrink into my neck, his walnut fists, hard as a volley of hail between my shoulder blades, my gaze boring into the blackberries lying in the dust, oh the blackberries, formed of tiny individual berries, this purple that sparkles after a light drizzle, the ugly holes left behind by the bugs that eat the berries

the beginning of the end, says Papa, he pulls the bottle from my fingers, gurgles the beer in his throat, cries into my back, and do you know what he means by that? My tremor started when I fell off the motorbike, Papa says, that was the beginning of the end, since then my heart hasn't been beating quite right, I've become as jumpy as a little girl, a young lad who flinches during a thunderstorm, has there ever been anything like it? A towering lad who shits himself for no reason – overnight, Papa says, I turned into a crazy lad who no longer listens to anyone ...

it happens, and whenever it happens I tremble all over, I get this fluttering feeling, my thoughts push against the wall of my mind and I am me without Zoli, you want to know what that means? I don't know, even if you're really patient I won't be able to explain it to you exactly, but I can tell you that my father never wanted to know what that meant, he became wild and angry and started sweating whenever I told him I am me without Zoli, that's it, this miserable nonsense in your head! and Papa always started again with his beginning of the end, that when the blood bubbled out it left only nonsense in my head, of course the boss had to move me to a different role! a puny labourer and a garden fool,

that's what I've become, with a flower between my legs instead of a cock, the fresh bread, the beautiful money, where has it gone?

he, who gave his child his own name, and back then everyone congratulated him on the birth of his son, he was as proud as a peacock of this hairless being, of this nothing that could have been something, after all, people always need bread, a baker with his own business, where others could sit on pleasant, sunny evenings, that could have been you, sobs Papa, and his free hand strokes my back - a snuffling animal waiting for food

B-A-C-K-

and Papa starts to babble, I baptise you Zoltán, Kertész Zoltán! He douses himself, and me too, from behind, and the beer makes my hair wet, a few drops trickle out, forming clumps in the dust in front of me, a memorial for Papa's heartache

O-H-

it's true, I could have saved my father, I could have dusted everything with fresh white flour, I could have made his one and only lousy life rise in a light bread dough

beautiful B-R-E-A-D- good B-R-E-A-D- daily B-R-E-A-D-

I could have worn a stiff baker's hat, a baker's apron, and the whole village would have bought, would definitely have bought their bread from me, every season would have started and ended with me, from Easter cakes to plaited Christmas loaves, the cycle of a year, a book that is opened and shut again, I would always have smelled of fresh yeast, but of course I would have, my father would have washed out his gypsy blood on my white profession, every day, we would no longer have been the tracks, the forest, the dirt, the cattle, entrails and chicken feet, the roots, stolen wood for the fire, coffee grounds and odds and ends

we would have been the oven, the warmth, oh yes, we would have been the paved roads, junctions, traffic lights, healthy teeth, pets, houses with English toilets, a benevolent look, a chinwag in the market square, we would have been the village bakery, the angels people dream of, not sons of bitches

bastard blood! we would have chased away the mangy cats without beating them with a broomstick, and the village would have been proud of us

Papa, why do you call me a bastard? B-A-S-T-A-R-D- I am your son, after all ...

whose is this empty bottle? whose is this useless bottle, which insults my hand with its useless weight? have I become the father of a stuttering idiot?

and my Papa has no more strength left, his heart, a limp, tortured piece of meat, and the bottle has no belly any more, no throat, the shards lie in the dust, next to the blackberries

Zoli ...

Papa's voice right next to my ear, his sobs, the blood, Zoli, it bubbled out of your head

think of the goats when they rush out through the gates

think of a black cloud as it breaks

think of your mother when she starts to curse

that's what it was like, just like that, said Papa, when the blood bubbled out of your head, the beginning of the end

yes, I will never be able to save Papa

Blood, there's dried crusty blood or fresh blood that tastes like iron, blood that drips, thick and heavy and pitiful, and the blood under the skin, it's nothing more than warmth and cold, but Papa, he really doesn't want to know that.

S-M-O-C-K- I-N-G

I watch as my father flies, he flies flies and flies high above, I think to myself that he's going to visit heaven on this humid evening, wants to tickle heaven with his calloused fingers, my father says himself that he has calloused fingers CA-L-L-O-U-S-E-D- how high he flies - my father, who still works on the tracks, with the trains, who shunts, bends over, gets his hands dirty, who wheezes and coughs, sweats his beer out of his forehead -

he flies flies flies and flies in his work smock, which smells of oil, it's grubby even when it's just been washed, but who is responsible for this rocket drive motor in his backside now, this firework energy glowing in his eyes? Papaaaaa! I call to him, and I stand in the garden by the rosebush, and from my fingers shoots a trail of light that definitely has five colours in it, I've just given the roses their daily drinking water,

Papaaaaa! and my colourful five-coloured light flows to his smock, and it looks so beautiful, so real, it definitely looks more beautiful than any I've ever seen before, my father is now sitting – and if you don't believe me, I feel truly sorry for you – on a glowing throne, no, I must say on a splendidly glittering glowing throne, which has grown and shot out of my fingers, he sits there, a blue Smock King, he no longer looks like the man I know, he isn't sweating, he isn't coughing, he sits there with his arms hanging down, he nods and smiles, it must be because he is tickling heaven with his bristle P-I-G-B-R-I-S-T-L-E- says my Papa

my Papaaaaa King! I call to him – the fact that he can sit there and glow like that, smile like that and be so content, that his smock is no longer a smock, but rather a cornflower-blue robe in the dirty yellow sky, that this firework energy in his eyes shines down as far as me, to the rose garden, and my tea roses are probably spraying out an almost outrageous magic scent because of this – the fact that everything is how it is, that I know this, is all down to me, his son ...

Papa, you are the Smock King, and the yellow heaven, soon it will open and reveal all its wonders ...

I propped myself up in bed and looked over at Papa, he was sitting alone in the kitchen, his bare legs stretched out in front of him, in my direction, do you hear, Smock King?

but Papa babbled, in his eyes the autumn turned, and the winter, the starless nights, a grimy moon, on his tongue Mother danced with an oily red mouth and a new hairdo, goodbye both of you, take care, I'll be back soon ...

O-H-

*Translated by Alyson Coombes*

# Ulrich Peltzer



Born 1956 in Krefeld, North Rhine-Westphalia, Ulrich Peltzer studied philosophy and psychology in Berlin, where he has lived since 1975. From the mid-1990s, he has spent long periods in New York. He has received many awards for his work, including the Berlin Literature Prize and the Heinrich Böll Prize. His most recent novel *Das bessere Leben* was shortlisted for the 2015 German Book Prize and was awarded the Marieluise Fleißer Prize, the Peter Weiss Prize, and the Franz Hessel Prize. Since 2015 Ulrich Peltzer has been director of the literature department of Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

## Selected publications:

*Das bessere Leben*, S. Fischer Verlag, 2015

*Teil der Lösung*, Ammann Verlag, 2007; *Part of the Solution*, Seagull Books, 2011

*Bryant Park*, Ammann Verlag, 2002

*Alle oder keiner*, Ammann Verlag, 1999

*Die Sünden der Faulheit*, Ammann Verlag, 1987

Ulrich Peltzer, *Das bessere Leben* [A Better Life], novel  
Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2015, 448 pages

## A whirlwind of voices around money and art

When it comes to channeling the complexity of sociopolitical issues through individual experience, Ulrich Peltzer is uniquely successful among German writers. He writes graphically while keeping an eye on the bigger picture. He is aware of current debates but also of the dangers of sloganeering.

The best way to describe his novel *Das bessere Leben* is through the negative space around it: What *isn't* this novel? It is not a big business novel, it is not a book about the world of high finance, not a swansong for left-wing ideals, not a reckoning with capitalism's fortune hunters. Yet all of these things come into it. Two protagonists define the book: both in their mid-fifties, earning their money in the global economy. Sylvester Lee Fleming – born in England, raised in the US, now at home all over the world – has something to do with insurance, if his business card is to be believed. Aside from this he's a kind of fundraiser who generates the situations he then solves. Assisted by various dubious henchmen he's not afraid of methods that could reasonably be classed as blackmail. Some people need money; others have it. It becomes inevitable that the man who acts as the hinge between these two situations becomes the most fascinating character in the novel, in all his diabolical elegance.

The other protagonist is Jochen Brockmann. His field of operation is much more conventional: as sales manager of an ailing Italian business that makes machinery for coating textiles and metals, he presides over something very material. Like the author, Brockmann comes from the Lower Rhine region. Around Brockmann and Fleming a large supporting cast is gathered – friends, former companions, family, lovers, and ex-wives. All this is narrated with hard cuts, concisions, and ellipses. The associative space Peltzer creates in the process, a mixture of distinctive language and precise, clearly structured scenes, is simultaneously vivid and enlightening.

A whirlwind of voices is whipped up. Fleming witnessed and was involved in the Kent State Massacre of May 4, 1970, in which the Ohio National Guard shot four students dead during a demonstration at Kent

State University against US foreign policy in Vietnam. Fleming was bound to one of the victims, Allison Krause, by shared political convictions and a great love. Brockmann, on the other hand, son of a doctor couple, recalls the provincial left-wing anarchist scene of his youth. They each have a good life now. They have money, in abundance. But something has been lost. The better life might be the utopia that Peltzer traces through literary form, without stating its potential connotations. It is ingenious and elegant at the same time.

*By Christoph Schröder, translated by Steph Morris*

## Sample Translation: Das bessere Leben (pp. 7-19)

He sat up with a jolt. Darkness all around him. No sound, just his breathing. The crash as the roof of the Reserve Officer Training Corps collapsed. Acrid smoke, flashes of light, red and blue, over the heads of the cheering crowd. Gasping, Sylvester Lee Fleming freed himself from the twisted sheets and rubbed his neck. This had been going on for days, ever since he arrived in São Paulo. Yesterday (it was yesterday, wasn't it?) battles with the cops on North Water St. before everyone ran towards the city centre, stones flying at store windows, garbage cans burning, repeated chants and cries: Stop This War!

Fleming felt for the switch on the bedside lamp. Velvety, yellow light fell on the magazine he'd been reading before he went to sleep (*Newsweek*). He caught the blur of a half-empty beer (*Antarctica*) between the sofa and armchairs in the far reaches of the room. The floor-to-ceiling curtains were drawn, behind them were windows you couldn't open, here on the eighteenth floor – an expanse of soundproofed plate-glass with a view of other glassy expanses, other skyscrapers, a hair's breadth away, day and night, through the haze (a canopy of toxic particles) left by hovering helicopters.

Yep, the beer needed finishing. As he glanced at his watch (just after three) the air-con came on and soft white noise filled every corner of the hotel room. One-handed, Fleming disentangled the covers – a blanket and a thin sheet – and spread them over his bare legs. Then he sank back into the pillows, holding the slender beer bottle on his greying breast, the other arm supporting his head. The witching hour, he thought (forced to smile), solitary hunters, dreams like full-on assaults, filling him with an alien panic. As if he'd been in real danger back then from the batons, the bayonets, after they (the mayor and his cronies) had called in the Ohio Army National Guard to enforce the curfew ... jeeps full of heavily armed troops on the streets, deafening megaphones. That must have been ... must have been Saturday, the weekend before the massacre.

The logo on the bottle featured two penguins facing each other in a red oval, encircled by stylized ears of barley and the words "Cerveja Pilsen, Desde 1885." He hadn't really noticed the penguins before, but it made sense, on a beer called *Antarctica*, around since 1885. The year of

the Mahdi: it shot through his consciousness (like an order). By January the rebels were outside Khartoum. Then they conquered the city and sealed Gordon Pasha's gruesome fate, as described in textbooks and regiment chronicles. A boy in boarding-school uniform butchers his remembrance in front a bored class: "*His life was England's glory. His death was England's pride.*" Fleming couldn't remember anything except the last lines of Kipling's poem (and he was really trying). Verbose invocations that had never brought a single soul back to life. He drank and closed his eyes.

The crash had certainly not been as loud that evening as in his sleep now, just a muffled bang immediately swallowed by the raging crackle of the fire, the howling sirens, not forgetting the crowd cheering as the roof fell to the ground, throwing up a parachute of sparks. Maybe someone had poured petrol or spirit through the broken windows. The weathered wood of the ROTC burned fiercely, in seconds. A blazing heat spread. People turned aside, shielded eyes with arms. Did you do that? He asked himself. He had (along with others, not alone) slashed the firefighters' hoses. Was the lovely Allison not involved too - with her righteous anger at the war, at the machinations of a regime which, as she used to say, had been bought? All those young faces in the glow of the flames, emergency lights revolving on police cars, banks of fire engines, slogans shouted through the fumes, coughing, laughing, hundreds of people (or more) gathered round the ROTC, and up the hill behind it, under the trees on the brow. From there you might have thought it was a festival, one of the wild parties at the end of the semester which got a little out of hand till the administration ... As if the main building might burn down. An SOS call right to the top where (clearly) they were only waiting for an excuse to send in the troops, to teach them (expedient idiots) a lesson they wouldn't forget in a hurry. Of course, Fleming thought, no doubt about it. He drained the bottle and placed it next to the bed.

There was no explanation - no plausible one anyway. Vindictive elves who sat on his chest as soon as he fell asleep and stole his breath although they didn't have the slightest excuse, all things considered. Perhaps the result of some mistake he'd made, thirty or forty years ago, something inexcusable, which could only be paid for like this, in dreams. Fleming had never (as far as he knew) felt fear in tricky situations where others might lose their heads, might panic - as happened when fantasies clashed with the world, always a painful collision.

He glanced around the room. The curtains were darkened by vague shadows, large marks whose outlines were lost in the pleats. Two club chairs, a couch, and a high-backed revolving office seat. Fleming had moved the desk to face the plate-glass windows to avoid staring at the ochre walls as he worked – screen, wall, screen, wall, like a correctional institution. The two rooms on the executive floor he'd reserved were already full ... as if they had no idea what they were doing, as if they hadn't sent him the confirmation, these ... Don't swear, he told himself, pulling the covers up higher. Poor sods sitting at their shabby terminals. Ask again tomorrow.

A click (like a bolt hitting an empty cylinder) and the white noise of the air-con gradually subsided, leaving nothing but silence, a sticky sensation on his skin, his breathing, and his pulse. Can never be ruled out entirely, mistakes ... but which one? Anyway didn't you always need someone to act as a catalyst, gather their courage at the crucial moment and make a decision, which only ... ? How else could something become historic, a date no one would forget, even after generations?

And anyway – Fleming suddenly realized how exhausted he was, weary and tired, long days in the chaotic city, followed by broken nights – it's not your problem and certainly not your fault that they fired directly, and even if it were, remember: They that sow the wind shall reap the whirlwind. That's what it says in their scriptures. Extremely reckless, no thought for the possible consequences. They wore gas masks and guns as they marched on to the campus. No one could have guessed. You ran for cover, fun over. Trashed banks and smashed store windows, blockaded streets, bashed cars, as if there were a God-given right to destroy the public order, a right to resist at any price because (don't forget) the constitution had been breached and, worse, abused and murdered by those in the highest positions of power – as it said in the speech one of the history students had delivered to his fellows who had streamed together, before burying the constitution (an expensive facsimile from the university library) under a patch of grass. An arrogance only permitted to the youth, Fleming thought. You will risk anything, stop at nothing if it satisfies the yearning for justice ... Oh Allison, what madness, what terrible mistakes. They can never be undone.

He turned on his side and drew his legs up, one hand between his knees, the other under his head. Her long dark hair, so abundant and full, such a wealth of shining hair you had to stop yourself reaching out to

touch it every time you met her – in the pub on North Water St., perhaps, ... or one afternoon in the university canteen, where she was eating with her boyfriend Barry, who had bought pot off him a few times.

“Hey, Fleming! Come and join us.” Barry gestured to his tray. “A problem shared is a problem halved.”

She laughed and held out her hand across the table.

“I’m Allison. You must be Sylvester.”

“Sylvester Lee,” Fleming said. “Strange parents.”

“Allison Beth. How about that?”

“Great.”

“Allison Beth Krause,” Barry said and shot her a sideways glance betraying his pride, shy and disbelieving, at having landed someone like her. The knowledge that he could never have Allison entirely for himself, never in his life, strengthened his love (strangely) rather than allowing the slightest doubt about her feelings or affections. They were bound together for as long as it lasted, maybe forever, with a secret accord, a spiritual harmony, with which Allison could end a sentence he hadn’t yet finished. Magical thinking, something not too strange for Fleming even from the fragments he caught. When Barry described it – “Do you think such a thing exists?” – he had nodded, taken a drag on the joint, and murmured something like “of course.” He certainly wasn’t going to undermine a customer’s fantasies. Barry wasn’t a bad customer, although not one of those who kept his business afloat.

They met from time to time, chatted, smoked together. Money changed hands. In March (in March?) he let Allison persuade him to go on a demo she had organized. Right across the city, accompanied by threatening gestures and swearing from bystanders, behind a banner the width of the street saying “BRING ALL THE TROOPS HOME,” Allison in the first row, clapping and chanting, “*No more war, no more napalm, no more Nixon.*” A stupid war against the wrong enemy. As if that wasn’t clear, just a series of coincidences condensed into one single urgency. An illness with no hope of a cure (Fleming stared at the label on the empty bottle of Antarctica on the carpet, “Desde 1885”), yet there were medicines people thought could make them live longer. What for? Because no one looks forward to dying, simple as that. You don’t. Things still to be done.

He circled his arms around his folded legs and bent his head till his forehead and the tips of his shorn hair were almost brushing his kneecaps.

Developmental phases, past and unrepeatable. Step by step, following a carefully devised plan – to be thwarted, hindered. Use it against me if you can. But you can't, none of you. Still there were these ... dreams. A disjointed sequence of bewildering images, of sounds, catapulting him out of his sleep, night after night. As if he ever had been in fear, of the police, the National Guard, other people, rapid turns of events. An uprising, a rebellion, breaking out after the television announcement. At peak viewing time – afterwards a play-off game was to be broadcast. Oh yes, basketball. Groups of fans clustered round the TV in every bar, hustle and bustle, crates of beer passed over their heads, so ... No the game had been Friday. The trickster had announced the invasion of Cambodia the night before. It was still calm then. It was the following night when they moved from the bar district around North Water St. towards the centre leaving a swathe of devastation and ... Saturday burning the ROTC, troops sent in. Sunday the curfew. And then Monday ...

Let me get this straight, Fleming thought: In the background of the room were two flaccid flags, to the right a desk and armchair, on the wall to the left a map of Indochina with dotted lines and arrows, alongside it the president, with papers in his hands, continually leaning forwards to explain the military situation to the public with an outstretched arm and index finger.

A flickering image, distorted by a black stripe which descended every few seconds. Someone had taped a piece of (very wobbly) wire to the top of the old set, probably re-taped each week, for several semesters. The flags, the desk, the head and body of the man, of the most powerful man in the world (who would disagree?) threw bright electric shadows, transparent ghosts like the ones in photographs of seances – the ethereal aura of the material. A deep voice boomed through the room in the halls of residence, each word a blow to the stomach, Fleming recalled. He had come along with Barry. Allison was sitting next to a friend called Simone on her bed, in her lap a pottery mug that she would later throw in the direction of the screen (that was too much).

“Liar,” she yelled. “What a liar!” As if anyone had been expecting to hear the truth, tonight of all nights. Leaning against the door frame, Fleming fished a can of beer from the inside pocket of his battered, croppered leather jacket and opened it as softly as possible. “We take this action not for the purpose of expanding the war into Cambodia,” the

voice booming through the small, sparsely furnished room claimed, “but for the purpose of ending the war in Vietnam,” (the mug smashed against the wall), “and winning the just peace we all desire.” “Bastard,” Barry said. “Who believes that?”

Allison’s friend had been shaking her head throughout. Then she laughed (when the announcement came that they wanted to return to the negotiating table as soon as possible), took her glasses off and rubbed her eyes. Fleming almost felt sorry for him, standing there in washed out shades of grey, a ghost of himself, bent over and twisting every time the stripe crossed the screen, but ultimately, objectively speaking, no one was forcing him to give the speech or give orders (a revolver to the temple). There was nothing more embarrassing than excuses and tortuous explanations, disseminated after the facts, when it transpired the role had been too big for you to handle.

Fleming took a step forward, to offer Allison some beer. She took a sip and passed the can to Simone. As if in slow motion, the antenna slipped sideways (a consequence of the flying mug? vibrations through the wall and the floor?) and suddenly there was just a seething mass of black-and-white dots. The sound was still working: measures had to be taken to halt the aggressors. Silence in the room, thickening with every second, the voice now muffled, distant, two thousand light years from Ohio. Barry attempted to straighten the piece of wire (a clothes hanger). The image came back, then the flickering resumed.

“Leave it,” Allison said. “I’ve had enough.”

Simone gripped the beer can with both hands. There were tears in her eyes, gazing at the TV. Nothing more could be made out, no flags, no map, no president. Apparently they were living “in an age of anarchy.” American universities were “being systematically destroyed.” If (a dramatic pause) “the world’s most powerful nation,” (got it?), “acts like a pitiful, helpless giant,” (deaf, blind, and limping), “the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy,” (no shame whatsoever), “will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world.”

Indeed, Fleming thought, suppressing a smile, while Allison got up, walked over to the TV, perched on her chest of drawers, and switched it off. Then she bent down and gathered the pieces of the mug, placed them next to the set and pushed her thick, brown hair behind her ears. Simone was sobbing quietly, her shoulders hunched.

“What are we going to do?” Barry asked.

Allison stepped outside and looked right and left, but it seemed there wasn't anyone in the corridor who wanted to talk, to ease their dismay, to do something about this madness. (He was still speaking.) Allison turned and sat back on her bed, taking Simone in her arms. It wasn't possible to understand what she was whispering, obviously, but Simone nodded, wiped her cheeks with the sleeve of her pullover and put her glasses back on. It had all been for nothing. Fleming's gaze wandered from corner to corner along the skirting board, discreetly searching for a ventilation grill, a floorboard that might be loose. He could see nothing that would work as a depot, a secure home (as long as she lived there) for his assets - a few bags of pot, uppers, downers, and acid that he no longer wanted to keep in his furnished basement room in the city since there'd been a break-in, or, let's say, since he'd returned to find the room turned upside down. Luckily whoever it was (a customer, a competitor) hadn't thought to take a quick look in the toilet cistern. (Ha! The cleverest hiding place in the world!)

Allison leant forward, her chin supported on her fists, her face, with its high cheekbones (to die for, Barry once said), perplexed. But then she leapt up (with decisiveness and anger) and ran into the corridor. They heard her shout out, heard replies becoming louder, voices and footsteps from next door, heard her gradually find her way out of the paralysis which had gripped her for the last twenty minutes. Simone was standing with her hands on her hips at the edge of a throng, one of the groups now amassed under clouds of cigarette smoke by the fire escape to the right of the lifts, discussing what to do: Occupy the university president's office? Burn down the Reserve Officer Training Corps building? Assemble tomorrow at midday around the bell on the common? For sure, no doubt about it. Allison was totally in her element, while Barry compiled a list of what to do first, second, third ... Contact Buffalo (I'll call right away), where he and Allison, so they hoped, next semester at the latest ... away from Kent, from Ohio ... Music was playing, nice music, Fleming thought (he remembered this), which someone was playing in one of the rooms, floating above their heads like the ascending smoke, above the plans they were making, a tangle of excited voices, of hugs, laughter, of the determination not to accept anything decided upon in a shabby puppet theatre by a bunch of puppets, a clique of malevolent medal wearers.

Fleming relaxed his grip on his legs, turned on to his back and stretched out. Angel could get hold of sleeping pills. He should have

done it yesterday ... When you have to start making notes to self with everything written down ... customers, informers (the two security service heads this afternoon), sums of money, a name with a number after it. Would have been suicide – the accounts always in his head, delicate business deals, based on a reputation, trust built with each pill, each gram. Fish in water (one of us). Play their game and keep your mouth shut (your job).

The air-con switched itself on, then straight off again. He turned on to his stomach and stuck his head under the pillow. The next day all the usual suspects were gathered around the bell, a gift from someone or other housed inside a small wall structure made of yellowish bricks. Speeches were made, amplified across the wide lawns of the campus with a megaphone. Finally someone took a spade and dug a hole, a grave for the constitution, which was no longer valid and must be buried (applause, whistling). Allison and Barry were sitting in the crowd on the hill that rose behind the little wall with the bell inside. You had to make a point, Fleming heard them say as they headed to the meeting, you had to draw a line; they nodded without explaining exactly what they meant. Lines, points ... fantasy worlds, unsusceptible to temptation, a vision of the inevitable. Why, he asked himself, pressing the pillow over his head with both hands, did I actually go along ... then walk down the hill to mend the microphone? A loose connection – he'd had a little screwdriver on his penknife – great! When he ran out of breath, he flung the pillow aside. Paths had crossed (wrong time, wrong place, as if luck were a matter of seconds, of a few yards) like particles hitting each other in an accelerator, changing course or splitting into several dozen others, the building blocks of matter. The things you hoard to explain events (mass times velocity equals energy) to leave no room for doubt or nightmares. What would have happened if ... (he breathed out heavily) police cars hadn't appeared that Friday night while people were flooding out on to the streets after the basketball game, in the mood to party despite everything (the speech). Bottles starting to fly, hitting metal, more bottles, glasses, curses heard, curses against the state, the president, culminating in appeals, hysterical cries, to hit back at the warmongers, the banks, the insurers ... On a street corner in the centre of town a fire of trash and building materials was blazing. Panes were smashed: dancing beams of light in the office of a credit broker, papers, ring binders and index cards floating out of the shattered windows. A young man standing

on the side of an upturned car shouted unintelligible words into the din, into the breaking and clanking of glass and metal, into the wailing sirens approaching in great waves ... Then the first tear-gas canisters started exploding, a hailstorm of shots raining down on all this aimlessness; scurrying, shadowy figures were suddenly lit up by a floodlight (in fact a police car). There were raised batons coming towards you (no one knew what was going on any more, he thought, not with the best will in the world), a burning sensation in your nose, in your eyes, nothing you could do, unless you had a moist handkerchief on you ... Back home in the basement you shut the blinds, lay on your bed and drank the rest of a (very expensive) bottle of Seagram's.

Stimulus and response, till there was no going back. A crying shame. Fleming grasped his cock and pulled on it, kneaded it. Reality was a chain of fuck-ups, of inconsequential moments and spontaneous decisions which later – most people didn't understand this – became set in stone ... Became plausible connections between A and B ... He let go again and crawled on all fours to the telephone. C, D, E. Facts documented by historians. He sat back on the edge of the bed, knocking the bottle of Antarctica over with his toes so that it rolled on the carpet in a semicircle. *Life and death, pride and glory*. That afternoon the mayor had declared a state of emergency and alerted the National Guard, who began advancing on the tranquil city from their barracks, forgetting (an easy thing to forget, in the heat of the moment) to inform the public (loudspeaker announcements in the streets, two or three phone calls). Would the fire have been started otherwise?

*Translated by Steph Morris*

## Julia Schoch



Julia Schoch, born 1974 in Bad Saarow, Brandenburg, has worked since 2003 as a freelance writer and translator in Potsdam, after lengthy stays in Bucharest, Paris, and Kaliningrad. Her debut collection of short stories *Der Körper des Salamanders* was awarded many literary prizes, including the Friedrich Hölderlin Prize and the Annette von Droste-Hülshoff Prize. Her novel *Mit der Geschwindigkeit des Sommers* was shortlisted for the Leipzig Book Fair Prize in 2009. She has received several grants and fellowships, including the Grenzgänger Scholarship from the Robert Bosch Foundation and a residency fellowship at the Ledig House in New York.

### Selected publications:

*Schöne Seelen und Komplizen*, Piper Verlag, 2018

*Selbstporträt mit Bonaparte*, Piper Verlag, 2012

*Mit der Geschwindigkeit des Sommers*, Piper Verlag, 2009

*Verabredungen mit Mattok*, Piper Verlag, 2004

*Der Körper des Salamanders. Erzählungen*, Piper Verlag, 2001

Julia Schoch, *Schöne Seelen und Komplizen* [Kindred Spirits and Accomplices], novel  
Munich: Piper Verlag, 2018, 320 pages

## Branded in the GDR

1989: a high school in Potsdam near Berlin. While the sixteen-year-old boys contrive to avoid military service, their female classmates must simulate the construction of a nuclear bunker. It's an absurd situation. The fall of the Berlin Wall is so near, yet at this point it still seems that everything will remain the same. Even the play they are working on will never make it to the stage because the director had not conformed convincingly enough to the system. By day he works as a caretaker, as if the government wanted to punish him with a cliché. Nevertheless, he manages to leave a lasting mark on one of the students who had auditioned for the theatre production, by "branding" her with a long kiss that she will remember for the rest of her life.

The girl's name is Lydia, who, alongside fifteen of her classmates, is given a voice in Julia Schoch's novel *Schöne Seelen und Komplizen*. Fifteen! Isn't that a few too many? Surprisingly not, because Schoch succeeds in giving each of these characters an individual voice, character, and (family) history. Born in 1974 in the former GDR, the author draws here from her historical roots, which also played a role in her novel *Mit der Geschwindigkeit des Sommers*.

The narrative is further complicated in that the first half of the book takes place from 1989 to 1992, and the second half around 2015, so the characters have evolved and the once adolescents have become middle-aged adults, who necessarily sound very different from their thirty-year younger selves. But Schoch is a virtuoso in language, as demonstrated in her debut collection, *Der Körper des Salamanders*, as well as in her last three novels.

In *Schöne Seelen und Komplizen*, after the comparatively slim three volumes that preceded it, one might say Schoch has gone the full distance – though for its large cast of characters, three hundred pages still seems relatively restrained. Other writers might have made a single novel out of each of the many life stories of this book, yet Schoch is neither interested in writing a coming-of-age tale nor a family saga, but

rather a novel about generations. As diverse as Lydia, Rebecca, Bodo, and Alexander might be from one another, they still have something in common, something that is difficult to name. It is not a feeling of loss – none of them mourn the GDR in the least – though the key word in *Schöne Seelen und Komplizen* could be “longing.” The novel leaves open how specific this longing has to do with their common past, so that West German, British or American readers alike can easily relate the novel to their own lives; anyone who has had a taste of midlife crisis is familiar with the losses of time.

Most of the former high school students have failed marriages behind them or are stuck in ones where the novelty has worn off. The few who seem to have mastered their lives, happy and full of confidence at forty-five, are out of place in this unified Germany – perhaps for this very reason. That the GDR experience has led to a particular manifestation of crisis can be perceived from many of angles; above all from an instability among the characters’ parents, who, unlike their counterparts in the West, were forced to cope with certain ruptures – whether ideological or economic – from which they could never fully recover. This would then affect their children, those high school students, who now have children of their own.

*Schöne Seelen und Komplizen* is far from a cheerful novel, yet it shows with subtlety and nuance what it has meant to live in Germany over the last thirty years and what it has meant to fight for one’s place in it.

*By Tobias Lehmkuhl, translated by Zaia Alexander*

Sample Translation: *Seelen und Komplizen*  
(pp. 37-43, pp. 51-57 & pp. 207-10)

PART ONE  
1989-1992

KATI VIEHWEG

The conductor had already blown the whistle, the wagon doors were slammed shut, and my mother shouted to Steffi from the railway platform: "Make sure Kati cleans her glasses every morning!" I wanted to crawl under a rock and die. If only she'd meant it as a joke. But her worrywart face clearly showed the opposite. My glasses were the last straw that she clung to as the train began to move. My mother can't bear it when I am away. What I couldn't stand was the fact that she had to choose Steffi, of all people, to dump this request on. Steffi shouted back happily that she'd be glad to. She smiled cheerfully and gave me a meaningful look. She gets herself in a tizzy every time somebody confides in her. Ever since we've been in school together, she's imagined we're allies. Unfortunately, so do the others in the class. Because of our fathers. Her father also worked for the city council. He wasn't a chairman like mine, not even a deputy, or anything else important. Still, she considers the two of us a unit. Even now, although her father has been dead for over a year. After the funeral, Steffi didn't go to school for a week. When she came back, there was no sign of anything. Then again I don't know what I expected to see in her. Maybe it's all very simple when something actually happens. Maybe the horror is only in your imagination.

My mother ran a little way alongside the train and I shouted: "You're so out of it." I immediately felt terrible, but it was too late to take it back. We picked up speed, my mother stood where she was. The last thing I saw of her was the steep wrinkle on her forehead. It bothered me for a while, but the excitement of traveling soon made the feeling fade away. We had a stopover in Poznań. I looked out at the people on the railway platform from the open train window. There was a man in a pretty ragged-looking suit. He fingered the buttons on his jacket, shaking his head. Suddenly he turned to me and shouted: "Fascist." I was so terrified it made me sick. I should have gone back inside the compartment, but instead I tried

to make him understand that we weren't from West Germany. At some point I realized he was mentally ill. Luckily nobody noticed it had taken me forever to get it. Especially not Steffi.

Of course they put us in a room together. Plus two more girls from the Puschkin school. As if this set up wasn't punishment enough, this is the deadest town I've ever known. It's finally vacation time and this is what we get. Brown old houses with apparently nobody living inside them. The whole city is totally still and empty, like an endless afternoon nap. I remember Poland differently. My parents had taken me and my brother there once upon a time, but to the sea. On the promenade they had green ice cream and waffles, even cola. Ice cream in Polish is called *lody*. A word that doesn't help us here, because in this forlorn dump there's no such thing as ice cream - there's nothing. Not even a lake, and it's eighty-six degrees. We're already sweating first thing on the bus on our way to the jam factory. On the first day the stench in the factory immediately made me sick. I was sent outside to stack fruit crates. They're all the same.

When time drags, I start singing. I think I'm pretty good at singing. Just not in front of others. I get so scared every time, I have to take tranquilizers days before auditions. Right before vacation, Alexander refused to take the song test. He walked to the front, but just leaned against the chalkboard and said, "I'd rather not." I know exactly why. Because the song was about military marching columns. But he didn't say that outright. He simply asked Schleiff to give him an "F" because he wouldn't sing. Totally calm. Of course he's just trying to make himself seem important. The weird part was that Schleiff didn't even give him an "F," that's how skillfully he wraps people around his finger. He's inscrutable. Those are the most dangerous ones. Just like that Arno, the wannabe director that Rebekka dragged in. He thinks his contribution is to be critical. In reality, all he did with his questions and discussions was complicate the simplest of things. He wanted us to get involved. At least we got rid of him and his stupid play. In the end the individualists always stumble over their own two feet, that's what my father says.

I wonder how everybody else is spending the summer. Nobody has told me anything. I know what Steffi's doing. She's sulking. She's wondering how she can pay me back for the thing with the telegram. I came up with the idea of the telegram on Tuesday. I was walking around town looking for something to do. I discovered a kiosk, at least. But there was nothing to buy there. I felt like crying. All these dismal houses around me and

the prospect of stacking crates for two more weeks. Luckily I didn't cry, because Oliver, Tretnier, and Rutschky showed up. The three titans from eleventh grade. I couldn't believe they hadn't come up with something better to do with their vacation. But more than that, I was surprised they recognized me.

They shook my hand and asked me if I was also in the camp for work and recreation and Oliver said, "More work than recreation, right?" We'd never said a word to each other until then. Back home they thought we were just some ninth grade ninnies, except for Cornelia, which doesn't matter to me. I have zero interest, it's a mystery to me, why all the girls in the school run after them, and especially Wolf Rutschky. Now he was standing in front of me, a big bony beanpole, and gave a kind of eulogy about the food supply situation in the Polish provinces. We laughed, all of us together. That they were hanging out with me made me feel insecure. I just couldn't figure out why they were.

We strolled down the street a bit. Because there was nothing else around, we ended up in the post office building. After we'd hung around the foyer for a while, Rutschky said we should send Simizeck a telegram: GET US OUT OF HERE. None of us knew exactly where Simizeck lives. Besides, there was no way we'd ever send him a telegram. So I came up with a different idea. I suggested we write to Steffi. It took a while until they realized who I meant. We talked it over, and in the end I wrote on a telegram form: BELOVED STEFFI - MY SONG DIES WITHOUT YOU - COME BACK - YOURS TRULY, M. Rutschky clicked his tongue approvingly. Apparently they were pretty astounded by my ingenious idea. We got the doorman from the dorm to put the telegram in our room's mailbox. As planned, Steffi took it with her after dinner. I sat down in the open window and waited. Steffi greedily scanned the paper the paper. The two from Pushkin wanted to know what it said. I also pretended to be interested. This was getting really fun. At first Steffi didn't want to show us, and then she read it out loud. I thought by now she would've crumpled up the scrap of paper and thrown it out the window. But nothing of the sort happened. She was happy. What a dumbbo. I mean the letter was written with a pen in German on a Polish form. Shortly afterward, she ran out of the room. To bawl her eyes out about the cruelty of it, I supposed. Again, I was wrong. The expression on her face when she came back was as if she was blissed out. At some point I noticed she was packing. Now, at the very latest, I should have called it quits, but I couldn't. I just

sat there and watched as comb, soap pouch, and toothpaste shuffled into her wash bag. When she was done, she announced she was going home. And then she left. I was still just sitting there. Thinking about how I would tell the story to Oliver and Rutschky.

Of course Steffi's plan had made the rounds pretty quickly, not least because she ran into thousands of people while schlepping her suitcase. Nevertheless, it was already dark out when the boarding school principle brought her back. She had actually walked to the train station. When she came in, she gave me a dirty look. I think there was even a tear glued to the corner of her eye. So now she's out for revenge. But I know she won't come up with anything. She's not really one for revenge. I am. I'd rather be alone than kiss up to my enemies. Besides, I would have seen through the thing with the telegram right away. Steffi hasn't spoken to me since then. She's not capable of more than that. She hasn't even asked me once if I'd cleaned my glasses. She didn't use her trump. Sometimes the thought flashes into my mind of her standing on the train platform with her suitcase, full of anticipation. It's getting dark and I take her hand to bring her back. From the side I can see her wet eyelashes. I quickly chase off such moods. When I'm alone in the city I keep an eye out for Oliver, Tretner, and Rutschky. It seem as if it were a coincidence. I don't want them to think I need their company. This place is so dead I even go inside the church. At home I wouldn't dare. But luckily nobody knows me here. I feel awkward because I don't know what exactly you're supposed to do in a church. I'll sit all the way at the back on the last row and try to pray just for fun. If my father could see me now. I remember how he went nuts at my mother once because she had looked at a cross-shaped brooch at the Christmas market. He tore it out of her hand and then screamed he wouldn't let her spend money on such a thing. And then he crushed the brooch. It was probably made of aluminum because he was able to break it so quickly. In his opinion, people who believe in God are just taking the easy way out, into the confessional and right back out again to commit the next sin. Which is true. If I were a believer, I would redeem myself from my secret here. But that's not going to happen. Millions of people stop believing because they discover at some point that God doesn't exist. But does the same go the other way round, that all of a sudden you start? As far as that goes, there's no chance of that for me. I'm just like my father. We have our reasons. Isn't it true that God doesn't care about world peace? You don't go to dear God in order

to complain, my grandmother always says, you thank him. But I never understood that. I'm not grateful. What should I be grateful for?

Before leaving, I stroll around the dark columns. I've got lots of złotys in my pocket, I could buy my mother a little present, it doesn't have to be a cross, but in this deadest of all cities you can't get rid of your money, not even for stupid church souvenirs. The giant pictures on the left and right with all these people dying or getting tortured. All these tears, the tortured faces in the pictures – I think it would depress me if I had to look at them every Sunday. Steffi is also probably crying now out of sheer anger. Four days without a word from her, that at least is something. But if I know her well, she won't be able to keep it up. She forgets. Her persistent niceness always triumphs. On the weekend at the very latest, when we take the excursion to Majdanek on the bus, she'll want to be my friend again.

(...)

TOMAS KROHN

I have no idea who spread the rumor about the concert. It's not even a done deal that anything is even happening. Not to mention who's playing. Still, our gang is marching toward the JWD, always following some guy from the twelfth grade. I think his name's Oliver. He's taking us on a secret path through a small forest and around a couple of garages. I bet you can just as easily take main roads to get to the JWD, but some people just have to rub your nose in the fact that they know their way around. Admittedly, as far as clothes go, it's true – I wish I had his leather jacket. With that kind of jacket, you immediately belong. I never know how to find the right things, but even then, I'd need the right chest to match, or at least the right look on my face.

Luckily it's kind of dark in the room, so my flawed outfit doesn't catch anybody's eye right away. I stick close to the entrance anyway in case one of the guys in the studded jackets gives me lip about my appearance. There aren't many punks, ten or fifteen. But as a group they make a huge impression. Three or four of them are hanging around on a stage in the middle of the hall. That's obviously supposed to show the rest of us who has the say around here. I totally get it. Brandy, Henne, and Graf are here

too. That makes being excluded a lot less awkward. Everybody I know here belongs to the Alien Department. Except for Alexander. You can tell he knows his way around. Still, he's not embarrassed to be seen with us. He heads toward us and we talk for a minute. He even invites us for a beer before he goes his own way again, back to the stage. That's how he is, nice, no ulterior motives. That's how he makes you feel even more that you're not in his league. He doesn't even do it on purpose. I don't think he has any enemies – admirable. Then, I also spot Lydia. That she's here as well, along with half the other geeks from class, is a total drag. I'd rather be alone with the guys. Anyway, I don't know whether or not tonight is supposed to be silent night as far as Lydia goes. That means I'm going to spend the whole time *trying to find out*. That's what she likes most. She's happiest when it's complicated. Over the last few days, she'd just been walking around with her head down. I didn't have a clue why. I still don't. She's impenetrable. If only Henne and Brandy knew she took me to a dance class a few weeks ago. *Dirty Dancing*. Not that she'd made much of the movie. It was just another one of her tests. At least that's what I'm guessing. She tried to talk me into accompanying her to the registration office for days. The hall was packed. When they put up the lists for participants to sign up, it almost started a brawl. The idiots tore the pens out of each other's hands. It was unbelievable. I stood demonstratively on the sidelines and scowled. At some point the lists were filled up – we weren't on it. Weirdly, Lydia didn't mind at all. She clearly didn't give a damn about the dance class. Instead, she suddenly got upset on the way home; she was the one who always had to take the first step. She got really mad out of the blue. And then she complained that I never touched her face. She has these fits all the time.

Tonight, though, her grudge seems to have vanished into thin air, which I notice with relief. Lydia stands next to me as if this was normal and tells the group jokingly she thinks the band's name is disgusting. Then she asks if I've heard about Franziska's parents. Franziska's parents have stayed over there on the other side. Although some people claim that her father had been there much longer. Weirdly, nobody asks Franziska about this. Lydia says she thinks it was sleazy to run off and leave their child here. Murmurs of agreement. They probably have left her some sort of message, I retort, don't you think? Anyway, a few weeks alone isn't so bad. I realize that I'm just saying this to rile Lydia. Pretending to be calm when she's actually seething. I take a look around, Franziska's

not here. But this isn't her turf. Ponies belong on the meadow, Lydia once said about Franziska. She can be pretty mean. That's probably why I'm with her, I definitely don't want her as an enemy. That said, Franziska really is a little like a pony. Which has nothing to do with the ponytail. Brandy suggests we have a party at her place now that she's got the apartment to herself. We agree for it to take place as soon as possible, preferably next Sunday, before her parents change their minds and are back standing on the doorstep. We laugh at the thought of the elaborate escape across the Hungarian border fences in reverse.

Meanwhile, the band climbs on stage. Good music comes from your balls, not your head, the singer shouts. Then he just stands there. I keep the sentence in mind to use at the next best opportunity, which is really idiotic because everybody has already heard it now. While the guitarist plays some test chords, Lydia suddenly drums on my arm. "Next Saturday doesn't work at all," she shouts, "it's the thirtieth!" She gives me a meaningful look, but I'm stumped. I see her disappointment because "the thirtieth" doesn't have the desired effect on me. Maybe there's a movie going on in her head. A film in which I'd have to say a very specific sentence. But which one, I don't know. Never know. It drives me crazy. I make it clear I want to focus on the band, but come to think of the dotted line that she recently tattooed on her wrist, with the words in English below: *Open here*. Of course, it's not a real tattoo, she did it herself with a ballpoint pen, I think. She wants everyone to see it, and at the same time she shrouds herself in silence. She loves stuff like that, signs that no human being understands. She came to my birthday with a notebook. A book with nothing but blank pages for me to write down my dreams as she suggested. An expectant look. I never dream. And if I do, I've forgotten it by the time I'm brushing my teeth. I said thanks. But "thanks" obviously wasn't the right word. That's why later in the tram she remained silent the entire time. We each looked in different directions. At some point, I turned around and saw she was gone. Just like that out of the tram. At first I wanted to go after her. But then the driver rang the bell and I was still sitting there. A ridiculous situation, but I was secretly relieved. Since then, she's been running around with this dotted line around her wrist.

The band is taking their time. I wonder why they need to fumble around for so long. Lydia keeps looking at me from below. Finally, she says, "I felt less alone before I knew you." And then she rushes off. It

drives me crazy. “What’s she doing here?” I hear Brandy say. I follow his line of sight and see Kati Viehweg making her way through the sparsely scattered audience. “Spying on the crowd or what?” I laugh along with him. Kati’s sad bird face behind giant glasses. I feel sorry for her. Does she even realize how her opinions are turning her into a laughing stock? She is constantly making the weirdest claims. The other day in Pistiak’s class, she said the people who go to the West are actually being *kidnapped*. Maybe she has to say stuff like that because of her father. Her father is some big shot in the party. She discovers me and makes a tiny movement of her wing to greet me. I jerk my chin upward as an answer. She seems so anxious as if she’s about to have a nervous breakdown, or is waiting to be rescued. I’d like to rescue a girl. But that’s difficult these days. In the summer, while swimming, I tried for fun to fish Lydia out of the water. She struggled like crazy and then swam halfway across the lake, probably to prove to me how well she can take care of herself.

The band finally starts to play. Then stops. Didn’t somebody say they were the Dead Kennedys of Poland? Cheering throughout the hall. Finally, the singer starts to count out loud. That’s all. It’s ridiculous, but I’m impressed. He’s clearly not afraid people might get angry. A bottle of beer flies on to the stage. The singer throws back an ashtray. He counts up to one hundred and fourteen, then the group climbs down again. Somehow, everybody seems happy with this. Me too. I feel like I’m in exactly the right place – if it weren’t for Lydia. I’m nervous, on the lookout for her. I really like being with her. But just as often, she gets on my nerves. “I don’t know how you can stand her,” says Henne. In his opinion, I’m with Lydia for getting into bed. I don’t know how he got that idea. Then again I don’t say anything to dispel his assumption. We haven’t slept with each other yet. Last summer, I touched her breasts for the first time in Rheinsberg. Somebody wrote a novel about the city, so she dragged me there. Turns out the castle is a ramshackle hut and nobody’s allowed inside at all. We were in a good mood anyway. We wandered around the park. On a bench in a quiet corner, I began to fondle her breasts under her shirt. They’re small. I’m no breast expert, but I think girls with small breasts feel more. But I don’t know about Lydia’s. When I pushed her bra up without unhooking it and said, “you don’t really need it,” she suddenly shut down. It took me a while to figure it out. She let me, mutely submitting like a rabbit hanging out of a fox’s

mouth. For five hours I sat there fondling her breasts like an idiot. I was thinking about what was wrong with that sentence the whole time. I even tried to apologize. We spent the whole rest of the day in that hick town in silence. I tried to cheer her up, but it was as if everything was dead. Finally, I also didn't bother to say another word. The matter was settled. Then we waited. It's always like that. We don't make up with each other, we just let time pass.

"Is anything happening yet?" Lydia asks, standing there next to me again, pointing to the stage, "it's already past nine." Obviously, she has forgotten her movie lines. She chats uncomplicatedly, even with Rebecca. Then she hangs herself all over me and starts kissing my ear in front of the whole world. She takes my right arm and wraps it around her waist like a belt. The thirtieth, she whispers again, and I feel guilty without knowing why.

(...)

## PART TWO TODAY

FRANZISKA MEYERHOLDT

For some time now, my field of vision has been circumscribed by an aureole. A constant flickering that only calms a little when I look into the distance, but reading books has turned to hell. The text moves, everything runs off the page, makes me fully nauseous. I've resorted to listening. Once a week I go with our friend to Stuttgart, she takes me in her car. It's a forty-minute drive – enough time to discuss the latest gossip, though she's usually the one who does all the talking. Sometimes I take the bus instead, which I prefer. I can calmly listen to a novel or short story. In Stuttgart I go to the bookstore on the Schlossplatz, which I leave carrying a big bag every time. I've stopped showing my husband my newly acquired treasures, all he would see is the vast sums spent on them, he'd think it's ridiculous, *monstrous*, this huge mountain of CDs, it even seems that way to me.

I was disappointed that I couldn't find a CD by the author Sandra had invited to town. At the same time, Sandra can't afford to bring really

big authors to her bookshop café. (Four or five times a year she invites a writer here – “I specialize in new discoveries” is her motto.) But I wouldn’t have bought one by her anyway. The author read very well and I believe the book was also written very well, but it had nothing for me. That sounds self-centered, I know. But I’m looking for something in books that might help me, or at least is a representation of my life.

As always, we sat for a while together after the reading with a glass of wine. This is often the most relaxed part. It turned out that the author was from Potsdam. “Wait a minute,” Sandra said, “aren’t you also from Potsdam, Franziska?” She turned around to me filled with joy at this extraordinary coincidence. I was surprised she even remembered. My past had never played a role here, which has always been fine by me. I nodded, almost apologizing. Suddenly I felt like a stranger. In that moment, it was as if I’d realized that I basically don’t belong in this town, this region. My husband, who was sitting next to me, would have laughed if I’d said that out loud. Because actually I feel quite comfortable here. We have good friends, all of them entrepreneurial types like him, they’re not even provincial. We go to the readings in Sandra’s café together, an established institution, and up until last year we were even members of the bowling club (I had to give it up because of the flickering in my eyes). Even the dialect didn’t bother me when my husband brought me here. But now, after Sandra’s comment, all at once I had an outline, I felt it distinctly, a form that left me sitting alone, that separated me and made me feel different, without the others having intended to do so. Something connects them, something difficult to explain, subterranean, that makes them a pack for eternity and that you can’t learn how to be a part of.

I said (although I directed it more to Sandra than the author) that I hadn’t been in my hometown for more than twenty-one years. The author brushed it off with a wave and said, “you wouldn’t recognize it anymore.” The conversation turned to the beauty of the city that had come to light through the renovations since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Practically all of the historical buildings have been rebuilt, she explained, the old City Palace, two churches, the old canal, everything looks almost the same as a hundred years ago. To my surprise, her report affected me, at least more than I’d have liked. As if during my absence somebody had misappropriated my life. My husband nodded, all that money that flowed to the East, all those dilapidated cities, he

said, staring pensively at the ceiling, as if the bills which went on the beautifying of the eastern part of Germany had been hanging there. His manner upset me – “you don’t have a clue,” I snapped at him, “what do you know about dilapidated conditions?” My husband was taken aback, “I beg your pardon?” he shouted, and looked indignantly into the circle, “you always said yourself how kaput everything was over there.” That was true. Still, in that moment I had the feeling my past was being betrayed if I supported his judgment. I didn’t know what to say. Fortunately, Sandra steered the discussion in a different direction. “The revolution must have been quite a turning point for the people around you,” she said to the author, “this situation, when everything changes at once ... we can’t imagine anything like that here.” The author replied that change was normal; ultimately history is nothing other than a series of changes. But then she turned on herself and admitted that Sandra was right and that the most important thing in the lives of the people of the East was surely the year 1989. It was hard for me to tell what she really thought. “I don’t know exactly,” I said quietly, “but I think the most important thing in life is simply where your thoughts drift back to, what recurs most consistently in your dreams.” (I thought about my three miscarriages.) Sandra clapped enthusiastically. “Unfortunately I didn’t come up with that sentence,” I admitted, embarrassed. The author shrugged wearily. Sandra got up and walked to the bar to open a new bottle of wine, but the author said her train was leaving very early tomorrow morning and she’d rather go to bed. I don’t know where the impulse came from, but I jumped up, grabbed her jacket and mine from the coatrack and said I’d escort her to the B & B. The others in the group looked surprised. I felt this without looking at them. Normally I am withdrawn, I don’t want to be a bother to anybody, I hate pushy people, but here I was forcing myself on this author. And yet I didn’t even find her particularly likeable. As a person, I mean. She seemed slightly over the top, a snippy, dry manner, which I didn’t like very much. But in that moment I couldn’t do any different. I had no choice. What did I expect, what did I picture? I couldn’t have said. There was just this urge to make a decision in that moment. As if I’d never get another chance.

*Translated by Zaia Alexander*

# Matthias Senkel



Matthias Senkel was born in the East German state of Thuringia in 1977 and attended the Deutsche Literaturinstitut in Leipzig before studying European and American studies at the University of Halle. He now lives in Leipzig, where he writes poetry and prose. His debut novel *Frühe Vögel* was awarded the Uwe Johnson Prize for Emerging Writers and the Rauris Literature Prize. *Dunkle Zahlen*, his most recent novel, was nominated for the Leipzig Book Fair Prize in 2018.

## Selected publications:

*Dunkle Zahlen*, Verlag Matthes & Seitz Berlin, 2018

*Frühe Vögel*, with comic illustrations by Maryna Zhdanko, Aufbau Verlag, 2012

Matthias Senkel, *Dunkle Zahlen* [Dark Figures], novel  
Berlin: Verlag Matthes & Seitz, 2018, 488 pages

## Literature and Technology: An absurd voyage into the Soviet computer industry

You've heard of Atari, the C64, or the 286? You know that IBM is an acronym, and that Netscape isn't a foldable shopping bag? But the Ural 14 is about as familiar as the Elektronika IM-05 and the GLM-3? Then you probably live in the West and don't know much about the computer industry of the socialist East. And you almost certainly don't know much about Matthias Senkel's newest novel, *Dunkle Zahlen*.

*Dunkle Zahlen* tells the largely unknown story of the Soviet IT and computer industry. The novel begins with a programmers' Spartakiad in Moscow (surveilled by the KGB), to which a Cuban delegation mysteriously fails to show up. Their interpreter takes up the search for their whereabouts. The scene then shifts to Kiev in the 1950s, where a young computer prodigy encounters a professor and unintentionally advances his top-secret research. This is not the novel's only jump in time; it ultimately spans from 1821 to 2043.

Three main characters gradually emerge from this multitude – but they disappear for long periods of time, only to suddenly reappear having become a father or gotten married for the second time; they fly with webbed feet over Moscow (the book is rife with allusion, not least to Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*), wade through sewers, or exit through the drain of a bathtub. Pro-computer revolutionaries battle against the nomenklatura, the young against the old. Computers are supposed to serve socialism as “valets of action,” but their agents fear every power except their own.

The novel's table of contents looks like a circuit diagram. There is – as in every formidable Russian tome with a large cast – a list of recurring characters, along with a glossary of abbreviations and a (very funny) “joke archive,” as well as a chapter titled “discarded epigraphs,” photographs, business cards, lists, song lyrics (“Song of the Programmers”), a Wikipedia entry, a crossword puzzle, and pages of gray and white boxes. Enough gimmicks, in short, to strongly suspect Matthias Senkel of formalism and to place him on probation in a strictly computer-free environment.

Senkel's first novel, *Frühe Vögel*, was a similarly technological fiction of space travel, including comics and an index of characters. It received two prizes, though neither was the first ever for the author, who also plays bass in a band: he had already won the prestigious open mic competition for up-and-coming German writers.

*Dunkle Zahlen*, by the way, is not even really Senkel's creation: in the novel's opening story, which frames the narrative to come, a machine called GLM-3 is started up. Only then does the reader come to the title page, which announces the book as *Dunkle Zahlen*, subtitle *Poem*. The author is given as GLM-3, the translator – Matthias Senkel. The GLM-3 is the "Great Literature Machine," the crowning jewel of Soviet computer development. Regrettably, it has been lost without a trace.

*By Jörg Plath, translated by Madeleine LaRue*

Sample Translation: *Dunkle Zahlen*  
(pp. 10-20 & pp. 77-80)

MSMP #01

Moscow, May 27, 1985

Camera cables, carefully held and pulled across the floor, were now coiled up again aft. In the viewfinder of camera no. 1: the large conference room of the Cosmos, rows of seats, and the orphaned podium. From the directors come instructions for another test pan, from the dot-matrix display to the stage steps and along the row of flags to the lectern. Dissolve.

In seven and a half hours, Dmitri Sovakov would step up to the microphone and open the second International Spartakiad for Young Programmers. At the moment, however, the chair of the Spartakiad committee was still standing on the threshold of a repurposed hotel room. Dozens of tape recorders buzzed in the hallway. By the elevators plain-clothes special forces were gathering, men and women in tailored suits, worker's uniforms, traditional folk costume. Audio surveillance technicians were preparing for the shift change, putting on comfortable slippers. Dmitri was a little green about the gills, and his lapel pin sat crookedly. Comrade Major General had summoned him to the blocked-off floor of the Hotel Kosmos: "Ah, come in, come in! And please shut the door behind you, Dmitri Frolovich." From up here, then, Yevenia Svetlyachenko would coordinate her week-long special operation. She had arranged for the surveillance unit's break room at the Kosmos to be specially adjusted to her needs. Next to the refrigerator a cold buffet had been set up. The large L-shaped desk was the same as the one in her office; even the pens were in the same place. A cursor blinked invitingly on the screen to the right, signaling the readiness of some computer. Perhaps it was at the end of a secure long-distance line at a KGB data center or some kind of special bunker. The screen on the right was mounted on a shelf, playing the feed from the surveillance cameras. On the wall behind the upholstered furniture suite hung an imposing low relief: a panorama of Moscow embedded with hundreds of small lamps, which shone in the skyscraper windows and made the stars on the Kremlin

glow. The perspective in the panorama did not resemble the view from the hotel in the slightest (the artist had obviously been standing on top of Ivan the Great's Bell Tower). Moreover, the capital today was overcast. The air pressure had fallen sharply that morning; heavy rain clouds were pushing southwards. Dmitri felt they would crash into the Lenin Hills like world-weary gray whales. Still, there would be no need to deploy anti-cloud aircraft before the opening ceremony; the entire Spartakiad would be taking place in inner rooms and was therefore less dependent on the weather than the summer Olympics. Nevertheless, heavy lightning, power outages, or other accidents could interfere with the flow of events. Over the last few weeks, Dmitri had woken up night after night with visions of horror scenarios. He had ordered emergency plans designed for every conceivable eventuality. So he thought. But the conference wing of the Kosmos was currently housing tons of computer technology – there was always a weak point somewhere. The installation of competition units alone had taken several days, and there was still more to do before the digital starting shot could be fired. That Major General Svetlyachenko had called him upstairs unscheduled had strained his timetable – a fact Dmitri did not even attempt to conceal.

“What's this, my little owl, I thought you'd be happy to sip a little cup with me,” said Svetlyachenko, and patted the cushion next to her.

Half an hour later Dmitri was permitted to withdraw. He had already made it to the insulated door when Major General Svetlyachenko stopped him again with a quiet “Ah,” in order to serve up “just a few itsy-bitsy” – ultimately, however, highly significant – “operative modifications.”

“But we can't,” he interrupted her. “That is, I mean, from my point of view it would be more sporting – ”

“From your point of view the matter can't be seen at all!”

Dmitri knew what this meant: “Even so ... there will be questions. How should I handle it, in your opinion?”

“Listen, little owl – in any case, you're the head of the Spartakiad,” Svetlyachenko replied, “you don't know any specifics at this point. And you'll express the regret of the committee. I'm sure most of them will secretly thank God, and no one will dig around for long. In addition, we'll keep an eye on our people, each and every one of them, round the clock. That way we might be able to counteract things. I'll let you know how we're going to proceed as soon as our computer banks spit out the first results.”



The Pioneers lowered their wall of signs to wave at the camera. Boys in traditional Caucasian dress danced a kozachok; members of the Gymnastics Club followed with rhythmic routines. In the background, the Pioneers fashioned a computer with their cardboard signs, out of which, in the penultimate bar, slipped a dove of peace. The chair of the Spartakiad committee stepped up to the lectern and nodded. Cut.

## CIRCUIT ELEMENTS

Leningrad, 1948

“To Moscow! To Moscow!” was everywhere the cry – in books and overfilled barracks, in makeshift canteens, and outside in front of the cellar holes where schoolboys gathered to smoke in secret, exchange dirty tricks, or even eavesdrop on their teachers. Yes, even in Leningrad some grown-ups were openly longing for a Moscow residence permit. Leonid’s mother, on the other hand, wanted to go only one place: “To Kiev!”

More specifically, Irina Kirillovna Ptushkova was drawn to Feofaniya, a former monastery on the outskirts of Kiev, which was to be converted into a technical laboratory.

“You’ll like it there, too, it’s in the middle of some marvelous oak groves ...” This argument did not convince Leonid. The breakthrough attempts and front lines had twice been pulled back over the capital of the Ukrainian SSR and left behind numerous pinholes in the map on the school wall. He had gotten an idea of what these punctures stood for once he was allowed to return to Leningrad after the end of the blockade. Consequently, he believed that he only had to put two and two together in order to figure out what was going on in this Feofaniya, as well as in all the other quarters and suburbs of Kiev: the oak groves would prove to be a prohibited area, doubtless strewn with countless mines and unexploded shells. Even if this was close to the truth, Leonid didn’t consider it especially persuasive. Probably because he knew that his mother would recall what kind of placard newspaper he’d written a few weeks before. And indeed, she promptly served him the guiding principle of his article on the reconstruction, a sentence he had taken directly from the All Union Radio: “It is precisely there, on the twice-

scorched earth, that a better future will be built.”

Leonid sighed.

“Papa will find us there, Lyonchik,” his mother swore, but her words fell on deaf ears.

“You always said you only needed a piece of paper to do your work,” said Leonid.

Irina Kirillovna, who had recently successfully completed her scientific training, explained that now so many more things had become possible, and Feofaniya was the best conceivable place for her to carry out her research. And the special rations they had there would do them both good. She mentioned once again a certain Sergei Alexeyevich Lebedev, who had been impressed by her thesis and invited her to work in his technical laboratory. Anything more specific than that she could not, or did not want to tell Leonid, even on the following evenings, though her eyes shone meaningfully.

*Like the polar sea under a full moon*

*Like a moor in the morning light*

At least that’s how Leonid’s grandmother once put it on an embroidered silk cloth. During the day this cloth covered the dressing table in the Ptushkovs’ room, hiding the rest of the verse in the fall of its folds. But Leonid had learned long ago to read the strange dual luster in his mother’s gaze prosaically. For his own swamp-brown left eye, too, revealed a deep thirst for knowledge. And the gray of his right eye gleamed now precocious, now absent, because he had already read a great deal and understood something of it, or was gradually beginning to understand. If, however, dust or pollen stung his eyes, his tears gave his face an uncertain expression that made him appear terribly melancholy. His teacher had attributed this to the fact that his father had gone missing while returning from the front, and tried to comfort him by pointing to the other thousands upon thousands of war orphans. Yet now, as Leonid once more tied up his belongings, now that he had to bid farewell to the friends he’d so recently made, now that it meant leaving Leningrad again for an unknown duration, they had to admit he was brave: for not a single birch was in bloom, and the most awful dust lay buried beneath the snow.

Feofaniya, 1950

The broken thermometer, whose bimetal spring was stuck at zero degrees, had for the last week been showing the correct temperature at lunchtime. Spring was approaching on schedule. Nevertheless, the ice sheet on the ponds was thick enough that Sergei Alexeyevich could still compel his employees to take an icy Sunday swim. He had already broken up the returning layer of ice in the bathing area and rolled the retaining beams to the edge. He then rubbed his slender upper body with snow and descended down the ice-hewn steps. After a few gratifyingly intoned puffs of breath, the laboratory head took up his previous train of thought: "... and we'll have to apply a corresponding additional voltage, phhha, to each of the vacuum tubes, phhhha, that should stabilize the signal, phhha, and reduce the delay in the circuit ..."

Meanwhile the scientists and technical assistants had thrown off their bath towels and dived one after the other into the water. Their gasping and groaning carried as far as Leonid, who was hobbling over pond no. 3. He was propped up on crutches, with a climbing iron stabilizing his casted foot. Other than him, only the custodian Kuzmenko and the chronically congested security officer Nitochkin had managed to dodge Sergei Alexeyevich's regular toughening-up exercises. Both of them sat on wooden footstools beside their own ice hole, carrying out a series of unscheduled experiments. Old Kuzmenko was switching out the bait, tying a larger fish-shaped decoy made of tire scraps on to the leader and dipping it into a jar of broth, an oily mixture of overcooked sprat tails. The oozing bait had barely sunk into the water when Kuzmenko pulled hard on the line. Nitochkin laughed when he saw how effortlessly the old man reeled in his prey: "Probably just another of Fritz's boots for your collection."

But the pointy snout of a pike was already appearing on the surface of the water. Kuzmenko knocked over his stool heaving the moss-covered fish on to the surface of the ice.

"What do you mean boot? Wouldn't surprise me if we found a whole leg in its stomach," he wheezed. The predator fish clapped its fins on the ice as if paying its respects to the old man. The motion ripped open its mouth and little bubbles of blood pressed out of its brimming throat.

No, not only blood: Leonid heard a "*Stildoncarefoteairupere!*" blubbering out. But Nitochkin was already drowning out the pike: "Look over there,

Kuzmenko, at his dorsal fins.”

With his left hand Nitochkin pulled out his dagger, and with two skillful cuts extracted a bronze clip from its fins.

“There’s something engraved on it,” he reported, rubbing the clip on his coat hem. “*Esox lucius rex*. Inscribed and presented in eighteen ... 1884? To be returned to E.I.V. at the Academy of Sciences, SPB. This must be a joke,” the security officer said, moving toward old Kuzmenko. The latter removed the hook from the pike’s mouth, carefully wresting out the bait.

The pike now succeeded in opening its jaw enough that it could lift its head a little to the side. It looked at Leonid with golden eyes and gasped out the unbreathable air all in a rush: “Dear muzhik, let me go, and I will render you three services!”

Leonid threw a sideways glance at the two men. They did not seem to feel that the fish’s offer was addressed to them.

“Three services?” he breathed.

“Only have to say: ‘At the pike’s bidding, according to my will,’ and then - ”

“Yes, yes, I know. But why always three? Why not two? Or ten?”

“Oh lord, you’re one of that sort,” gasped the pike, “probably an idolater too” - but it couldn’t continue. The pike just gasped again and writhed under Nitochkin’s sole.

“Stop playing me for a fool, Citizen Kuzmenko!” demanded the officer, shoving the fish in a fit of passion even farther from the ice hole. “Who else could have added these childish scratchings?”

With that, he threw the bronze pin down at the custodian’s boots and stomped on it. The pike was noticeably losing strength, the clapping of its fins no longer sounded approving.

“I suggest,” it panted, “that you throw me back into the water immediately, chh, and in a quiet minute look it up in Propp, chh, or Aristotle. But tell me now, chh, how can I serve you: with a carousel, an excavator, a, chhh, professorship of cybernetics?”

With its last ounce of strength, the fish reared up, but merely fell against the jar of broth. Fishy liquid poured out on to the snow and flowed into the ice hole, spreading across the water. Under the low sun the oily film glistened like a rainbow, and Leonid, without thinking, threw the pike back into the pond. Neither measured nor weighed! But before the custodian could box his ears, Leonid sank unconscious to the ground.

(...)

## DARK FIGURE

dark – adjective and noun (Old English *deorc*, possibly related to Old High German *tarchanjan*, to conceal, hide): without light, shadowed, obscure, grim, dim, gloaming, black, murky, vague, unclear, unknown.

figure – noun and verb (Latin *figurare*, to form, shape, *figura*, a quality, kind, figure of speech, from PIE root *\*dheigh*, to form, build): form, shape; representation; an ordered arrangement of lines to form an ornamental pattern; a numerical symbol; a number of ten or more, etc.; related to *feign* (Middle English *feinen*, *feynen*, disguise or conceal, deceit, falsehood, Latin *fingerere*, touch, fabricate, alter; cf. *fiction* and *figment*), to form or invent (e.g. a story), to represent in fiction.

dark figure – (also dark number)

I) Indo-European phraseme, essentially: *The larger the figure, the more difficult it is to comprehend*. In Old Church Slavonic, *тъма* signified darkness, obscurity (cf. Ukrainian *тьма*, Belorussian *цьма*, Serbian *mama*, Slovakian *tma*, etc.) and also referred to large quantities (ten to one hundred thousand) as well as to great multitudes whose individual elements could not be readily calculated, such as the number of individual water droplets in a cloud or the grains of rye in a field.

II) Statistics: a) In empirical and mathematical statistics, often used as a synonym for a statistical outlier; in the plural, it refers to the sum of all outliers in a survey. b) In criminal statistics: the gap between the number of crimes reported and the number of crimes actually committed. c) In certain fields (epidemiology, transportation, etc.), the *dark figure* serves to demarcate the statistical cases from those actually observed.

III) Game studies: A result which, from a player's perspective, occurs with less-than-average frequency, e.g. *the one-in-a-million roll*. The gap between the mathematical probability of occurrence and the perceived probability is, however, referred to as the *dark difference*.

IV) Psychology: triskaidekaphobia; see (VII).

V) Psycholinguistics: In the linguistic development of a child or the foreign-language acquisition of an adult, numbers which are either a) temporarily conflated as a result of their phonic similarity, e.g. “one, *twee*, four, five,” or confused, e.g. *thirteen* and *thirty*, or which b) in a given stage of development have not yet been differentiated: “nine, ten, *many*.”

VI) Synesthesia research: Umbrella term for numbers which are perceived as dark colors. Haleine in *La Langage de Synopsie* (1951) included pale, bitter, and musty numbers in this category.

VII) Numerology: Numbers associated with death and the so-called dark powers (e.g. four, 666) are classified as dark. The number thirteen has taken on a particular significance in everyday life: due to superstition and irrational fear (triskaidekaphobia), thirteen is often omitted from the numbering of high-rise building stories, airplane rows, horse trailers, etc. *Dark thirteen* therefore has a double meaning, since light never shines on the (missing) thirteenth floor.

VIII) Display technology: a) Illegible digits on a defective VF display (more commonly called *dark digits*), but occasionally also b) temporary blank spaces on intact segment or split-flap displays, as well as c) digital cathodes in Nixie tubes held at zero voltage, that is, intentionally not lit up.

IX) Computer technology: a) In data processing devices, any values smaller than the smallest storable positive value are automatically rounded down to zero. In certain functions, however, the divergence from subsequent values begins only below this threshold. In such cases, the machine’s zero conceals an infinite number of dark figures. b) Temporary error conditions in the logic circuit may lead to false bit series; both the correct values that are lost in this process as well as the randomly occurring (distorted) values are referred to as dark numbers.

X) Laboratory jargon: humorous nickname for measurements of dark matter and black holes.

*Translated by Madeleine LaRue*

## Antje Rávik Strubel



Antje Rávik Strubel is a Potsdam-based writer and translator. She studied German and American literature, and psychology, at the University of Potsdam and New York University. She has received many awards and fellowships including the German Academy of Arts Prize for Emerging Authors in 2002 and the Hermann Hesse Prize in 2007, and has been nominated for both the Leipzig Book Fair Prize and the German Book Prize. Rávik Strubel has been writer-in-residence at Villa Aurora in Los Angeles, Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, and the Deutsches Haus at New York University. She is the German-language translator of renowned American authors Joan Didion and Lucia Berlin. Her debut work for the stage will be premiered at Schauspiel Frankfurt in Spring 2019.

### Selected publications:

*In den Wäldern des menschlichen Herzens. Episodenroman*, S. Fischer Verlag, 2016

*Sturz der Tage in die Nacht*, S. Fischer Verlag, 2011

*Kältere Schichten der Luft*, S. Fischer Verlag, 2007

*Tupolew 134*, Verlag C.H. Beck, 2004

*Unter Schnee. Episodenroman*, Verlag dtv, 2001; *Snowed Under*, Red Hen Press, 2008

*Fremd Gehen. Ein Nachtstück*, Verlag dtv, 2002

Antje Rávik Strubel, *In den Wäldern des menschlichen Herzens. Episodenroman* [Into the Woods of the Human Heart], novel  
Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2016, 272 pages

## Crystal clear episodes

In her latest novel, *In den Wäldern des menschlichen Herzens*, Antje Rávik Strubel masterfully incorporates several key motifs of her already impressive oeuvre. Like *Unter Schnee*, this work is an “episodic novel,” composed of short stories linked together by recurring characters. As in *Kältere Schichten der Luft*, and indeed many of her other works, the author explores the notions of “male” and “female,” interrogating the meaning of such categories. Here, Rávik Strubel orchestrates a merry-go-round of love affairs, wherein not only the constellations between characters are in flux, so too are their genders. This works because the author is a master at playing with the expectations of her readers.

The concept is underlined by the neutral names given to many of the characters. In the first episode, for example, we discover a few pages into the text that René is a young woman, and that she is on vacation with her girlfriend, Katja, at the canoe camp “Hemingway,” located in Stora Le, Dalsland, Sweden. The name of the camp offers us another clue: as in *Kältere Schichten der Luft*, which also takes place in Scandinavia, the setting is traditionally seen as a “male” getaway, replete with tests of physical strength and confrontations with nature. Katja, who is the more experienced in lesbian relationships of the pair, senses something is wrong in this second summer together in the camp and in a succinctly drawn dialogue that is reminiscent of Hemingway himself, we witness the abrupt and unexpected end of their relationship.

The stark dialogues and excursions into nature complement each other in the concise, classically “masculine” style of the American short story. The fact that gender roles are being challenged – in this very male-dominated genre and style of language – leads to a productive friction. What is perhaps most striking about this concept is the way in which Rávik Strubel not only reinscribes “male” writing for her own purposes but also subverts it by including themes related directly to gender. Though questions of gender are a currently a hot topic, Rávik

Strubel doesn't cloak them in theoretical jargon but instead artfully and compellingly weaves them into the narrative.

The second episode also takes place in nature, this time in California, where the author lived on and off for several years. Tom, a renowned and rather masculine writer, has retreated from the world and has been living near Sequoia National Park. Leigh, who is in the process of transitioning, interviews Tom for his master's thesis. His companion Emily, whom he has brought along on the trip, ends up jeopardizing their as yet undefined relationship by disrupting the interview and confronting the author, criticizing him for his cynicism toward Leigh and in general, and for the fact that he has been telling the same stale stories to journalists for years. At the end of the episode, Emily turns away into an uncertain future.

This moment of disappearing paves the way for a recurring motif: Emily's disappearance from California continues to play a role through several subsequent episodes. Only much later does she reappear in Germany, on the island of Hiddensee, where she begins a love affair with René, whom we encountered in the very first episode with Katja. There are many characters in this *ronde* of love affairs, engaging in ever-changing constellations. The more the episodes evolve, the more layered and complex the connections between the stories and the sexes, or genders, become. Rávik Strubel's great skill in composition and crystal-clear language make for an intriguing read, with characters we can empathize with.

*By Hans-Peter Kunisch, translated by Zaia Alexander*

Sample Translation: *In den Wäldern des menschlichen Herzens*

(pp. 144–64)

DESERT IN BLOOM

*Mojave Desert, California, USA*

Yellow rubble along the road. A sprawling wasteland, countless miles left behind in the four hours Faye had spent driving towards an ever-receding dusty horizon.

She arrived at noon. Heat surged into the car. The windshield, side mirrors, even the dashboard was coated in grease. The motel glistened in the sun.

When Faye had first heard that the desert came into bloom in early summer, she had imagined Technicolor flowers, shiny, rubbery, fleshy green leaves, lotus flowers, amaryllis, dark-eyed turnera, fire lilies, devil's hair. A world of tropical plants had branded itself into her mind and, after countless previous attempts in which something always coincidentally seemed to get in the way, she had finally gotten into her blue vintage BMW and had driven east from Los Angeles.

(...)

She'd needed courage to take this trip into the desert. But she believed courage was nothing more than naivety, and now felt disappointed even though she hadn't driven to the desert to see flowers. The mounds of rubble didn't show the slightest semblance of green.

The ground was scorching. As soon as Faye got out of the car, the hot hard sand burned the soles of her flip-flops. She hurried into the shade of the motel. It was a U-shaped building with a massive DESERT INN sign in giant red letters and an AAA sticker in front. The seal of the auto club was like a sedative in this wasteland. Mechanics couldn't prevent earthquakes, but in the event of any other disasters, help would be on the way.

Faye picked up her key at the reception desk. She carried her bag into one of the identical rooms facing the parking lot out front. Her BMW glistened in the heat.

She was waiting for Leigh.

A group of quad riders appeared on the dunes in the distance. Their chests were bare. They held the heavy four-wheel machines between their legs and raced up and down the sand dunes. Faye sat on the edge of the bed and saw the quads plowing the desert, sometimes nearer and sometimes further away.

After an hour, Faye got tired of waiting. She grabbed the bucket from the bathroom and filled it with ice cubes from the vending machine under the awning. She wrapped the ice cubes in a towel and pressed it to her neck. The ice hurt and she thought about Leigh and their telephone conversation, and about his shapeless, oversized clothes, and that he was the only thing that had ever bothered her about Emily. Emily had deserved a wild, crazy and beautiful Leigh, someone elegant and attractive, respected, renowned, a completely different Leigh. Not this one.

“I’m gonna hang up,” Leigh had said on the phone, “if you keep dissing me.”

“A little courtesy wouldn’t kill you,” he’d said.

“If you can’t change something, stop trying.”

“Let it go, Faye.”

“Just chill.”

“Listen,” he’d said. “Her stubbornness was her greatest asset.”

“You still think I fucked her. You think I fooled around with her and then dumped her. But I forgive you. I forgive you, because you can’t help yourself. A trauma never surfaces as something painful.”

“You’re the expert on that,” Faye had said.

The melted ice had soaked her blouse. The heat bore down on the roof. She could see the quad riders through the window. They were nearer to her now. She saw them reach the crest of the final dune before the road, stand erect and thrust their pelvises forward. The vehicles tipped headlong, the engines howled as though the drivers were furious at the sand for only submitting to their weight temporarily. The swollen tires had left nothing behind but a fleeting tread mark. The riders’ bodies were tattooed. Sand, suntan oil and sweat coagulated into a shiny armor on their skin.

They pulled into the parking area in front. She saw that one of the riders was Leigh. She recognized him from his oversized shirt, his almost

delicate physique, and felt relieved, but then caught herself. Leigh wore a helmet that didn't suit his slim face. Everything he wore was too large. He was the only one who didn't drive bare-chested. A woman sat behind him and blood rushed into Faye's head. But it was not Emily. The backlight made it appear as if Emily hovered like a mirage in the air. It would have never occurred to Emily to ride through the desert on a quad. She had great respect for the desert, for the ingenious hunting paths, accessible only with moccasins and meaningful only for their creators, the Chumash, the Diegueños, the Tongva. Paths that had long since been buried in sand, along with the artifacts of past existences, arrowheads, pottery, jewelry that had been pulverized, made invisible. Invisible but still present, as Emily said, there in the backlight, or as she would say, would have said, might have said, Faye thought, watching Leigh kiss the woman sitting behind him.

Emily had often retreated to the Mojave Desert to "shed her skin," as she put it. Had put it, Faye thought. A thing of the past.

"The lighting out here is crazy," Leigh said and took off the helmet. "Makes you lose your sense of reality."

They stood next to the ice machine under the awning. Emily had always demanded that Faye share her enthusiasm for everything, but she couldn't feel enthusiastic about Leigh, not even now. She had only seen him once before, and it wasn't something she cared to repeat. Actually, she had never seen him properly, and now she forced herself to look him straight in the eye, while the woman standing next to him looked back at her, and Leigh smiled. She felt physically uncomfortable around him. His eyes were pale blue, the contours of his face indefinite. His skin looked as if it had been washed too often. The longer you looked at him, Faye thought, the more indistinct he seemed, and this was not due to the crazy lighting or the greasy sun, which was still high in the sky.

"Beret and I decided she should wait here while we drive to see Emily. Just in case you were worried," Leigh said. He now had a goatee, a flimsy one, with thin fringes.

"Don't be afraid," Beret said, "I'm not gonna get in the way of your little adventure."

"You didn't tell her what this is about?" Faye said to Leigh. "That we're not taking some joyride?"

“You haven’t changed.”

“You mean compared to the one time we talked on the phone, or compared to the ten minutes we spent together in Emily’s kitchen when you refused to take off your scarf?”

The kitchen was Faye’s favorite place in Emily’s house. It was a large kitchen with a dining table that seated twelve. When they were alone, Faye sat at the narrow white bar next to a life-size head made of glass that Emily sometimes threw her hats on. Faye sat at the bar and watched Emily mix drinks. Emily liked making cocktails. She made Old Fashioneds, adding Angostura and orange slices cut into quarters. Or she made Negronis after the sun had gone down and they needed to discuss difficult subjects. Once, somebody had brought her a bottle of absinthe from Europe. It was a special bottle with a dropper, a highly concentrated elixir for experts, just a few drops of it sufficed. They sat with their glasses under the loquat tree in the garden and didn’t dare drink any of it for fear they might go blind. They ended up pouring the stuff over the aloe vera plant, and laughing at the fact that they were such cowards, so far from Europe.

Leigh was one of the difficult subjects they had discussed back then.

It wasn’t difficult because Leigh was a difficult person. Leigh had grown up in a suburb, in one of the satellite communities south of L.A., inland, where the rent was cheaper. He had grown up in a house mounted on wheels, a trailer that could be driven anywhere if the real estate prices went up. He was white trash but had fought his way out and managed to get a scholarship, read French female philosophers, and listened to Latino pop. He hated being pigeon-holed and liked hanging out at the Blue Moon, a former club for soldiers, until a group of transgender people took it over. Leigh was someone who made pancakes, someone Emily had swooned over, and with whom she was now friends. Friends or more.

Leigh was a difficult subject because Faye feared for Emily and Emily knew about her fear.

As soon as the conversation turned to Leigh, Faye would change the subject.

“Remember,” she said, for example, “how I used to stand in the middle of the schoolyard because I couldn’t find our classroom and you came

and took my hand and showed me the way? Even if they'd tortured me, I never would have found it without you. I was totally disoriented."

"Oh, don't exaggerate."

"If it wasn't for you, I'd have never made it through elementary school."

"Well, you were consistent if nothing else," Emily said. "I could always rely on you to go in the wrong direction."

Then one day there was Leigh, standing in the door. He had leant against the doorframe, until Emily had dragged him into the kitchen and introduced them to each other, first Leigh – Faye, then the other way around. Neither of them said anything. Emily suggested making them a drink, a special "meet and greet drink," and Faye knew it would be a Negroni because of the difficult situation, their special drink, which suddenly had lost all its meaning. Leigh didn't have a clue about all that. He just nodded, relieved, and Emily told him to take off his scarf because it was summer and she didn't want to turn on the air conditioning. She suggested wrapping the scarf around the life-size glass head.

"He needs our protection," Emily said, kissing the glass forehead. "See? He's completely at our mercy. He's transparent, we can read anything we want into him." She stood behind the bar and hunched her shoulders. She made herself so small that her head vanished behind the glass.

"And," she said, "how do you like me now?"

The glass head in front of Emily's face was transparent, while at the same time concealing her.

"Still the same old provocateur," Leigh said to Faye under the awning. "Always ready with a zinger."

Faye said nothing, and while Beret headed towards the reception desk, Leigh went back to the quad and unstrapped their overnight bag. Faye waited under the awning. Beret came back with the keys and Leigh went inside the room with her. When he returned, he said, "Are flip-flops all you've got?"

"Is that a problem?"

"Yes," Leigh said. "Flip-flops are fucked on the quad."

"I'm not planning to drive out on a quad with you," Faye said.

"No?"

"I've got a car," she said. "And I plan on using it."

“I’m not driving into no man’s land in your old lemon.” Leigh handed her a pair of sneakers. “How about these?”

“Whose are they?” Faye asked.

“Beret’s. Who else’s?”

Faye slipped on the sneakers, they put on their helmets, and suddenly Faye didn’t think it was such a good idea to drive out with Leigh. Before he started the engine, she said, “You were the last one who saw her.”

Leigh nodded.

“You have a responsibility,” Faye said. “I expect you to get me there safely and back again.”

Leigh looked at Faye. Then he slowly peeled the beard off of his chin.

“Did you think it was real?” He took a leather pouch from the chest pocket of his shirt.

“Chromosomes,” he said contemptuously. “Genetics. Hormones. The cult of the natural.” He stuffed the beard into the pouch. “Why did we bother inventing the individual when we stifle all its possibilities? Yet everybody clings to the idea as though it were some kind of salvation.”

He glanced at the quad riders who had dropped into the Driver’s Ranch. “See those guys?” he asked. “Did they frighten you? At first they look like they’re playing the usual macho act, tough guys talking the talk, who can’t walk past a woman without making some lowlife comment. Actually, they’re nothing like that. I know two of them from my seminar. *Third-wave feminists*. The whole nine yards. Not really my thing, not enough *gender hacking*, too wishy-washy, but better third wave than no feminism at all.”

The Driver’s Ranch was a rough-hewn shack with a corrugated iron roof, where they served omelets with french fries and pumped-up burgers for breakfast. The riders sat in the shade of the veranda. Their overheated, tattooed armor trembled when they ate, their bloated muscles covered in sailboats, helmets, bare asses, a pierced heart.

“Right,” Faye said, “Orthodox feminists. That’s exactly the impression they make.”

“*Faggots*,” Leigh said. “If you want to hang out with them, you’d better have more to offer than the ideal proportions of your cock.”

The courtyard glimmered in the heat.

“Let’s get going.”

Leigh was still looking at the Driver’s Ranch. “The beard. It’s a reminder that our desire has a terrifying precision. I can’t remember who’d said that, but I think it’s true.”

“Okay.”

“Nothing’s okay,” Leigh said. “As long as you blame me for Emily’s disappearance.”

“You’re the one she wanted to see. The day before she disappeared. You saw her last.”

“Maybe.” Leigh mounted the quad and started the engine. “But *I* never wanted anything from *her*.”

“And I suppose you don’t want anything from Beret either?” Faye shouted over Leigh’s shoulder.

“Depends,” Leigh shouted, “on the impression we make.”

The sneakers were too small. They pinched but Faye suppressed the pain. She thought about Emily. She tried to imagine what Emily must have thought the last time she was there. She concentrated on holding on, since Leigh drove fast, the ground was bumpy, and the quad had lousy shock absorbers. Leigh left the main road and they drove into the yellow desert. The dust swirled upward, making it difficult to breathe – the dust and the heat – but after a while they got used to it. Leigh headed towards a group of Joshua trees that seemed to be swimming in the distance. They looked like underwater plants that were swaying under an invisible current. The San Andreas Fault was not far away, an eerie border between the desert and the city. The fault was a reminder that the earth was molten, a fiery stream under the edges of two plates, the surface gaping open above. The plates drifted in opposite directions. Each year the Pacific and North American plates moved two inches closer to each other, and it was merely a matter of time before the nuclear power plant that had been built on top of these floating strata of earth, along with its reactors and fuel rods and holding basins, would be crushed by the plates, melting desert and city into a huge radioactive hell.

Sand splashed under the wheels like heated water and Faye clutched the side handles.

The kitchen in Emily’s house was a place where Faye had felt at home. There weren’t many places like that and none where she had felt as completely safe as she had there. Now it seemed almost impossible that she had ever been there.

Back then, there had been no *For Sale* sign on the lawn. Back then, the bougainvillea had been watered regularly. She hadn’t yet said to

Emily, “You and your beautiful soul always clinging to these fucked up guys. But hey, everybody needs a calling in life. And you helped me get through my screwed-up childhood. I don’t exclude myself from being messed up too. After all, half of this goddamned city is messed up. And that makes people like you in high demand.”

That was the evening Emily hadn’t mixed any drinks. The evening she had not sat on a barstool, had not sliced an orange into quarters, the evening the glass head had remained hatless. Emily had not bothered to take off her hat. It was already dark outside, almost Christmas, a string of lights had been blinking somewhere. But Faye had only noticed them later. Only in retrospect had she noted the blinking lights. In the sleepless nights after Emily’s disappearance, she had begun to see the string of lights as a warning signal. The blinking had warned of danger, had marked the evening before Emily’s disappearance, but she had overlooked this sign.

Emily had not gone to the bar. They had not even reached the kitchen. Trembling, she had stood in front of the big windows in the entryway. She had just come back from seeing Leigh. Or she had wanted to go to see Leigh. Or Leigh did not want her to come to him, but she wanted to try anyway, and Faye had lost her temper, had looked down on them both, as if from a great distance. “Don’t worry, Emily,” she had said coolly. “I’m sure he’ll ask you to marry him soon. You’d be a lifesaver, given his financial situation. Or rather *her*? Should I say *she*? Or how about *its*? You never know with those unique people. At least you won’t have to worry about attracting attention, you and your endangered gynander. It’ll be the freakiest wedding in Beverly Hills. I bet you’ll even make it to the cover of *Vanity Fair*.”

“Leave,” Emily had said. “Get out. Fuck off!”

They didn’t pass a single tree, a single shrub. The ground was flat as if it had been steamrolled. Leigh stopped and when they got off the quad they saw a pattern in the sand ahead. Up close, they could see gorges running fifteen to thirty-feet deep. The passages in the sand were labyrinthine, the earth had fallen off vertically, as if somebody had dug trenches with a giant spade.

“Down there,” Leigh said. “That’s where it is.”

They climbed down one of the gorges, way below sea level, Faye thought. It was shady there, but not cooler. Slides made the ground

uneven. Heaps of gravel along the path gave way under their feet, sometimes they had to duck under an overhang made of sand that had formed a bridge, where the surface of the earth hadn't yet collapsed.

Leigh walked ahead and Faye had a chance to observe him from behind, his muscular legs, his slender back, the straight shoulders that led to a soft, shaved down-like neck, the neck of a beautiful woman. She'd have liked to know if Emily had seen that, if she had always seen Leigh that way, with a shirt sliding from the shoulders and sunburned skin. He didn't look so bad from the back. Faye tried to imagine Emily in this narrow pass, wearing sneakers or flip-flops. Maybe she had been happy because the desert absorbed and enveloped her, or maybe she felt restless, because solitude and vastness terrified her. She tried hard to imagine what Emily had seen in this desert.

The gorge led to a circular opening. The sky above was pale, almost white, and when Leigh turned to Faye, his face was white too.

"Emily put herself at your mercy," Faye said.

"It's a voluntary decision, I'm assuming, to put yourself at somebody's mercy."

"You pushed her away!"

"It's all a matter of interpretation," Leigh said.

"You really are merciless."

The area was surrounded by sand walls. There was a hollow in the ground on one side and Leigh went there to take a look.

The hollow was filled with charred wood and burned branches. But it had been a long while since somebody had made a fire. The coal was white and half buried in the sand.

Faye watched Leigh as he bent down to pick up a branch, but she knew they weren't going to find anything there.

"I can't even remember her properly anymore," she said. "The last remnants of my memory are all used up."

There were no traces, not even carvings or signs on the sand walls, no artifacts of Tongva or Chumash that suggested it had been a sacred place. It was just a cave that lacked a roof.

"When Emily was still around," Faye said, "the memories came too fast for me to process them."

Leigh put the tank bag on the ground. He removed a thermos and two cups and handed one to Faye. When Faye didn't respond, he sat down in front of the fire pit.

“You should drink something,” he said, as he poured himself some tea. “Unless you’re planning on getting dehydrated.”

Faye said nothing. She just sat down. She was quite a distance from Leigh. She propped herself up with her arms behind her. She was waiting for Emily. She had never waited that way before. She waited without looking at Leigh, and the greasy light of the sun above the gorge enveloped them both. Faye waited so intensely she had the impression Emily would come running through the gorge at any moment and shout, “There you are! What took you so long? I keep forgetting what a scaredy-cat you are.”

Then everything would be cleared up. No more fears, no questions. Emily would tell her everything. About the situation she had gotten involved in, a shooting, the wrong place at the wrong time, a fight, nothing to do with her, but one from which she had barely escaped.

And then Emily really did appear. She came out from the spot where the gorge curved round, an outline of color against the sandy ground. Faye first saw a child in red sandals and a sailor’s hat, but with every step Emily came closer, she grew older, and when she entered the cave, she wore her wrinkled white summer dress, the same one she wore the day she returned from Sequoia Park with Leigh.

Leigh screwed the thermos shut and leaned back against the sweltering wall that separated them from the molten interior of the earth.

Above their heads, at the height of the earth’s surface, Joshua trees floated like underwater plants in the heat. And if you considered things precisely, Faye thought, then they weren’t just below sea level, because the two of them were deeper than any sea. They had already been submerged in all the seas.

“Show me,” she said abruptly.

“What?”

“You know.”

Faye stood up and walked over to Leigh. She stood in front of him, casting her shadow on his face.

“Show me.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Of course you know.”

“You’re just like Emily,” Leigh said without looking up.

“Do to me what you did to her.”

“What’s the point?” Leigh said.

“What did you do with her?”

Leigh looked at Faye. “You guys really must think I’m your circus horse,” he said quietly. “Do you even have a clue what you’re doing to me? You’re taking away my humanity,” he said fiercely. “You and your Emily.”

For a moment it was still. It was as still as it could only be in a ditch in the desert. The sky was no longer as white. It had dulled at the edges of the gorge to a matte blue, or was that Leigh’s eyes? Faye realized she was staring at Leigh, she was staring into that pale blue, losing herself in it, and when he held her gaze, and looked straight back at her, she looked away.

He reached for her hand. He pulled Faye down. But she resisted.

“Maybe it was too soon. But Emily knew one thing. She knew that desire is precise,” he said. “And she knew that because of me. Even if you blame me a thousand times.”

“What was too soon?” Faye said.

“Oh, nothing.” He let go of her hand and she sat down beside him.

“What do you want?” he asked.

All of a sudden, Faye didn’t know what to say, didn’t want to say something wrong, something that would stop her from finding out what had happened to Emily. Emily was the only reason she was there.

“Tell me what you want.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just tell me,” Leigh said.

Faye tossed her sneakers away, which were suddenly smoldering hot.

“If you want to know what I did with her, you need to know what you want. Emily certainly would have known.”

“I’m not brave,” Faye said. “I’m not like her.”

Leigh hugged his knees. “If you were Emily, you’d probably say, I want your cock and I want your breasts.”

He stroked the sand with his fingertips until they were almost touching Faye’s foot. She recoiled and sat motionless. She realized Leigh didn’t know anything about the shooting. He had never found out, he simply had other concerns. And she also realized she had suspected him the entire time.

When Faye did not respond, Leigh said, “Emily might say, love me. Touch me. Do you feel how wet I am? I want you to feel that.”

Faye just sat there and the heat bore down on her head and neck and burned the soles of her feet and between her toes.

“Emily would say: I want you inside me. I want you to pull my lips apart and open me and come inside me,” Leigh said. “I want you to thrust into me slowly and deeply.”

They sat side by side, watching the movements of Leigh’s hand.

“And you?” Faye finally asked. “What do you say?”

Leigh held his hand still. When he remained silent, Faye said, uncertainly, “Does that turn you on? You’d say to her that her softness, her openness turns you on. They turn you into who you are.”

Leigh smiled but didn’t look at Faye. He looked over his knees into the fire pit.

“You’d say that you are everything for her,” Faye said, feeling dizzy, as if too much oxygen were suddenly being pumped through her body. “You are everything for her, and in that moment you are everything through her.”

“Yeah.”

“You thrust into her and when you feel her bend towards you, when you feel her desire, you also feel the contours and workings of your body, your cock, and you are no longer indistinct.”

“See,” Leigh said. “You do know.”

“You kiss her and enter her and feel how she gives in to you in your groin and in your belly.”

“Yeah,” Leigh said. “And she says: Stay. Please stay like this. But let me turn around, so I can feel you everywhere. Hold me with your hands and push inside me and then go faster. Lose control.”

“And you lose control,” Faye said.

“Lose control and take me with you, fuck me, love me, bend over a little, she would have said. Bend over. It turns me on to feel your breasts touching me, to feel them brushing against my back every time you thrust inside me.”

They sat there without touching and Leigh again began to plow the sand with his fingertips. To Faye it seemed as if her body had suddenly become transparent, superimposed over Emily’s. Or maybe it was the other way around, Faye thought. Emily’s body had become transparent, so that she, Faye, appeared from within it.

And then there was the sand, the yellow embers of this desert that sifted through Emily’s splayed fingers. Her hands lay palms upwards on the loose ground, palms that were now grasped by Leigh, who was on top of her, pushing her with his entire body to the ground, and Emily

got wet from his weight, his soft breasts, strong shoulders. She gave in, swept away by Leigh's movement, slid back and forth and yielded to his hand, which he led downward, over her belly and her thighs to the hem of her dress, which he pushed up in a single motion. He slid his hand down to her clit and cupped it with his fingers. Emily tried to twist away from him. She writhed to escape the pressure of his fingers, to ease it, to transform it into a caress but Leigh stayed, and the pressure stayed, and his body pressed her to the ground, held her down in the sand. And then she let go, let herself fall into his hand, until the pressure was just right, and her body softened nearly to a blur, and she needed to bend toward him to feel her boundaries and ignite where pressure and resistance were greatest.

When they returned to the quad bike, the sun was low. They had to hurry to reach the motel before dark. They hadn't spoken since they had finished the tea from the thermos, got up, and left. They walked silently through the gorge, and now wordlessly put on their helmets. Leigh started the quad and they drove off, Faye resting her face on his back. She held on to him the way Emily would have wanted to.

She wasn't afraid anymore.

In the last light, before the oblique shadows of the beginning of night, Faye saw the pale carpet lying over the entire plain. Desert sage and brittlebush covered the rubble. Endives and Californian buckwheat, brown-eyed evening primrose blossoms, desert stars and gravel ghost gave the wasteland color, dark blue thistle sage and bright pink desert calico.

*Translated by Zaia Alexander*

# Uwe Timm



Born in 1940, Uwe Timm is a freelance author who divides his time between Berlin and Munich. His literary work includes more than twenty-five publications, many of which address recent German history. His books have been translated into numerous languages; in the case of *My Brother's Shadow*, more than twenty. He also writes novels for children and young adults; his most well-known children's title, *Rennschwein Rudi Rüssel* received the German Youth Literature Prize and was made into a film. In 2006 Timm was awarded the Premio Napoli as well as the Premio Mondello, in 2009 he received the Heinrich Böll Prize, and in 2012 the Carl Zuckmeyer Medal. He is a member of Germany's PEN Centre and the Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

## Selected publications:

*Ikarien*, Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2017

*Vogelweide*, Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2013

*Der Freund und der Fremde*, Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2005

*Am Beispiel meines Bruders*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2003; *In My Brother's Shadow*, Bloomsbury, 2006

*Rot*, Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2001

*Johannishnacht*, Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1996; *Midsummer Night*, New Directions, 1998

*Die Entdeckung der Currywurst*, Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1993; *The Invention of Curried Sausage*, New Directions, 1997

*Heißer Sommer*, Bertelsmann Verlag, 1974

Uwe Timm, *Ikarien* [Icaria], novel  
Cologne: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2017, 506 pages

## The Old World and the New World

Icaria is the kind of place dreams are made of. A commune where equality and community reign, where there is no private property, where people work, learn, eat and celebrate together, where each person pursues a trade and can be happy in their own way. This, at least, is the image Carl Wagner and Alfred Ploetz have in mind when they travel from Zurich in 1884 to spend several months with the Icarian commune in Iowa. The two young men, communists and students of medicine and economy, have read Étienne Cabaret, the founder of the first Icarian commune, and are struck by his ideas. A classless society, with lots of space and health – what more could one want? But the Icarians turn out to be fearful, wizened philistines, who ridicule Karl for his tender romance and accuse the visitors of wreaking havoc. The new commune comes to nothing. Ploetz, however, feels strengthened in his mission to try to improve human beings.

Uwe Timm takes on historical material with which he has close connections: Ploetz, who died in 1940 at the age of seventy, was the grandfather of Timm's wife, the translator Dagmar Ploetz. Dr Alfred Ploetz is known as the founder of eugenics, the inventor of the concept of "racial hygiene." This cultural-historical background informs the novel, but Timm works skillfully, employing refractions and reflections to make the subject bearable. Without these devices it would be hard to tolerate the expositions on racial theory, with formulations like "selective breeding," "eradication," and "ballast existence," for the duration of five hundred pages.

Uwe Timm is a highly skilled narrator. This is why he doesn't have the wayward Ploetz speak for himself, but instead invents a renegade travel companion, Karl Wagner, and lets him recount his friendship with the scientist. The aged witness of the times is questioned by someone dedicated to solving crimes: an officer of the American occupation named Michael Hansen, the novel's third protagonist. This young man, a scholar

of German literature with Ernst Bloch and E.T.A. Hoffmann in his field pack, who emigrated to America with his family when he was twelve, plays the role of a judge. His character combines analytical faculties, warm pragmatism, and a curiosity for the diversity of life.

From this there emerges a captivating wickerwork of different plot strands, backdrops, and literary genres. Lengthy descriptions of a devastated Germany alternate with the officer's terse, precise diary entries, contrasted by lyrical depictions of the landscape, birdwatching notes, and the fourteen protocols of the interrogations. Reference points for American readers are full of contrasts: Hansen's perspective, as a representative of the US Army with German origins, presents a double-sided view of Germany.

Depictions of the Iowa commune are equally illuminating. A light is shone on a chapter in the so-called New World's history of ideas, which is rarely represented in literature. The appeal of *Ikarien* lies in its opposing poles: the future-oriented US and a brutalized Germany; the revolutionaries of the Bavarian Soviet Republic and the human breeders under the Nazis; Ernst Bloch and Stefan George. In *Ikarien*, Uwe Timm depicts the dark side of utopia.

*Maike Albath, translated by Jamie Lee Searle*

Sample Translation: *Ikarien*  
(pp. 9-22 & pp. 51-54 & pp. 61-63)

He's alive.

I'm a witness.

He survived.

He moved down the street laughing, yelling, dancing along, a little awkwardly, but still a dance, clapping his hands. No one had ever seen him before. It was as if he'd fallen from the sky. Sturdy and compact, slurring his speech, dancing down the street, past the ruins of the corner building, along a tarn gray facade dangling white bed sheets, past the dairy shop, the shoe store, toward the fishmonger Grün, and coming the other way Adolf Andersen, not sporting his brown uniform and shiny high boots this spring day, but clad instead in innocuous green, *grün, grün, grün sind alle meine Kleider*, nor did he raise his arm, as only yesterday he had, to call out *Heil!* – no, he tipped his hat, nodding left and right in an over-friendly fashion, then paused in confusion, stood stock still as the awkwardly dancing young man approached him with a grin, stretching forth his stub-fingered hand, which Andersen took, surprised and embarrassed, as the young man was already stumbling on, making strange gurgling sounds, cries, not of pain, but rather pleasure, or perhaps both, cries of pleasure-pain, while from that same mouth, which seemed too small for his tongue, words spilled forth: one seemed to be *Wolke*, another *Baum*, yet another *Himmel*. Or was it *Himmler*?

No, *Himmel*.

The young man clapped his hands again, yes he was clearly dancing, an awkward dance, you could see it in the slow rhythm of his clapping hands as he drew near a tree, the only one left standing, having outlasted bombs, fires, and the winter sawing, a chestnut with leaves like little green paws. The young man pressed himself against the trunk, ran his fingers along the bark, and a gurgle flowed from his mouth. He crossed the street, flapped his arms as if trying to fly, called out hoarsely several times, and chased the crows, imitating their cries.

Three or four months later, having regained a sense of what was supposed to be normal, the children started to tease him. They didn't understand him. He shook his fist at them. But even if he managed to

catch one, he didn't strike them, but said instead: "Sleep well!" And, "Softly now!"

Why sleep?

He spoke like a child: I was the youngest and stuck with him the longest. How marvelous when he tried to sweep the clouds away with a broom.

When I started to tease him too, my mother asked me, "Why do you do that?"

"Because he's funny."

"No, he's not funny, and he's not bad. Children can be bad. But not him. He doesn't hurt anyone. He'll always be a little childlike."

Our talk went something like that. And bound up with it a feeling of shame, of having betrayed someone to please others.

For twelve years his parents kept him hidden in their apartment.

An apartment building, eight families, fourth floor, a flat at the end of the hall. Two adults and a child lived there. The child was kept inside. They shared the rations meant for two adults: butter, bread, cheese, vegetables, and potatoes. It was barely enough for two, let alone three. And the boy ate a lot, was hungry, constantly hungry, the mother said; he ate like a horse, said the father, who brought back something from work now and then, carrots, some cabbage, a sliver of soap and on rare occasions a little honey. One of the father's colleagues in the Water Department kept two beehives in his garden. He knew about the boy they kept hidden. Real honey was a feast.

Did the other tenants in the building know about him? One or two might have, for even if they kept their shoes off, those below could surely tell that more than two people lived above them. They didn't give anything away. He was a little different. He might have been killed.

They kept quiet.

Would they have kept quiet if it had been a Jewish family?

The horror, the things that can't be said.

It has to be said.

The rubble. In the summer there were trails through hills of debris.

Paths worn down. That's where the *Trümmermörder* walked through the ruins. Ashes lay there. Fragments of bone. Brick dust. Humus. Thick green growth, lupines and thistles, coltsfoot too. Little clouds flew up from the depressions, white cabbage butterflies. The old folks said there were never so many butterflies as in the summer of 1945. Pests they said. They gnawed at the cabbage, were insatiable, and cabbage was scarce too. Children chased them, swung at them with thin willow branches; they fell to the ground with shredded wings.

We were the rescuers. We killed the pests.

In my dreams I could fly. It was easy. I spread my arms and I was in the air. Below: houses, streets, trees, our teacher Herr Blumenthal, hair sprouting from his ears and nostrils, and there was a bicyclist, swaying, about to fall, yes, he tumbled to the ground. I flew filled with joy. I looked forward to going to bed. I looked forward to falling asleep.

What I remember: Karlchen chewing. A steady motion, his jaw grinding slowly. As if chewing on his tongue. His smile pulled his face wide.

What I remember: the jeep, a car, so basic, so transparent in its functions, the wheels bare, the steering wheel, the gearshift, the gearbox a metal block visible behind the rear axle, the spare tire at the rear, on the other side a spade, the front windshield could be tilted up, the car had no doors, the soldiers simply stepped in, when it rained a folding cloth top was raised on metal bars.

The English soldiers occupying Hamburg drove the same jeep, but the one parked that July on Eppendorfer Weg had a star on its radiator, with an American officer in a starched khaki uniform. He was smoking. The driver, who wasn't Black, though we later discovered that many drivers were, handed out sticks of chewing gum. An end in itself: pure taste, *lirum larum Löffelstiel*, and the act of chewing, the grinding motion of the jaw that puts the body at ease. The car smelled of gum and gasoline, a smell that's stayed with me ever since, the distant memory of the Other, the new.

The surprising thing was that the man in uniform understood us and spoke German. He asked the children their names. They told him their first names and their age. Karlchen was far bolder, or perhaps merely more curious; he touched the metal, the tires, the mirror, and finally, cautiously, with his somewhat stubby fingers, felt the officer's uniform.

The man asked, "What's your name?" And Karlchen said, "Karlchen." He had to repeat his name, and his question: "Can car jump?"

The officer laughed: "No."

The driver gave Karlchen a stick of gum wrapped in silver foil. And as the boy started to shove it in his mouth, the officer took it back, unwrapped it, and returned it to him. Karlchen chewed and clapped his hands.

## OUTWARD BOUND

The spray above the waves. On the ship stands a young man, on assignment. His name is Hansen, Michael, after the angel the Germans save for themselves. His first name was chosen by his father. Hansen is a perfectly normal, unobtrusive young man. He's tall and women say he's good-looking. You can tell from the way he walks that he plays sports, his movements are calm, strong. He's a good listener, that's a virtue. And he asks questions. Many good qualities, but nothing striking.

The young man stands at the railing with a comrade, looking out to sea, an overcast Atlantic blending with the sky. They stare intently, like the lookout on the bridge. They're watching for gray wolves. For a periscope, a snorkel, the bubbling path of a torpedo. No wolf in sight. The wolves are being chased with radar, airplanes, depth charges. The ship, a dark gray troop carrier that was once a gleaming white passenger ship, is faster than any wolf.

The young man is one of the chosen.

Why him?

He speaks German and has a driver's license.

Chosen by whom?

By the American Psychological Warfare Division: PWD. But he doesn't know this yet.

Seven months ago he volunteered for the army and was assigned to the Intelligence Corps, the ones with two crossed flags on their buttons. He received an A-backpack and a B-backpack fastened with straps and snap hooks, carried over the shoulder. He went through basic training, learned to make his bed and the petty tests that went with it: the covers had to be so taut the drillmaster could bounce a quarter off them. He learned

to crawl with his rifle held out in front, to keep his balance on beams, to squeeze under rolls of barbed wire, to climb high wooden barriers, and again, keeping his balance, to run through the woods. He kept up well, had played basketball and tennis at Washington University. He learned how to shoot a rifle. He was recommended for Officer Training with high marks, learned tactics and how to deliver intelligence reports, which had to be brief, accurate and precise, as the Intelligence Corps Colonel said. They were decisive in any battle. Even the bravest soldiers wound up flailing about in the field if their orders didn't arrive in time or were muddled. The flags on their buttons were once sent commands from mountain to mountain. Now there was Morse code, telephone, radio. Encryption, the deciphering of enemy radio transmissions, reconnaissance. Estimates of troop strength, plans of attack, the mood of enemy troops.

"You are the brain and the nerves of our troops," said the Colonel. Muscles, sinews, bones, that's the others, the infantry, the artillery, the tank corps.

Or better yet, you're the angels that bring the tidings. But you see everything too. And you listen. You watch the enemy. Not only which troops are where, but what they are thinking. Their plans. Their mood.

Half a year later Hansen was sworn in as an officer and named Second Lieutenant. A so-called six-month wonder. He was fit to be sent against the Germans, the Krauts, the Nazis. He was an American, though born in Germany. No one asked him what he felt about having to fight over there, apart from the fear of being injured or even killed.

At home in Ringwood, near New York, they had discussions about it. Why volunteer right after his MA? He would have been drafted, but surely they could manage a deferral. But he wanted to. "War is rubbish," his frightened mother said. She said it in German, and also: "You worry over your kids, raise them as best you can, in pain and sorrow, and then the guys upstairs send them off to be killed in the war." His father was against it too, but for a different reason. He'd renounced his German citizenship years ago and become an American, but he still said you don't fight against the land of your birth, against your own blood relatives.

Hansen outfitted himself at the military exchange, a close-fitting uniform that differed in style and quality from the one he'd worn as a common

soldier. Now he had a dark green jacket with gleaming buttons, rose-colored trousers, shirt, tie, a billed cap with a golden eagle, epaulettes with a narrow band of brass. A lightweight, practical uniform.

Three months before leaving for Europe he'd met Catherine, on a train, just before Christmas. A blizzard brought traffic in New York to a standstill.

He was on leave for a long weekend. The snow set in as he pulled out, and by the time the train entered Grand Central Station the storm was raging. Busses, taxis, and the suburban trains were no longer running. He stood in the domed hall beside the young woman he'd chatted with briefly across the aisle on the train. Her boyfriend was to meet her beneath the large station clock. Hansen gave her a few quarters for the pay phone, and she learned from her boyfriend's parents that he'd left, but had called on the way to say he was stuck in traffic.

Hansen accompanied her to a little bar across the street from the train station, where they found two chairs at a small wobbly metal table. They sat squeezed in among other stranded passengers. The windows were fogged over by steam from all the damp clothing. Now and then the headlamps of a car moved slowly by. They drank beer, ordered the last available sandwich, which she insisted on sharing with him, and talked for a while. At one point she stood up, asked him for more change, and went to the phone. He saw her standing near the counter, speaking into the receiver, how she shook her head, her thick dark brown, slightly reddish, shimmering hair. Soft gray trousers, a light-colored cable-stitch sweater, the gentle indication of her breasts. She came back, said she'd passed along the name of the bar, in case Horace called. The name Horace. Her name? Catherine. They sat in the crowded bar, closer to each other than usual for people who'd just met. When she laughed he felt her body against his arm. And she laughed often. The conversation switched from English to German. Hansen asked what she did for a living. She was studying anthropology at Columbia, earning her way as a language instructor, German, mostly for soldiers heading for Europe. Was her family German? No, she was French, but they spoke German at home. She came from Alsace. Four years ago, shortly after France surrendered and the German occupation began, her father sent her to America by way of an uncle in Spain. A precautionary measure, since it wasn't clear when the war would end. Alsace had been annexed by the German Reich

after the surrender. Her family had to take on German citizenship. But she made it to safety. Her brother didn't fare so well. He'd fought in the French army, and was sent to a prisoner-of-war camp in East Prussia after the defeat. Later, with his new citizenship, he was drafted into the German army. What times these were. I hope he's still alive. I hope they are. She'd heard nothing from her parents for the past three months.

Stirred by a sudden emotion, he put his hand on her arm and said: "The good thing about bad news is that it generally travels quickly."

She looked at him blankly. He said: "I'm in the Intelligence Service. I know about these things." He offered her a cigarette, which she took, saying she only smoked on days off. They sat together smoking for a while in shared silence.

After a good two hours the door to the bar opened again and a young man in a brown duffel coat entered, covered in snow. "Hello," he said, hugged Catherine, shook hands with Hansen, squeezing hard, and Hansen squeezed hard back, a brief test of strength that embarrassed him slightly afterward. He wondered if the other man felt the same. "This is Horace," she said, and he said "Hello" again - sorry there wasn't time to join them, there was no room anyway, and the car was double parked, it couldn't stay there long, they had to leave right away. She wanted to pay. Horace wanted to pay. Hansen warded them off, they could split the sandwich but not the cost, which was true, since the bill didn't divide evenly. But there was still time to exchange addresses. He wrote down the camp address and his parents' telephone number. When they were gone, he looked at her business card. In engraved letters: *Catherine Weckmann*. He smelled the card, a fragrance, a distant perfume, then put it away as he noticed people nearby looking at him, their faces distant and questioning. It might not have been a good idea to carry on a conversation in German in such an intimate, even conspiratorial tone. They might have been taken for the German spies posters all over New York were warning about.

Hansen and Catherine corresponded over the next three months, in German, letters his fellow soldiers in the training camp couldn't read, though there was nothing more intimate in them than the wish to see one another again soon. He liked her German, filled with old-fashioned phrases like *gehab dich wohl* - keep well.

(...)

APRIL 27

Columns of German prisoners on the road, marching toward a camp in the north. They looked ragged. Hard to believe that this gray mass was once ready to rule Europe. And on the other side of the road, heading south, equally ragged and worn figures, forced laborers from Poland, the Ukraine, Russia, prisoners from the concentration camps, then more prisoners of war, Belgian, French, now and then German refugees from the East, women, children and old people, horse-drawn carts, loaded with bundles, suitcases, baskets, a handcart pulled by women, a cow on a rope, baby buggies piled high, two streams passing each other in opposite directions. Those who had suffered took no revenge, made no threatening gestures, no shouts, nothing, a long silent line. Drizzle. The added gray. But it's said that away from the roads the Germans were plundered, raped, even murdered. Farmers had their cattle slaughtered.

FRANKFURT. MAY 2

The lodgings - a requisitioned villa that four weeks ago a manager at IG Farben called home. A small castle of sandstone and brick, with false Gothic windows, bays, little towers. A large reception hall, a pompous staircase, a gallery on the upper floor, all paneled in thick oak, grim solidity, a massive chandelier, heavy Chinese vases on cabinets, oil paintings on the walls, bearded men, faces of founding fathers, two landscapes with cows grazing in the evening glow, carved into the woodwork: *FORTES FORTUNA ADIUVAT*.

Well.

Hansen had to share the room with a lieutenant, George, a lanky, freckled psychiatrist from Austin who, Hansen thought, resembled Schiller, at least to judge by the portrait Professor Kuppitsch had hanging over his desk.

The large, high-ceilinged master bedroom had three windows, shrouded by dark green velvet curtains. The marriage bed was in two sections on wheels, and could be rolled apart on small tracks. Did they roll them apart when they had a fight? Or did they only shove them together to have sex?

I have to tell you up front that I snore - and then some. All my girlfriends have complained. I hope you can put up with it.

George was only three years older than Hansen and had treated wounded men at a field hospital at the Battle of the Ardennes. He said the

military didn't take psychological problems seriously. Career officers had the emotional sensitivity of rhinos. They didn't believe in mental trauma. A general wanted him to examine German prisoners who had fought at Stalingrad, were flown out wounded, and then, when they'd recovered, were sent back into battle. Severe cold, hunger, hopelessness and yet they held on, it was astounding. It deserved study. The general, who was responsible for motivating the troops, was fascinated. What's all this talk about trauma? Save it for night-time, do your duty by day.

As far as the military was concerned, handling shock was a matter of will power. They refused to believe in deeper psychic disturbances. As long as the war went on, patients were always suspected of malingering. There were striking cases of battle fatigue, like Private E-2, who went blind every time a gun went off. He couldn't react, couldn't even aim his gun, let alone fire it. He went blind, even though his hands never shook.

Although he'd been assigned to study mental stress, there were so few doctors when George landed in Antwerp that he was sent directly to a field hospital in the Ardennes. Up to that point, he said, his practical anatomy had been limited to corpses. All at once he was performing operations, minor ones at first, removing shell fragments, sewing up wounds.

I hope people aren't mad at me when they look in the mirror.

Surgery had never interested him, he'd only covered the basic requirements in medical school: observation and adding a final stitch now and then. That was it. The brain interested him. And suddenly he had to use a scalpel on legs, chest and arms: learning by doing. An experienced medic helped him.

Then he'd been ordered here and laid the scalpel aside. He treated cases like this private, who went blind whenever he tried to fire his rifle. He'd sought shelter in a ditch when a grenade went off, and then watched as a Sherman tank was hit by a German bazooka. One of the tank crew pushed his way out of the conning tower, tumbled to the ground, and lay there with his lower body in flames, the upper half pressing upward, screaming, as if he were doing push-ups, till he died. I declared him unfit for duty. And yet the war in the Pacific is still dragging on.

(...)

## THE ASSIGNMENT

In Frankfurt Hansen was ordered to join the staff of the Psychological Warfare Division. Major Engel gave Hansen his marching orders to Munich. The major had studied philosophy with Husserl in Freiburg and traveled to America on a fellowship in 1932. He sympathized with the Third International, and when the Nazis took control of the government, he stayed on in the States and taught classics at Harvard.

“Have you heard of eugenics?”

“Heard, yes.”

“You’ll be dealing with it soon.”

It seemed to Hansen that his superiors didn’t know what to do with him. They were simply moving him about. But before Hansen could even raise the question, Major Engel continued: “Don’t worry, those of us in The Society of the Tower – you’re a literary scholar aren’t you? – are keeping an eye on you. You’ve seen the harsh reality. That was the initiation. Now you reach the spiritual side. You’ve been chosen. If I may use that solemn phrase. By the way,” Engel said, speaking in German with a Berlin inflection, “I’ve always been sorry my name didn’t end in S. You know what I mean? So. You’re off to Munich. Here’s the address. In 1936 the man was being considered for the Nobel Peace Prize. A specialist in eugenics and the founding father of racial hygiene.

No point in interviewing the family, that’s hopeless. It’s always the good-hearted *pater familias* who hid the eggs at Easter time, and stood with tears in his eyes when the little children lined up for their Christmas presents and recited their poems. Our office has found a man who once worked with this doctor in the US. The doctor is dead now, but his assistant is still alive. They went through the registers. The office wants to know just what they did there. And about the secret societies he founded: Pacific, Nordic Bow, whatever else they were called. Do they still exist? Members? Goals? Those are the things the office is interested in. We go deeper. We’re interested in how the theory of racial hygiene evolved. The man conducted a series of experiments over many years on heredity. Dr Alfred Ploetz. Ever heard of him?”

“No.”

“So much the better. Look up his *famulus*. Interrogate him. You have full authority. Confiscate his archive. Requisition the castle.”

“Requisition it?”

“Yes, All you need is your uniform and two or three men.”

George was sent to Munich too, to join a team investigating medical experimentation on the inmates of concentration camps. Hansen and George were taken in an army car from Frankfurt to Munich. They were assigned a room in an occupied hotel in Neuhausen.

“Only one room?” asked Hansen.

“You’re not here on vacation.”

Hansen feared he’d never be rid of the snoring Texan. The hotel was on Nymphenburger Straße. Only a few buildings had been destroyed there, a bombed-out section every so often, the ruins still smelling of mortar, others already overgrown with grass and weeds.

*Translated by Breon Mitchell*

## Bettina Wilpert



Bettina Wilpert, born in 1989, lives in Leipzig and teaches German. She studied cultural studies, English language and literature, and creative writing in Potsdam, Berlin, and Leipzig. She has received scholarships to participate in workshops such as the 20th Klagenfurter Literaturkurs (2016) and the Prose Authors' Workshop at the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin (2017). She was artist-in-residence at Prosanova 2017, a festival for new writing. *nichts, was uns passiert* is the author's debut novel. It has been longlisted for Hotlist 2018, an award that highlights the best of independent publishing from Austria, Germany, and Switzerland.

### Publications:

*nichts, was uns passiert*, Verbrecher Verlag, 2018

Bettina Wilpert, *nichts, was uns passiert* [That kind of thing doesn't happen to us], novel  
Berlin: Verbrecher Verlag, 2018, 168 pages

## It happens everywhere

At first glance, *nichts, was uns passiert* could be regarded as a contribution to the “Me Too” debate, though that movement hadn't yet kicked-off when Bettina Wilpert was writing her debut novel. The book is about a young man who has sex with a young woman who doesn't want it at that moment. The story revolves around whether what happened was rape or not. This question is examined from various angles, as presented by an anonymous, reporter-like narrator. The fact that there is, in the end, no clear answer to this question makes the novel an intriguing literary experiment.

The action takes place in the type of milieu where people would normally think “that kind of thing doesn't happen here.” Wilpert takes us into the student scene of Leipzig, East Germany's coolest and most desirable city. The fact that Bettina Wilpert lives in Leipzig lends the work a great deal of authenticity, although the case at the novel's core is fictitious. Anna, late twenties, with a Ukrainian background, has recently completed her languages degree and is working part-time in a bar. Jonas, of similar age, is writing a PhD thesis on Ukrainian popular literature. They meet through mutual friends, find they have a lot to talk about, especially politics, and sleep with each other without becoming romantically involved.

They meet again at a party at Jonas's place. Anna gets really drunk, Jonas takes her to his room, and suddenly he wants sex. Anna is physically unable to resist him. Later, she says that she said No; Jonas claims he didn't hear her. When she wakes up, Anna feels abused and traumatized. After three months of depression alternating with helpless rage, she reports Jonas to the police. The case cannot go to trial because there is no proof of physical violence. As soon as word gets out among their friends and acquaintances, people take sides and battlefronts are drawn. Jonas is ostracized, purely on the basis of suspicion.

Bettina Wilpert carried out research for her novel in online victim forums, and interviewed a social education worker, a lawyer, a

psychologist, and a detective superintendent. The language she uses is spare, matter-of-fact, and unadorned, apart from certain expressions that accentuate the record-taking style of the narrative. In spite of this laconic approach, the plot is vivid, and the reader engages with each of the characters as the perspective shifts back and forth between the protagonists and the many other observers who get to tell their version of events. By remaining strictly impartial and reserving all moral judgment, the author encourages the reader to think about how society deals with sexual assault, and its psychological, legal, and interpersonal consequences.

This book is both timely and topical. It offers an insight into the lives of young Germans between city and campus through a story that will resonate beyond geographic borders.

*By Kristina Mardt-Zinke, translated by Rachel McNicholl*

Sample Translation: *nichts, was uns passiert*  
(pp. 5-22)

A

It was May and he'd introduced himself as Joni, though she never called him that; nor did anyone else. Perhaps she'd misheard the name, Anna said. She'd seen him before – Leipzig wasn't that big a city. And it was a Tuesday or a Wednesday, a weekday for sure.

The day she'd met Jonas, Anna told me, she and Hannes had been sitting on the steps of the Albertina, the university library. They were having a cigarette break – not the first of the day, maybe the third. It was late morning, and she was hung-over. She'd been working until 5 a.m. in the Lindental, a pub in the west of the city. A band from Vienna had been playing, and she'd had a few vodkas with the guys. The sun was just coming up, and the birds were twittering as she cycled home through Clara-Zetkin Park. That was nice. It was the first time she'd pulled an all-nighter that summer and seen the dawn, one of her favourite moments. She hadn't met a soul in the park, and it wasn't till she was on Karli, Karl-Liebknicht Straße, that she saw people up and about. Doctors or bakers maybe, people who had to head off to work at that early hour.

She'd woken up when her roommate, Verena, had left the apartment (around 9 a.m.), and hadn't been able to go back to sleep. As she had nothing better to do, she went to the library, where she met Hannes. As usual, he'd been there since 8 a.m., had already written two pages and deleted three. When she arrived, they went on their first cigarette break. They discussed the essay Hannes was writing. At the time, he was still researching how Nazism was remembered in the GDR as exemplified by schoolbooks. Anna remembered this well because Hannes had been working on this essay for almost six months even though it only needed to be fifteen pages long. He'd got carried away, read far too much literature, and couldn't organize his thoughts. Anna had tried to help him – she was good at editing others' writing – but he wouldn't listen to her, and so the essay had gotten worse instead of better.

On the day she met Jonas, then, she'd been discussing Hannes's paper with him on the Albertina steps. She hadn't had any breakfast and was feeling a bit queasy from the vodka the night before. Cigarettes and

coffee weren't helping. She spotted Jonas coming out of the library and approaching them. He asked if he could bum a roll-up. She handed him her tobacco without a word. She expected him to turn away and smoke by himself, but he and Hannes greeted each other like old friends, clapping each other on the back. They started making disparaging remarks about someone Anna didn't know, cracked an inside joke, remembered an evening boozing together. Anna was confused – how come Hannes knew this guy? They quickly explained. They'd both been on a tour of the Buchenwald Memorial recently and had hung out together there. They mentioned a lecture they'd heard and launched into a discussion about it. Anna smoked away and didn't pay them much attention. Their conversation became too silly for her and she was beginning to feel distinctly nauseous – afraid that the cigarette on her empty stomach might wreak revenge – so she announced that she was going to the dining hall, the Mensa, even if it was a bit early. The selection of dishes would be better and fresher at that time of day. On the way, they met Uli, a guy Hannes knew, so the four of them headed to the dining hall together. What exactly they talked about, Anna couldn't recall. Her memories of the Mensa were blurred because she would eat there at the same time almost every day, frequently with Hannes and Uli. She hadn't spoken to Jonas much; it was more like a group conversation with people butting in, not really listening to each other. They'd probably chatted about weekend plans, or writing assignments, or the World Cup.

Jonas said it was June. He'd first met Anna during a World Cup game. Yes, it could have been Germany vs. Portugal; he hadn't been paying much attention. It was a Monday, and he'd been planning to stay late in the library to work on his PhD – he was usually more productive in the evenings than the mornings. But he'd forgotten to put his phone on silent, and Hannes had rung, asking if he wanted to watch the football. He hadn't known Hannes for very long at that stage, only from the Buchenwald excursion, but it felt like they were friends. Getting wasted together is a bonding experience.

Jonas couldn't concentrate after the phone call, so he got on his bike and headed for the beer garden in Connewitz. He'd never been to a public screening before. He wasn't particularly interested in football, World Cup or otherwise. The game was on in the early evening, so he'd be able to go back to the library later.

Anna had looked familiar, he said. He couldn't say where he'd seen her before – probably one of those faces you know from the library. She'd arrived after him and taken the free seat beside him.

She was one of those people who complain about everything. He liked that – he had no time for people who approve of everything and like everyone. As soon as she sat down she started to complain about football and the German team, and said it should really be called the “Men's World Cup” because there was also the Women's World Cup.

You could have a good argument with Anna. She stuck to her point of view and didn't change her mind just because it was easier. Jonas didn't think there was any need to say “Men's World Cup,” but talking to Anna was preferable to watching the match. “I hope Germany loses,” she said. She unnerved him, and half the time he wasn't sure what her remarks meant. He asked her why she was watching the match if she wanted Germany to lose. She leaned over and whispered that she'd nothing better to do, her shift in the Lindental didn't start until 9 p.m.

Anna told Jonas she'd been hanging out with Hannes a lot in the last few months and didn't see why that should change because of the World Cup. She didn't intend to just drop her friends. She pointed out that Jonas didn't seem particularly interested in the game either. How come he was there? She liked the fact that he was easily needled. He rose to the slightest provocation. He admitted that he didn't have anything better to do either, and what was wrong with having a beer in a beer garden?

She got the feeling he didn't like her. There was something arrogant about him, but then shy people often use arrogance as a shield. She couldn't remember the score, but presumably Germany had won that match because they'd won the whole Cup, she knew that much. She didn't stay long after the game was over because she had to go to the Lindental. It was quiet enough there. Monday evenings were never busy.

The next time they met was a few days later. Again, by chance. It must have been a Friday or a Saturday. Jonas was sure of this because it had been very quiet in the library, and if there had been more going on, they wouldn't have crossed paths. Jonas wanted to get some fresh air, have a break and a smoke. Anna was in the entrance hall, at the foot of the stairs leading up to the magnificent gallery. She looked a bit lost, as if she'd been standing there for some time.

She didn't know what to do with herself. She'd been feeling like that a lot that summer. Maybe it was because she'd just finished her degree – one chapter of her life had ended, the next had yet to begin. She'd only sent off two job applications so far. She hated applying for jobs, and she didn't really feel like working anyway. Her student grant would keep her going for another few months, till the end of September, when the semester was officially over. She'd need to find a job by then, a proper one, but in the meantime all she had to do was work part-time in the Lindental. Sooner or later she'd get a job as an interpreter, in Berlin maybe, or some other city. The employment situation in Leipzig wasn't great. Her dream had always been to work with the United Nations in Vienna, and she'd tried very hard to get an internship, but it never worked out and now she wasn't even sure it was what she wanted.

She had moved house that summer, sharing a two-bedroom apartment in Connewitz. She and her roommate had met through a mutual friend. They got on well but hardly saw each other. The internet in the apartment had been down for three weeks. The contract had been in the previous tenant's name and, as so often happened, the service was interrupted because the internet provider hadn't updated the account details yet. This was why she'd gone to the library to surf the net, Anna said.

At this point I interrupted her for the first time: On a Saturday evening? How come? Had she no other plans? She couldn't remember. Most of her friends had probably left town for the weekend, and she didn't fancy sitting at home on her own with a book.

At first, she wasn't all that pleased to see Jonas. He seemed to be everywhere all of a sudden. She asked if I knew that feeling, when you neither like nor dislike someone. There's no logical reason not to like that person; you might even have something in common, shared interests. But she was fascinated by him at the same time, she said, not necessarily in a positive sense – it was more that she was curious, wanted to know what kind of guy he was. No, it wasn't infatuation.

Yes, she thought he was good looking, but she didn't find him attractive. She liked his beard – and his glasses. He was one of those would-be intellectuals, and while she liked that style, she also found it very off-putting when people gave themselves airs: I've been to college, I'm very clever.

She wasn't bad looking, but she wasn't the kind of woman who made him go *wow* either. Not that that happened much anyway. Sure, he often admired women for their beauty, but that didn't necessarily mean he desired them. It was the same with men – he could often appreciate their beauty. But he was seldom completely bowled over. He'd only been in love with two women up to that point, and one of them had just broken up with him – after seven years. It wasn't so bad, really, things had gradually come to an end. Since then, he'd been living in a kind of bubble, trying to keep distracted, especially through his thesis.

He didn't believe in one-night stands, and had never had one before.

He'd headed down the stairs towards the front entrance, wasn't even going to say hello to her. He had just been reading a theory text in relation to his thesis and was still deep in thought, but she was standing in the middle of the entrance hall, so he couldn't pass by without acknowledging her. He just gave her a nod and hurried on out. It was a little nippy outside. He considered going back for his sweater but didn't, partly out of laziness, partly because he'd have had to pass Anna again. So he stood on his own outside the Albertina, and when Anna came out, it was obvious she'd wanted to talk to him.

She'd probably said something silly like: "What, no football today? Have you nothing better to do on a Saturday night than sit in library?" She'd made some kind of jibe, for sure, and winked at him.

Jonas said he hated it when people winked. I nodded. It reminded him of his Latin teacher in eighth grade, who always winked at him and asked: Which case? Dative or accusative? And Jonas had always felt really uncomfortable because the teacher didn't do that to anyone else in the class and it started a rumour that he was gay.

Jonas ignored Anna's jibe about the football and asked her for a light. She produced a lighter from her pocket and rolled a cigarette for herself. She asked what he was working on at the moment.

It varied from day to day. Sometimes he liked talking about his thesis; other times it annoyed him when people asked how he was getting on – when it wasn't going so well. He'd been working on it for nearly a year

at that stage. He was behind schedule, still in the research phase. He'd read all the primary literature but was struggling with the secondary texts. Naturally he'd read Connell on masculinity, but that was only the basics, really. He was still floundering when it came to the concept of space, couldn't quite find the right theoretical framework, was reading round in circles in different anthologies on place and space in literature.

His PhD was on Ukrainian popular literature. She had to smile, but she didn't tell him why. Yurii Andrukhovych and Serhiy Zhadan? Her guess was right, and the surprised look on his face made her grin. It hadn't been that hard to guess – those two were probably the best-known contemporary writers in Ukraine. There were others, of course, but they hadn't been translated yet, or as widely discussed. Besides, she'd have put money on it that a guy like Jonas hardly ever read books written by women. Was she familiar with Andrukhovych and Zhadan? Yeah, sure, she'd heard of them, though the only one she'd read was Andrukhovych. Yes, *The Moscoviad* – that was it. Interesting stuff, but she hadn't really been convinced. Too much chauvinism.

He'd heard that so many times. These people – hadn't a clue about literary analysis, couldn't tell author and protagonist apart, mistook the representation of sexism for the reproduction of it. They'd argued about the book; at first he'd been afraid the mood might flip and become aggressive, but they both managed to remain fairly objective.

What was she studying? She corrected the tense, pointing out that she had finished. People often thought she was younger than she was, took her for twenty-one or twenty-two when she was actually twenty-seven – twenty-eight later that year. She'd done translation studies, Russian, and Spanish. He was visibly impressed. What was her connection with Russia? She didn't have any direct connection with Russia but she was born in Ukraine. Her family had moved to Germany in the early 1990s. No, they weren't among the “quota refugees” from the former Soviet Union, they'd got in as ethnic Germans, so-called Russian-Germans.

He told Anna he'd been to Ukraine twice, spending longish periods in Lviv and Kiev.

She was glad he'd said Lviv, not Lemberg, and hadn't pressed her to explain how she could be Russian-German and from Ukraine. Most people assumed she was from Russia, but there had always been ethnic Germans in Ukraine too. Perhaps this was the moment when he started to be fascinated by her and she started to like him.

Of course he knew Vinnytsia! Julia, a good friend he'd met in Lviv, came from there, and he'd been to her house for dinner several times. For a while he'd thought Julia was in love with him, and his girlfriend had thought so too – his ex-girlfriend, he meant to say.

Vinnytsia, the city with the famous fountain, he said, and they both laughed. He had never seen the fountain – there were times when he thought people had just made it up, until it turned out that he'd only ever been there at the wrong time of the year, in winter, when it was turned off. It was a bit of a joke, really, that Vinnytsia's claim to fame was a fountain that sprayed river water high into the sky. The city didn't exactly have a lot of tourist attractions, but he liked it; it wasn't as big and noisy as Kiev. He liked the river, the parks, and the second-hand Swiss trams that ran through the city still bearing ads for Zurich Opera House.

She hadn't been to Vinnytsia very often; she was only five when they'd left, so she didn't remember much. Her memories were mostly of her grandparents' apartment; they'd joined the rest of the family later. Now, whenever her family went to Ukraine, it was only to Lviv, because an aunt lived there. Anna didn't think much of Vinnytsia. She considered it sad and boring – not like Lviv, where she could actually imagine herself living for a while. She liked Lviv's winding streets and its southern charm, even though it was hundreds of kilometres from the Black Sea. It made Anna feel like the sea was around every corner. With its art nouveau buildings and cool bars, Lviv – the city of “blurred borders” – could just as easily be in Poland, the Czech Republic, or Austria.

It was during his voluntary service year after he'd finished school. He'd been declared exempt because of his poor eyesight – and because of his weight, though he told me he hadn't shared that piece of information with Anna – but he still didn't want to go straight from school to university. He couldn't decide what subjects to take, so he went to Lviv

and volunteered, helping survivors of Nazi forced labour camps to cope with daily life. It was as a result of this year in Ukraine that he ended up taking Eastern Slavic studies. He'd picked Leipzig because he wanted to get out of Frankfurt. Berlin was too trendy, East Germany was a bit different.

What was she up to for the rest of the evening? Her first instinct was to lie, to make something up, a friend's party she had to go to. But she was a bad liar and he'd have seen through it, so she told the truth: "Nothing. And you?"

She said she hadn't got the impression he had any particular plan in mind. When he'd asked what she was up to, it wasn't really a direct question, as in: Do you fancy doing something together? It was more a throwaway remark - one of those things people say when they can't think what to say.

Yes, maybe he did say something like that. It was a perfectly normal thing to ask. It wasn't meant to sound like he was suggesting they should spend the evening together. He certainly hadn't expected the evening to turn out the way it did.

He hadn't had any specific plans either; he'd intended to keep working on his thesis, but it was getting later and later, and there was no point in staring at words if you hadn't the concentration to take them in.

He began to feel attracted to her. Maybe it was because she was from Ukraine, though he didn't want to be pinned down on that; it might sound racist. It was nice that they had something in common - especially when there were so few people he could discuss this topic with. Even during his undergrad studies, he hadn't met that many people who were interested in Ukraine - most of the students on his course who'd been abroad had been to Russia, Belarus, or unusual countries like Kyrgyzstan. A few had been to Ukraine, but he didn't really like them. In fact, he didn't like most people. Especially after everything that had happened, he added bitterly.

They'd swapped stories about Lviv, about the bars they'd both got drunk in. Yes - the bar at the end of Virmenska St. that didn't look like a bar at all, so hardly any tourists found it. The front door led straight down to the basement.

One thing led to another – all that talk about bars gave them a real thirst. The Konsum supermarket was closed already and there was no late-night store near the Albertina. So they'd walked along Karli, bought a little bottle of vodka at Südplatz, and headed for Clara-Zetkin Park.

They sat on the bridge. It was already dark. It wasn't the Sachsenbrücke where so many people hung out, but the smaller bridge near the racecourse. They were the only ones there. Occasionally cyclists whizzed by and gave them a fright if they had no lights on.

Oh, the Dostoyevsky phase! She'd read all his books one after the other when she was sixteen, she said. First *Crime and Punishment*, then *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Idiot*, *The Demons*. He'd interrupted her here. Usually she hated it when a guy butted in to explain something to her, but she let him speak – maybe it was the effect of the vodka.

Had she not read Svetlana Geier's new German translations? Her versions of the titles were much closer to the Russian originals.

She began to think she didn't like him after all. Definitely one of the know-all brigade, a hair-splitter.

Maybe those translations weren't available back when she'd read Dostoyevsky, she replied.

He was quite sure they'd come out after 2000 – how old was she anyway? Twenty-seven. And he? Only a year older, and soon with a PhD under his belt. It was enough to put her in a bad mood.

He said he had a very clear memory of his mother giving him the books for his seventeenth birthday. Like Anna, he'd read them all one after the other.

She couldn't be angry with him for long.

Oh, and the pipe phase! He'd taken a pipe to school and stood in the schoolyard, on his own, reading his book in the corner by the flowerbeds. The pipe was far too strong, of course. He was only a teenager. During recess, which lasted twenty minutes, he'd only dared draw on the pipe twice, stifling his coughs to avoid embarrassing himself. When the bell rang and the others were heading back to the classrooms, he put the pipe in his pocket and quickly lit a cigarette, taking frantic drags to satisfy his nicotine craving.

That made her laugh, of course. She could just picture him, the nerd who was teased by the other kids at school, who had only one friend, and they didn't even get along. The only thing that made allies of them was being equally unpopular. He was the kind of outsider who didn't have his first girlfriend until his early twenties, and it was around then that his image changed too. The same qualities that had branded him a nerd before made him cool when he got to university, especially since there were very few guys doing his particular humanities course.

And Sorokin, of course. Katya Petrovskaya was too sentimental for him.

He dared attack Katya Petrovskaya? She loved that book of hers. She could relate to the narrator's search for her family history in Ukraine, whereas he, Jonas, being white, German and male, probably wouldn't understand. Naturally, he loved Sorokin. She didn't tell him that she found Sorokin pornographic, vulgar and disgusting.

He was delighted he could talk to her about literature. His friends had studied either philosophy or sociology and were now desperately wondering whether they should get teaching qualifications, as there were no jobs in Leipzig for humanities graduates. They didn't read literature, only theory. Sometimes he even felt that they looked down on literature. But he loved exactly what his friends didn't like about literary texts – that you can't draw any clear conclusions. Indeed, it was impossible to put into words the effect that reading a good book can have on you. Jonas said he'd be a different person today if he hadn't read so many books when he was young.

Yes, she liked talking about literature. But Jonas was quick to drift into theory, and he insisted on analyzing every book and putting it in a postmodern context, and she had no interest in that. Besides, conversations with him were invariably reduced to exercises in name-dropping.

They'd toasted Russian literature, Ukrainian literature – every kind of literature!

They'd got drunk pretty quickly. It only took a few shots because they hadn't had anything to eat. He magicked another bottle of vodka out of

somewhere, though she was certain they'd only bought the one bottle in the late-night store. No, she hadn't been under any pressure to drink.

He hadn't been trying to fill her with drink, Jonas said. It was just a normal summer's evening in Leipzig, not a lot going on, so they'd ended up drinking. She'd made the first move. He hadn't slept with anyone since he'd split up with Lisa. Nothing happened while they were still on the bridge.

At some point she said she was hungry; he said he lived fairly nearby and had plenty of food at home. She suggested going to his place. No, she hadn't been planning anything, Anna said. She was just going with the flow.

He really did live fairly near the park, on Arthur-Hoffmann Straße.

B

Anna knew the area well. The first apartment she'd lived in in Leipzig was nearby, on Körnerplatz. That's where she'd met Hannes - he claimed he had "cast" her for the role of housemate. They'd lived in that apartment for nearly three years, until the rent went up. Since then she'd shared four different apartments, and her friends had gradually lost interest in helping her move; a different apartment every year. Four apartments, four different parts of the city: Südvorstadt, Schleußig, then the east of the city, now Connewitz, in the south. No, there was nothing wrong with Connewitz, just that she'd have preferred to live in the west. That's where most of her friends lived, but she'd been turned down for all of the house shares she'd gone for there.

Jonas's apartment had been spared any major refurbishment. The windows had been replaced, he said, but he and Momo, the guy he was sharing with, had managed to hang on to the stove and the coal-fired heating. They kept bombarding the property management with letters to try to delay further upgrades.

Momo wasn't in when they got there. Jonas was glad - Momo would definitely have given him a funny look when he saw Anna. He knew that Momo missed Lisa; she'd been a balancing element in their household.

They drank some more in the kitchen. He still had some Ukrainian vodka from his last trip. And then, yes, one thing led to another. Anna couldn't remember too much detail – just that it had been fairly *classical*, not very dynamic. They were both drunk. He'd been on top, and it was quick. The first time you have sex with someone, it's never good. They both fell asleep afterwards.

What Jonas mainly remembered was the business with the condom, because he'd been so embarrassed. Normally he kept a packet under the bed – the good ones, the thin kind that allow more sensation. But when he reached under the bed, there was nothing. He hated that moment of having to ask: Should I get a condom? He got up, checked his wallet, found nothing there either. He went out of the bedroom, because he remembered seeing some condoms in the bathroom that Momo must have left there. He found them, and things moved pretty quickly after that, despite the interrupted foreplay. The sex was okay. It was new for him to be sleeping with someone other than Lisa. Anna was slimmer and had smaller breasts, and he caught himself trying moves and patterns he'd practised for years with Lisa; but they didn't work. Anna couldn't have known his favourite positions, after all. Besides, he'd been pretty wasted.

Yes, she remembered the condom business. It hadn't bothered her; it was a good thing, and it was kind of sweet to see him so embarrassed. One of the advantages of using condoms (apart from avoiding pregnancy and STDs) is that you have to have the conversation. You have to establish consent. It gives you a chance to say no when the other person asks: Should I get a condom?

The next morning was awkward. She'd slept badly, wasn't used to sharing a bed, and he'd curled up to spoon her several times during the night.

She had a hangover. She got up quickly and invented an excuse – she needed to get back to her place to help Verena with something. The main thing was to avoid having breakfast with him, though he'd already invited her to, just to be polite.

It was nice not to sleep on his own. What he missed most since the break-up with Lisa were the cuddles, another warm body in the bed.

He got the feeling Anna didn't like it, so he was glad when she went straight home the next morning and he could go back to sleep. She'd spared them both an awkward breakfast.

She hadn't spent too much time thinking about it. She didn't want a relationship and she wasn't in love. It had just happened. It was nice to have sex again, even if it wasn't great – it was good for her ego. The longest she could remember going without sex was in first year: it was all new, university and everything, and she was often unsure of herself. Insecurity makes you unattractive. That's something she'd learned this past year, after everything that happened. If she was happy with herself, Anna noticed people looking at her, men and women. If she was unhappy, people didn't see her at all; it was like she didn't exist. That hurt.

After that night with Jonas, she remembered walking home in a good mood. Her bike was still at the library. She was listening to music on her headphones – Future Islands – and thinking: Yay, I had sex! It was about three months since the last time. Three months was her limit – she really couldn't go any longer without it. Before that she'd had a fling with a guy she'd been in college with – at first she thought she was in love, but he soon began to get on her nerves.

Jonas hadn't thought much about Anna afterwards, and he wasn't in love. He regarded her more as a distraction to help him get over his ex. He didn't miss sex; he missed emotional intimacy, and he missed Lisa as a person. The closeness they'd had. But he had no interest in a new relationship. Sleeping with Anna was a nice change; he hadn't been spending a lot of time with other people these last few weeks. Since Lisa broke up with him, he'd had to get used to being on his own again. He hadn't cooked at home since they split. That used to be their thing. Now he felt sick at the thought of cooking for himself, so he went to the Mensa or bought frozen pizzas. He didn't want to cook with Momo, because he mainly ate meat. Jonas had been a vegetarian for almost ten years.

*Translated by Rachel McNicholl*

## Recommended Books in English Translation

Enzensberger, Theresia, *Blaupause*, Carl Hanser Verlag, 2017; *Blueprint*, translated by Lucy Renner Jones, Little, Brown and Company, 2019.

Geiger, Arno, *Unter der Drachenwand*, Carl Hanser Verlag, 2018; *Beneath Drachenwand Mountain* (working title), Macmillan, forthcoming.

Grjasnowa, Olga, *Gott ist nicht schüchtern*, Aufbau Verlag, 2017; *God Is Not Shy*, translated by Katy Derbyshire, Oneworld, 2019.

Kinsky, Esther, *Am Fluß*, Verlag Matthes & Seitz Berlin, 2014; *River*, translated by Iain Galbraith, Transit Books, 2018.

Kracht, Christian, *Die Toten*, Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2016; *The Dead*, translated by Daniel Bowles, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018.

Leiber, Svenja, *Staub*, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2018; *Dust* (working title), translated by Nika Knight, Seagull Books, 2020.

Lüscher, Jonas, *Kraft*, C.H. Beck Verlag, 2017; *Kraft*, translated by Tess Lewis, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019.

Melle, Thomas, *Die Welt im Rücken*, Rowohlt Berlin Verlag, 2016; *The World at Your Back*, Biblioasis, 2020.

Menasse, Eva, *Tiere für Fortgeschrittene. Erzählungen*, Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2017; Seagull Press, working title and publication date forthcoming.

Menasse, Robert, *Die Hauptstadt*, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017; *The Capital* (working title), translated by Jamie Bulloch, W.W. Norton/Liveright (worldwide including Canada, Singapore and Malaysia, excluding the remaining areas of the British Commonwealth), MacLehose Press (British Commonwealth, excluding Canada, Singapore and Malaysia), 2019.

Meyer, Clemens, *Die stillen Trabanten*. Erzählungen, S. Fischer Verlag, 2017; *Silent Satellites*. Short Stories, translated by Katy Derbyshire, Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2019.

Salzmann, Sasha Marianna, *Außer sich*, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017; *Beside Myself* (working title), translated by Imogen Taylor, Text Publishing, 2018.

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