Welcome to the tenth anniversary of Festival Neue Literatur, the only U.S. festival to showcase fiction originally written in German. Festival Neue Literatur brings six of the most important emerging and established writers from Austria, Germany, and Switzerland to New York City for a long winter weekend. This year's festival theme is In Memory We Trust.

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Volume 10

IN MEMORY WE TRUST

Featuring book descriptions, translated excerpts, and brief biographies of Festival Neue Literatur 2019’s chosen authors: Stefanie de Velasco, Daniela Emminger, Laura Freudenthaler, Dana Grigorcea, Pierre Jarawan, and Gianna Molinari.

Festival Neue Literatur brings six of the most important emerging and established writers from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland to New York City, where they join celebrated U.S. writers Min Jin Lee and Jenny Zhang in a series of conversations and readings.
Festival Neue Literatur (FNL) is a collaborative project of the Austrian Cultural Forum New York, the Consulate General of Switzerland in New York, the German Consulate General in New York, Deutsches Haus at New York University, the Frankfurt Book Fair New York (formerly the German Book Office), and the Goethe-Institut New York.

Visit the Festival Neue Literatur website for more information on the festival and to access this reader online.

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Dear readers,

For a decade, the Festival Neue Literatur has brought German-language authors to New York City to join American novelists in a four-day celebration of the power of contemporary writing on both sides of the Atlantic, through a series of conversations and readings. This is the only U.S. festival that showcases fiction originally written in German, and each year, our audience has grown. In 2019, the festival’s 10th anniversary year, the FNL theme is “In Memory We Trust.” At a cultural and political moment when facts are under attack, and when technology makes it easier than at any prior time in history to spread false ideas, the importance of writers as guardians of truth and memory has never been greater.

This year’s eight participants come from Austria, Germany, Switzerland and the United States, but their novels transcend national boundaries, reaching from America and Western Europe to China, Japan, Korea, Kyrgyzstan, and Lebanon, excavating their narrators’ pasts to reveal abiding truths. The authors include Daniela Emminger (Austria), Laura Freudenthaler (Austria), Dana Grigorcea (Switzerland), Pierre Jarawan (Germany), Min Jin Lee (US), Gianna Molinari (Switzerland), Stefanie de Velasco (Germany), and Jenny Zhang (US). Excerpts from the six German-language works are included in excellent English translations in this reader, along with descriptions of the books and authors.

Each of these books has a distinct voice, but all of them engage the reader with their narrators’ struggles to decode memory’s clues to correctly interpret the present. In one, a high-spirited young Swiss-Romanian banker finds echoes of Bucharest in the streets of Zurich; back in Romania, she slips into reveries of her 1990’s girlhood under Ceausescu—reading Dumas, revering Michael Jackson. In another, the friendship of two girls in West Germany—both of them daughters of Jehovah’s Witnesses, one of them a refugee—crumbles after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Older protagonists also feature in these fictions: there’s a 40-year-old widow who travels from Austria to Kyrgyzstan to track down her boon companion from childhood, a boy who (unlike her), had the gift of remembering past happiness; and there’s a haunted middle-aged Austrian wife, who suspects her husband of cheating, and detects the ghost of his lover amid the solid walls and furnishings of their apartment. Another apparition haunts a Swiss woman who works and lives in a failing factory: a ravenous wolf is said to roam the halls. If fear of the wolf won’t move the woman to action, what will? And in another of these novels, a young German man, Samir, goes on a hunt for his Lebanese father, who disappeared from Berlin when the boy was 9. Flying to Lebanon, he scours Beirut and Zahle for traces of his vanished father, unearthing difficult truths, achieving a complicated peace with his past, and finding new direction for the future.

We hope you will enjoy reading these samples, and meeting their authors at the Festival Neue Literatur 2019, where you will discover their connections to the outstanding American writers who share the stage with them. Those writers include not only the featured authors Min Jin Lee (Free Food for Millionaires (2007) and Pachinko (2017)) and Jenny Zhang (Sour Heart, 2017); but the festival chair, the novelist John Wray; the curators, Tim Mohr and Liesl Schillinger; and the translators who make foreign literature legible to English-language readers.

Sincerely,

Liesl Schillinger, Curator
Tim Mohr, Curator
**Liesl Schillinger**

Liesl Schillinger is a literary critic, writer and translator, and teaches journalism and criticism at the New School in New York City. Her articles, reviews and essays have appeared in the New York Times, Foreign Policy, the New York Review of Books, the New Yorker, the New Republic, the Washington Post, and other publications; and her short stories and literary translations have appeared in Tin House, Words without Borders and elsewhere. She has translated novels from the German and the French for Viking, Penguin Classics, and New York Review Books, and is the author of "Wordbirds: An Irreverent Lexicon for the 21st Century". In 2017 she was named a Chevalier of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres of France.

Photo by Albrecht von Alvensleben

**Tim Mohr**

Tim Mohr is the author of "Burning Down the Haus", a history of East German punk rock and the role dissident musicians played in bringing down the Berlin Wall. He's also an award-winning translator of German novels by such authors as Alina Bronsky, Wolfgang Herrndorf, and Charlotte Roche. His own writing has appeared in the New York Times, Inked, and the Daily Beast, among other publications, and he spent several years as a staff editor at Playboy, where he edited writers including Hunter S. Thompson, John Dean, and George McGovern. Prior to starting his writing career he earned his living as a club DJ in Berlin.
Esther, the West German teenage daughter of Jehovah’s Witness missionaries, has landed in the crumbling East German town where her father’s family originated, just after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Abruptly swept away from her previous life and country, Esther misses her best friend and fellow Jehovah’s Witness, Sulamith; the two had gone through childhood together, bonding over shared experiences—and secrets. In the former GDR, while her parents fish for lost souls in the “Red Sea” of former communists, Esther discovers long-hidden family secrets as she confronts the collapse of East Germany, and the emergence of new rules.

Soon before Esther's eastward move, her friend Sulamith begins to struggle with her faith in the foundations of the only truth the girls have ever known: the Jehovah’s Witness world of Kingdom Halls. Velasco's novel interweaves the parallel lives of these two one-time best friends, forced by circumstance to reassess their church, their friendship, and their reality.
“Esther!” Mother calls.

There’s thick black smoke far off on the horizon. Fire, fire! There’s no fire. It’s only the smokestacks. Like old, smoking sugarloaves. They’ll be demolished soon, Sister Lehmann said. Nobody makes Feuerzangenbowle, she said, and even if they did, not out of those things. There’s already a sign up, I can see it from my window, gleaming white as if aliens had planted it: Future site of Globus Garden Superstore, and behind the sign a soot-covered brick façade and a rusted gate. Nobody ever goes in or out, you’d be able to see them from my window. But despite that, the entire complex is surrounded by rusty barbed wire. Who would ever want to go in there anyway?

A narrow river slithers past the factory, light-colored runoff foam as stiff and dense as whipped cream gathers along the banks, the sight alone’s enough to make you sick. Along the river stand buildings, the walls not gray, not brown. Someone needs to come up with a name for that color. Grawn. Almost all the roofs have collapsed, the windows are broken, out of rage or done in by time. On the ground floor they’re patched with cardboard, bullet holes everywhere. Is that still from the war? Couldn’t be, it’s too long ago. Maybe it was a hailstorm. You could believe anything about those walls, even that they could be pockmarked by hail. You have to be careful on the streets. Chunks of stone are always breaking off and falling down. They’re white and porous. On Sundays the people here sweep it all into into the courtyards. There it adds to the ever larger piles of rubble.

I wondered for a long time what it was those stone chunks reminded me of. I squatted down, picked them up, weighed them in my hand and rubbed them between my fingers, and then I realized what it was. When dogs eat too many bones they leave something like this behind. Sulamith and I used to sometimes mistake the stuff for chalk when we found it along the path in the field next to our raspberry patch. We’d use it to draw on the walkway at the entrance to our garage. I tried to write my name with it, the S in the middle facing the wrong way because I didn’t know any better because I couldn’t write properly yet, and Sulamith drew our building, me standing in front of the door and Mother and Father sticking their heads out the window, heads that were triangles, pointed chins, the noses just a line and two circles, gigantic nostrils, they looked really deformed, until Sulamith suddenly dropped the chalk. It’s dog shit! I’d never heard anyone I knew say that word out loud. Dog shit, it sounded as harsh as frying a chocolate bar in a pan. Unlike Sulamith, I’ve never been any good at drawing. And I can’t tell the difference between dog shit and chalk, which is no good. But if I were good at drawing and I had to draw everything outside, the gray smoke-filled sky, the factory, the river, I’d draw it all with these chunks of stone, I’d take pieces from the rubble piles in the courtyards and keep drawing until there were no more rubble piles, no more buildings, long enough to get rid of everything, until there was nothing left here at all.

“Esther!” calls Mother again.

Sulamith’s clothes are hanging out in the yard. I hung them in front of my window so I wouldn’t have to see everything out there, the smokestacks, the crumbling buildings, the polluted river, the red sea. The red sea, that’s what mother said yesterday at our first meeting. Everyone brought chairs from home because there aren’t any in the hall. The roof is done but otherwise almost everything else still just looks the way an unfinished building looks. It was bitter cold.
The walls aren’t plastered yet, there’s no carpeting. We’ll be the first here in Waldleben with central heating, but it hasn’t been installed yet.

Sister Wolf hobbled over to me, her artificial hip makes her walk like she’s on uneven stilts. You’re not a child anymore, she’d said, clapping her hands in front of her face like it was some sort of marvel, like growing up and getting older was a challenge. Her breath smelled of the plaque that gathers between back teeth when knotty fingers can no longer clean them well enough. Just like Luise, she’d said, the only thing missing is the braids. Anton Wolf was standing behind her. He laughed, a gravelly laugh, and like an old train the pitch of his laugh went up as it passed. The light of the ceiling lamp fractured like a Roman mosaic in his ancient eyes. His gaze went through me at the height of my jugular like an arrow into the past, a past when he’d once been as old as me, or as young.

We’re still studying The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived. Books opened, the entire congregation sat down on brought-from-home chairs. It smelled of paint, the fluorescent lights on the ceiling crackled like rickety old bones. Gabriel stood next to Father on the stage and read aloud. He’s the same age as I am and was baptized at the most recent summer congress. His parents are special pioneers, just like my mother and father. I can’t imagine how anyone could manage to do 120 hours of fieldwork per month while underground. Gabriel reminds me of Tobias. Just like Tobias he wears suits that are too big for him so he can grow into them, and just like Tobias he blushes easily and is apparently always hungry. After the meeting he pulled out a stick of dried salami and sucked on it like candy. His ears flushed bright red when he read aloud yesterday, as if there were something dirty about the passage, though it was just about Jesus going out to sea with Peter. A strong storm comes in, water spills into the boat, threatening to sink it. Peter gets scared and throws himself at Jesus’s feet, but Jesus just passes his hand over Peter’s head and says, from today on you will fish for men.

When Father posed the first question to the circle, Mother had volunteered. Her slender hand went up, Karin and the other sisters looked at Mother’s manicured fingers, they stared at the red nail polish, the white blouse with the narrow lace collar and blue trim, they stared at the pencil skirt that clung to Mother’s long legs, down to her fine patent leather shoes, and then at me, as if I were something like a lace collar or fine shoes. An accessory, as they say. Sister Lehmann was the only one unimpressed by Mother’s getup. What do you want here? It was written across her face, this question and the inability to imagine leaving one’s home only to start over again from scratch in this particular corner of the earth, of all places. Her newborn began to cry, she picked the baby up and put it to her breast. Her dark top was covered with milk stains. Mother had never had milk stains on her things. Mother had never nursed me.

When Father finally called on Mother, she’d spoken extensively on the passage and then she’d said, that’s exactly the reason we were sent here. To fish for the last people before the great tribulation comes, because that’s our mission, regardless of whether we’re special pioneers, regular pioneers, auxiliary pioneers, baptized publishers or unbaptized publishers. Here, Mother had said, here lies the red sea. The red sea is full of fish. Jehovah parted it, and then he brought it back together. Now we come and fish until there are no human fish left.

Up on the ceiling a moth flew into the fluorescent bulbs, it careened into the lights, over and over again, eventually bouncing off and dropping down on us, dead. That’s how Lucifer and his demons must have fallen when they were thrown out of heaven, Sulamith would have said. Sometimes she’d thought up profane sentences like that, not out of disrespect, simply to be able to deal with things a little better. I got goosebumps, not sure whether it’s the cold or because it scares me that I hear Sulamith talking to me so often, that she’s always still with me, sitting next to me on one of these hard folding chairs that must have been Grandmother’s. Sulamith scratches her neck, tugs on a loose thread on her sock, unraveling it. She stares at her book. The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived, Jesus and Peter in a boat. She takes a pen
and draws speech bubbles above the heads of Jesus and Peter. In the one above Peter she writes It’ll be asparagus season soon! and in the one over Jesus she writes: Sail away!, and then she draws a Beck’s logo on the boat. Now Jesus looks like a party animal, and Peter no longer looks doubtful, he just looks like somebody anxiously awaiting his next plate of asparagus.

I felt her long hair on my forearm, that blonde impenetrable mat, and how she was trembling on the verge of laughter, but then I saw that it wasn’t a mat of hair, it was my mother’s blouse touching my arm, Mother with her Lady Di haircut, and then everything rushed back, as if I were experiencing it all for the first time again. Sulamith isn’t around anymore. They’d awoken me in the middle of the night and bundled me into the car. I screamed and cried when we arrived here the next morning, but it didn’t help. It’s for your own good, Father had said, you’ll thank us for it one day, Mother had said.

I still have to get used to Mother. I just can’t call her Mama anymore, not since the whole thing with Sulamith. I always called Mother Mama. Now I don’t address her at all. I avoid situations where I have to address her directly. It’s the same with Father, but it’s easier. There’s no occasion when I need to address Father. Father’s always out. As soon as this hall is finished, he’ll make his way to other places where additional halls need to be built, where people need to be led to the truth, places where we’re not yet known or are already banned.

“Esther!” Mother calls again, “get down here!”

The entire house smells of lentil soup. The scent makes me ill. Father is sitting at the dining table in the living room, his elbows resting on the tablecloth, white with blue trim. It’s the same fabric Mother made us dresses out of for the 14th of Nisan. Father looks around as if he were a guest in a strange house, even though he grew up here. There are very few traces of Grandmother left here. The bench on the terrace, rusted tools and an old shoe polish kit, a couple washcloths and the cards that I found stuck to the inside top of my bureau, where the drawers go. I can barely remember what it looked like here when I was a child. Grandmother lived in a nursing home during her final years. Mother and I hardly ever came here, too dangerous. Father couldn’t even come with us to her funeral. The way he sits there looking around nervously, as if someone might ambush him from behind at any moment. I’d really like to know what the story is with the cards, why they were hidden in the bureau like that. They must be Father’s, it’s his old room, the awkward child’s handwriting.

Mother comes in with a steaming bowl. Unlike Father, the change of location hasn’t affected her, on the contrary, she’s fully adjusted, even her new sewing room up in the attic already looks just as organized as the one at home.

Mother ladles out soup.

“Next week the bathrooms and heating will be installed,” says Father.

“In the hall?” asks Mother.

Father nods.

“Hopefully you’ll be home more often after that,” says mother.

I can’t help cracking a smile. Home, that sounds funny. As if this place could ever be our home, and as if Father could ever stay home for more than two months at a time.

He bows his head and folds his hands.

“Herr Jehovah, enthroned in heaven, hallowed be thy name. We thank you for the food you’ve put on our table, and that we may eat together as a family in peace. We thank you that we may build a place of worship here, in an area where the truth and good news were for so long unable to be heard. Let us arrive here and, together with our new brothers and sisters, who were steadfast for so long despite persecution, proclaim your good news. Amen.”

“Amen,” says Mother.

“Amen,” I murmur.

I pick up the spoon and dunk it into the brown lentil sea. Mother passes me the bread basket and motions to the thick slices of gray bread.

“No, thanks,” I say.

Father pulls out the daily texts from the drawer next
to him, flips through them until he’s found today’s date.

“So keep yourselves in expectation of me,” Father reads aloud. “To pour out on them my indignation, all my burning anger; for by the fire of my zeal the whole earth shall be consumed.”

I choke down a spoonful of lentils.

“For then I will change the language of the peoples to a pure language, so that all of them may call on the name of Jehovah, to serve him shoulder to shoulder.”

Pure language, that was also the title of our last congress, in summer. Barely two months ago and I can’t recall a thing, all the hours I sat there gone, as if painted over with black paint. It was Sulamith’s last congress. Congo, she always said, and that’s how she always marked the congress in her school calendar, with that word. Congo, congo, congo, congo, as if she had to travel to a strange, dangerous country for a long weekend.

“Esther?”

Mother puts down her spoon.

“I asked you something.”

“What?”

Father shakes his head and takes a sip of rose hip tea, Sulamith’s black dress, like she was going to her own funeral, her blubbering face. The way Lidia yanked her into Papa’s car. Her screams, how she dug her long fingernails into Lidia’s arms in the back seat. The strong smell of cold sweat that wafted from there into the front seat. Lidia’s heavy breathing and next to me Father, who stubbornly sped down the autobahn.

Mother stands up and returns with the quiz cards. She shuffles them and then puts a small stack of them in front of each of us. Father starts.

“What are the names of Noah’s three sons?”

“Shem, Ham, and Japheth,” I say.

I pick up a card.

“What words appear on the wall at the feast of King Belshazzar and are interpreted by the prophet Daniel?”

“MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and UPHARSIN,” says Mother.

“And what do they mean?” asks Father, looking at me.

“MENE. God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end. TEKEL. You have been weighed and found wanting. UPHARSIN. Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”

Father nods with satisfaction.

Mother picks up a card from her stack.

“How many pieces make up the armor of God?”

Father leans back, chews and slurps.

“It consists of six pieces. The belt of truth, the breast-plate of righteousness, the sandals of the gospel of peace. The shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God.”

I take a sip of tea and wash down the rest of the lentils.

“May I be excused?”

“Wait,” says Father, tapping on the cards. “This can’t be a coincidence. For what does Esau sell his birthright?”

I shove my empty plate to the side.

“For a bowl of lentils. May I be excused?”

“Don’t you want any dessert?” Mother asks.

“No,” I say.

It’s time for you to start going to school again,” says Father.

Mother nods.

“Are you looking forward to it?”

“No,” I say.

Sulamith’s clothes flap in the wind outside my window. A pair of jeans, socks, underwear, a blue sweater, and a t-shirt. Fruit of the Loom it says on the t-shirt, and beneath that a little basket of fruit. The t-shirt has watermelons printed all over it. Sulamith loved fruit prints. Can you get watermelon here during the summer? They finished a new road here a few days ago. It goes from the train station out to the fields. They built a supermarket at the end of the road, in the middle of a hayfield. It looks like a Playmobil carton that’s landed in the mud. I was there yesterday. I wanted to buy some laundry detergent with my pocket money, but the
store hasn’t opened yet, so I washed Sulamith’s things with
Mother’s expensive shampoo. I washed each item individually
in the sink, by hand, as if they were made of silk. Sulamith’s
things were always lying around my room back home. School
books, clothing, jewelry. She stayed over a lot, sometimes for
weeks at a time if Lidia had to go back into the clinic. We’d eat
breakfast together in the morning and read the text of the day.
Mama took turns quizzing us as if we were sisters, and then
we’d ride to school on our bikes, the same juice boxes in our
bags, the same sandwiches spread with the same chocolate
spread.

Before the evening coal dust comes, I’ll bring in the
clothes. They won’t smell like Mother’s expensive shampoo, but
they wouldn’t anyway, even if I had dried them in the house.
The stench from outside oozes in through every crack. I don’t
know how to describe it. Disinfectant, gasoline, coal. All that
mixes with the scent of wild animals. It smells like a zoo, as if
there were tigers and camels living nearby.

Down in the kitchen, Mother is cursing to herself. She
can’t get the damn coal stove started. She would take the
Lord’s name in vain if she could. Brother Lehmann showed us
how it works, several times. First light some old newspaper,
then put some kindling on top, open the vent so it can draw
air. Coal on top of that, and wait half an hour. But it still doesn’t
work right for us. Mother just isn’t used to this type of heating,
and, like me, will never get used to this type of heating, to the
mess it makes and the black soot that smears on the toilet pa-
per when you blow your nose in the morning. The coal shovel
clangs on the kitchen tiles. Mother comes up the stairs and
pushes open the door to my room.

“Bring in the washing. It won’t dry properly in this
weather. What is that stuff, anyway? They’re all summer things.”

“They’re Sulamith’s.”
Mother’s eyes widen.
“What are they doing here?”
“They were in one of the moving boxes.”
“Hang them up. We’ll send them back. Lidia will want to
have them.”
“Lidia gave away all of Sulamith’s things.”
Tim Mohr is the author of “Burning Down the Haus”, a history of East German punk rock and the role dissident musicians played in bringing down the Berlin Wall. He’s also an award-winning translator of German novels by such authors as Alina Bronsky, Wolfgang Herrndorf, and Charlotte Roche. His own writing has appeared in the New York Times, Inked, and the Daily Beast, among other publications, and he spent several years as a staff editor at Playboy, where he edited writers including Hunter S. Thompson, John Dean, and George McGovern. Prior to starting his writing career he earned his living as a club DJ in Berlin.

Stefanie de Velasco was born in the Rhineland and raised as a Jehovah’s Witness. At fifteen she left the religious organization and subsequently studied Ethnology and Political Science. She is a regular contributor to publications such as Zitty, FAZ, and die Zeit, and her debut novel, “Tigermilch”, was published in 2013 by Kiepenheuer & Witsch. It was translated into multiple languages, including English as “Tiger Milk” (also translated by Tim Mohr), and adapted into a feature film.

Photo by Joachim Gern
A powerful story about searching, finding and getting lost; about genius and insanity; about friendship and love. In “Kafka with Wings”, Austrian writer Daniela Emminger captures the nuances of the nation of Kyrgyzstan; its inhabitants, peculiarities, and vivid natural landscape.

In Austria in the 1980s, a Kyrgyz boy named Samat makes friends with a girl named Sybille, then disappears without a trace, leaving her behind. After 25 years of wondering what has become of him, she comes across a trove of unopened letters Samat had sent her after his departure and decides to set out to find her former soulmate.

A wild hunt ensues as Sybille journeys through Kyrgyz history and the culture clash of the present, guided by fragments of Samat’s cryptic letters. Driven by hope and despair, love and obsession Sybille and Samat cross paths again, discovering their own proverbial wings in a Kafkaesque transformation. (155)

Excerpt from pages 9-20, 487-491.
To the wild and magical land of Kyrgyzstan and its inhabitants.

This book is puzzling from the very start, many lines’ meanings now lost to the dark. Its signs and symbols have long intertwined: with animals, birds, and oaks here enshrined.

—from a prophecy in the “Book of Change,” the Epic of Manas

Final Countdown, One.

It just had to be a Kyrgyz, of all people, or half Kyrgyz. And then he’d up and disappeared, too, just like that. And now, twenty-six years later, here she was, hot on his heels in the middle of the Kyrgyz Steppe, 3,400 miles from her old self. She looked out over Song-kul Lake, as if it belonged to her, and whispered his name: “Samat.” Elizabeth Bishop really had no idea what she was talking about—The art of losing isn’t hard to master—yeah, right. It was unbelievably hard, hard to bear losing a person, a continent, a country, a name, everything one once was, and just leave it all behind. It was like something from the beyond, since it certainly wasn’t anything from the here-and-now.

In midsummer 2015 Sezim sat on the other side of the world, at 1,800 feet above sea level, on the shore of the mountain lake, freezing despite his wool hat and heavy down jacket. On the distant horizon behind him lay the vast, snow-capped peaks of the Moldo-Too Mountains. Here and there ephedra cones popped out from the greenery like red dots. The air carried the scent of wormwood and juniper. The sky above was blue. The sheer beauty of it all was almost unbearable.

For a moment she wished Siri was there, or some other virtual assistant that could help her sort out, decipher, and interpret soundbites and signals. She’d have liked some kind of sign or hint that the search for her childhood friend Samat was moving forward, but there was only silence. And what help would it have been anyway, what use would it be, to let some soulless software identify and process naturally spoken languages or sounds? It might be able to access a world of wisdom, but even so it was so often wrong, and how could it help anyway, since she herself neither spoke nor understood a word of Kyrgyz or Russian? She was pretty much lost in translation.

Then again, what did she have to lose now, and what did she have to lose then, back when her name was still Sybille and she hadn’t come looking for a needle of a man in a country of haystacks, a country still ruled by fathers and sons, where even in the twenty-first century women are still kidnapped and Karakurt spiders still wreak havoc. Where democracy was having a hard time gaining ground, and poverty was everywhere in the form of holey socks and mouths missing teeth, the Russian past left fissures and furrows on landscapes, faces, and hearts, a country in which love was a luxury and luxury was nonexistent, the only vegetables were meat, where ancestral worship and superstition permeated every nook and cranny, looking for people like her. Soon one would have to climb seven generations back up the family tree to escape the long shadow cast by incest, one would have to keep their wits about them if they didn’t want to
metamorphose, as if by the wave of a magic wand, into a fish, a bird, or a butterfly—and why not, really, since fish have no brain and birds no bags and butterflies no sorrows—but maybe one would want more, would want to raise dust like Ghenghis Kahn once did, or like Manas the Great or, like her, once again find a long-lost friend.

“Where are you hiding, Samat?” she wondered, and “I hope it’s not too late.” And then she lights up one of those thick papirosi cigarettes, whose filters have to be pinched flat at both ends before one goes ahead to ruin their lungs. She puffs little clouds of smoke into the air, they thin out as they rise before her and shroud the Kyrgyz landscape in a nebulous grey that weaves the aeons together.

She’d already come so far. She’d been tracking him for weeks, had worked her way across the entire country, following a few false leads, suffering some setbacks, and even given up. She’d cast the net, and eventually she’d have to draw it in, closer and closer, at least that’s what she’d hoped. He’d fall into her net, maybe even tomorrow.

Dillgirl, Chervilboy.

Sybille met Samat back when she had just turned nine. It was early in the summer of 1984 and her mother had sent her to pick herbs along the edge of the nearby woods, where wild chives and dill grew. She hadn’t even seen him at first, since he was crouched down amid the pasture’s high grass, gnawing on a straw, absorbed in a thick tome. She knew him by sight, he was a couple of grades above her and the only foreigner in town. There were rumors that he was half Chinese and that his mother, Erna Bergen—a resolute, musically super-talented, and outwardly quite striking person—had gone off to Moscow in the early seventies and, after a significant stay, had then brought him back almost as if he were her most valuable piece of luggage: tiny, fatherless, uprooted. She said not a single word about her time away nor, especially, about Samat’s father, leaving the local gossips say all sorts of things, again, with not a word from her in response. Due to financial circumstances upon her return she could no longer afford to enroll at the Bruckner Conservatory in Linz to study violin and piano, so instead she took a half-day teaching position at the local elementary and secondary school, and spent the rest of her time helping her father, Samat’s grandfather, run the old family farm, where they also lived.

Samat had also spotted Sybille out of the corner of his eye.

“What are you up to over there?” he asked, smiling at her.

“Picking dill,” she replied a bit shyly.

“Then I’ll call you Dillgirl from now on, if that’s okay with you.”

“My name is Sybille.”

“Even better, that rhymes with dill.”

They laughed. Sybille ventured closer.

“And what’s your name?”

“I’m Samat,” he said, sticking his hand out to shake hers. “It’s Kyrgyz, and means ‘desire and longing’. My dad named me.”

He slammed the book shut with a thud. The colorful cover depicted a bunch of butterflies.

“And I’m not Chinese, by the way, like everybody in town seems to think—I’m really half Russian, or actually half Kyrgyz, to be precise.”
Sybille thought it over for a second; it made no difference to her.

“What are you reading?” she asked, curious.

“A book on native plants and animals. I want to be a butterfly catcher when I grow up.”

Sybille gaped, “And when will you be a grown-up?”

“Soon,” Samat said with a grin, “I’m already fifteen. You?”

“I’m nine.”

Samat stood up, took her by the hand, and said, “C’mon, I’ll show you something.” They walked along the edge of the woods until Samat suddenly stopped and picked a couple of white flowers shaped like upside-down umbrellas that gave off a delightfully spicy scent.

“This is fresh chervil, my favorite herb.” He held it up to her nose. “My mom uses it to make an outstanding soup, following the recipe of a famous French chef. It’s called Paul Bocuse’s Chervil soup. You’ll have to come over to try it sometime.”

Sybille beamed.

“Know what I’m going to call you from now on?”

He looked curious.

“Chervilboy.”

That’s how they first met. They got along right off the bat, bound to one another by wound ribbon like Persen­nick and Ploetz in the story by Artur Knoff. At first Sybille’s parents disapproved of their friendship, not least because of their age difference, and also because they didn’t trust their daughter’s half Kyrgyz friend, and viewed him with thinly veiled suspicion. But Samat was always friendly and polite when he visited, was an outstanding student, and wanted to go to university, where he planned to study Russian and biology. He was bright and diligent, and in his free time he lent his mother and grandfather a hand on the farm, so at some point Sybille’s parents finally gave up giving her a hard time about their friendship, admitting that they didn’t stand a chance against the close bond between the two. Whatever it was, it sure seemed strong as steel.

During vacations they were virtually inseparable—they milked the cows together, brought the hay in, ran through field and forest side by side, and told one another their tiniest worries and greatest dreams. They laughed a lot, and sometimes just spent time together without saying a word; they never got bored, and their mutual love of nature brought them even closer together. When Samat moved to Vienna three years later to study, Sybille missed him a lot. He’d become the big brother she’d never had. They wrote one another often and their friendship lived on, surviving their first long-distance winter, then spring, until his first year of university was over, summer break finally came, and they once again stood face to face. It was like they’d never been apart. Perhaps their uncommonly deep connection remained strong because Samat had been there for all of his younger friend’s most formative moments: he’d buried Sybille’s goldfish and, later, her hamster as well; toasted her with re­currant juice each time she passed an exam; and given her a camera on her tenth birthday (with well-deserved pride, since he’d painstakingly saved every penny for months), because he wanted to try and capture their friendship in photos, portray their feelings in pictures, freeze their memories in fixitive. Samat took the first two snapshots himself on the virgin film: they looked like two old illustrative tables of dill and chervil, shots secretly snapped in the supply cabinet of the biology lab. He didn’t want to forget her, and didn’t want her to forget him. Especially since even as a kid Sybille, who’d grown up in a
home where there was no room for feelings, had a hard time remembering happy occasions and lighthearted moments; in keeping with the example set by her father and mother, she was much quicker to recall negative, problematic, seemingly hopeless situations. But she wasn’t alone there, many people were raised from infancy on to believe, as Susan Jeffers once said, “that negative equals realistic and positive equals unrealistic.” Such people were always prepared for the worst, and instead of training their binoculars on life’s bigger picture they focused on pessimistic societal conventions, their parents’ tarnished values and stained morals, which were often permeated by sadness and self-doubt. Maybe another reason she liked Samat so much was because he was so refreshingly different, he saw the world in vivid, happy color, and when he was there she could laugh, dream, and fly. The camera was the absolute best gift Sybille could ever have received—it was a lifesaving, magical machine, a bewitching storage bin that let her record and cherish all her most pleasant, uplifting, and meaningful moments. She kept the habit up for years, and almost never left home without her camera, snapping her way through life until one fine, far-off day—no one knew exactly when or why—her enthusiasm waned, or maybe just her discipline. She lost interest and her “shuttermania,” as her peers jokingly called it, became a tired old routine, adult laziness and the everyday grind got in the way. (It wasn’t until years later that she discovered a similarly effective memory-boosting tool, in the form of a packet of coffee beans received as a gift from another friend.)

What Samat himself never found a photo of, however, over all these years, was his lack of a father and homeland. The older he got, the more his Kyrgyz half rumbled and grumbled within, expanding, driven by a desire for the truth, which made him increasingly restless and dissatisfied. He’d have liked to find answers to all his questions, both spoken and unspoken, but his mother was unwavering. His persistent prying—first childish, later pubescent—yielded nothing. She never spoke of the past or of the chapter in her life where his father and homeland had played a role, and no matter how hard he tried he couldn’t remember a thing.

Samat and Sybille’s fervent summers and letter-filled winters went on for two more years, until a gray shroud swept onto the scene in 1989, clouding their togetherness and casting a long shadow over the terrain of their friendship. Their summer break was less harmonious than usual, Samat was silent and absent-minded, Sybille insensible and helpless—and when her friend finally disappeared at the beginning of August, much earlier than planned and without even saying goodbye, she no longer understood a thing. Weeks went by with nary a letter nor any news. Samat seemed to have disappeared without a trace: she combed across all of Vienna without finding him, he wasn’t in any of the hospitals, and even the missing-person report his mother had filed with the police turned up nothing. It was as if the earth had swallowed him whole. By the start of school Sybille struggled to concentrate on anything, and summer break was rapidly drawing to a close.

Now, although dill and chervil are two relatively straightforward, resilient plants that take root all over the world—shooting tall, upright and sturdy, often trespassing their supposed altitudinal limits—even they require regular water, a suitable spot to call their own, and the right plant-kingdom companions by their side to survive in the long run.

When a letter from him finally arrived the following February, thoroughly torn, stamped from up-and-coming Germany, Sybille’s parents decided not to give it to her. Surely they had their reasons—Samat had always been a thorn in their side, an unwelcome distraction, a troublemaker, a foreign entity that had shaken the family belief system. Or maybe they were glad to finally get rid of him because for months they’d had to witness how crushed Sybille had been by her friend’s unexplained disappearance. And it had taken quite some time, but finally a little smile had begun gracing her face again, albeit ever so seldom. Maybe they had the best of intentions, and really just wanted to spare their only daugh-
any additional grief—whatever their motive, they kept this first letter, and the ones that followed, hidden from her. Parents don’t always know any better, and make mistakes.

The years passed, the photos faded, one after the other they abandoned their frames and albums to settle into the crates and cabinets of the past. And by the time Sybille turned eighteen and began her studies—she, too, had remained faithful to her love of nature, opting for veterinary medicine, not least because of parental pressure (“Study something sensible, respectable, something that’ll earn you money and a future.”); her second, more unreasonable choice would have been to go to art school—she’d finally forgotten Samat. Dillgirl and Chervilboy withered away, and if they were to be found at all, it’d be in a thirsty and scrawny state, deep in the tangled jungle of memory. Her once-so-beloved camera had also long since disappeared into a dank corner of her parents’ cellar, covered in rust and dust down in the dark. And although all that languished, life (hers) went on. Sybille moved to Vienna, buried her nose in hundreds of books, calmed her heart, filled her head with all sorts of facts and scientific foundations—from anatomy to zoology—and dutifully, in the record minimum of six years, struggled through every subject and every internship required to earn her degree. Amid all that she also met and fell in love with her future husband, Martin Specht, an amusing psychologist and passionate amateur cook who, slowly but surely, once again brought order and life back to the field of feelings her former childhood friend had left so wild, weedy, furrowed and fallow. Shortly before graduation the couple married and moved to an apartment just outside the city. They had a few chickens—leftovers from a previous experiment who had dutifully provided eggs for breakfast ever since—but no children. The relationship between Sybille and her parents remained strained and as rife with mutual incomprehension and guilt as before. Unable to imagine a future for herself in small animal, ruminant, poultry, swine, or equine medicine, Sybille specialized in behavioral science, reproductive biology, and genetics. With a heavy heart, she temporarily left Martin and their home to spend several months in an insemination center run by the EU in Den Hout, the Netherlands, followed by a stint in a pharmaceutical research center in Vilnius, Lithuania. Once back in Vienna, she landed a position in the Department of Integrative Biology and Evolution at the renowned Konrad Lorenz Institute for Evolution and Cognition Research. From then on ethology was her professional home, and over the years she garnered a reputation and professional success reaching far beyond the Austrian border.

Sybille had grown up, her private and professional life was largely fulfilling, the Dillgirl of yore existed no more. And if fate hadn’t struck so cruelly in her late thirties, hadn’t whirled through her life like a hurricane, had future circumstances not forced her to grapple with the art of losing, dill and chervil would certainly have remained forgotten, forever. Sometimes that’s just how it is with pieces of the past and long-lost friendships, but sometimes not: they look like they’re over. But they aren’t.
Daniela Emminger is a contemporary Austrian writer, who lives and works in Vienna. Within the past 10 years she has published a number of writings (novels, plays, short stories and essays) that gained much public attention in press and media and won different awards. Emminger is also successful as a journalist for Austrian newspapers and online-magazines. In addition, she lectures and gives workshops in Creative Writing. Before working as a professional author, she worked as a copywriter for advertising agencies in Berlin and Hamburg, as an editor in the Baltics and as a curator for contemporary art and design in Vienna. Her recent novel “Kafka with Wings” (original title: Kafka mit Flügeln) was published in 2018.

Photo by Nina Keinrath

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Photo by Donnelly Marks
Ghost stories don’t have to be set in the past; in waking life, alienation and invisibility can make people feel like ghosts in their own environments; and spectral outlines of others haunt the present, too. In Laura Freudenthaler’s new novel "Ghost Story" she broaches these themes as she tells the story of Anne and Thomas, a married couple who had shared a quiet life and an unchanging routine for twenty years. But when Thomas becomes increasingly absent, Anne suspects him of having an affair, and soon begins to detect the presence of an invisible new occupant in their home, whom she calls “the girl;” scurrying, whispering and disrupting her world. All that had been familiar begins to change, and we follow Anne into a world of uncertain reflections and false floors, intertwining reality and imagination.

Excerpt from pages 47-57, 63- 67.
In the dark, Anne listens to sounds in the wall next to which her head lay. Something was going on in there, as if the bricks were being rearranged, slowly and doggedly. Anne sits up and swings her legs over the side of the bed. She is wide awake. First, she feels the wood floor with her toes, followed by the balls of her feet, then her heels. Anne goes into the living room. In the middle of the night none of the street cars are running and no more cars drive past. When someone walks along the wall of the building, his footsteps make no sound. Thomas sits in the kitchen. Don’t turn on the light, he says when Anne steps on the door sill, which cracks with the sound of something breaking apart. She sits, facing Thomas, on a chair that has been pushed away from the table. She lays her hands on her lap, the left holding the right, palms facing the ceiling. A shadowy movement passes in front of Thomas’ face. She knows he is placing a hand over his mouth and chin and breathing in. How long have we been in this apartment? Thomas asks. Fifteen years, Anne says and knows that’s wrong. Twenty, Thomas says. Twenty years. You were thirty, he says. Yes, Anne says, so were you. Twenty years, Thomas says, going out the same door every day, always onto the same street. We’ve been using same bathroom for twenty years. Some people move every two years, Thomas says. I’m not sure that would help, Anne replies. What would change if you went out into a different same street every day? Thomas remains silent. You’re right, of course, he says, nothing. Anne moves the fingers of her right hand, balls them into a fist and lets them fall open again. The darkness where Thomas is sitting has grown more transparent. He has turned his face toward the window. The truth is, we’re boring and bourgeois. Bourgeois, Anne repeats, who says things like that? She looks at Thomas’ shape. He straightens up and shakes one of his arms toward the window, but Anne noticed it, a face, a young woman, mocking and curious. A girl. Do you want to move out? Anne asks. Thomas is standing. It’s late, he says. It’s the middle of the night, Anne says. Thomas stands in front of her, but maybe she’s mistaken. In this darkness it’s impossible to tell what is a body and what a shadow. Tell me what you want, Anne says. She doesn’t hear the door sill crack. He must have stepped over it. When Anne stands up and leaves the kitchen, he’s gone.

On the bus to the swimming pool, Anne looks out the window. She is waiting for the station where she has to get off. The neighborhood looks vaguely familiar, but these are no longer the same streets and shops she passes once a week. The final stop is announced. Good bye. Anne gets off the bus and looks around. She decides to walk back to the swimming pool. The broad street does not lead to the expected crossing, but along a wall. Anne wants to walk around the building along the wall. School of Medicine is written on a sign. The street she’s looking for must be behind it. After she has walked around the medical school building, she finds herself in a different part of town than she had thought. But she thinks there’s a large square nearby from which she can find her way again. She comes on a square with a name she has never heard before and has the feeling she’s in a city on the Atlantic, probably Nantes. No one else seems to be freezing. The sky is neutral, as are people’s faces. Hip-high blocks of cement are arranged around the square. Anne leaves Nantes with hurried steps and unexpectedly comes upon a multi-lane road that circles the city and she feels her way back until she is in a neighborhood she actually knows. She sits down in the nearest café to warm up. Only after a
while does she notice the music playing at a tolerable volume. Anne orders tea and a slice of cake. The weakness she feels makes her worry she is going to faint. Back in her apartment, Anne hangs her dry bathing suit in her closet and puts the unused towel on the shelf. She places her swim cap in the box with Thomas’ goggles. She stands in the hot shower for a long time. She dries her hair in front of the mirror and grabs a pair of tweezers. She has to raise her chin and push it forward to get at the short little hairs. Three of them always grow back in the same spot. In this pose, with her chin jutting forward, she thinks she looks heavy and mean. A thug. The pain from plucking the hairs brings tears to her eyes. The thug becomes blurry and unrecognizable. Thomas and she stood facing each other on a sidewalk, debating which way they should go. The afternoon sun fell at a slant. Anne felt the light from the side on her face. With her eyes half-closed, she still noticed the way a man’s gaze lingered on her as he passed them. Thomas looked at her attentively. Have you got a hair there, he asked, stroking her chin with his finger. You’ve got a hair, he said and laughed. Anne raised her hand, pushed his away and with her fingertips felt a short, hard hair. Let’s go then. She takes a taxi to see her friend. Her friend tells her that no, she can’t help, Anne should sit down with a glass of wine and talk. Anne watches her friend, the way she tastes the sauce, adds some salt. Anne says she’s going to quit swimming. Today she sat in a café instead of swimming. Her friend says she can understand that. She’s always resolving to be more active, but then is overcome by such an enormous, heavy, profound sense of fatigue. Enormous, heavy, and profound, Anne says. They laugh. When Anne got back today, the flower shop had already closed and she didn’t care if there were fresh flowers next to the piano or not. Anne’s friend asks about Thomas. It could be that she’s just living with a ghost, Anne says.

At lunchtime, Anne went to a bistro and had toast with goat cheese and salad. Since she doesn’t want to go back to her apartment, she orders an espresso and watches the other diners. Most of them give off little signals that they are going back to work. A sigh as they stand up, sometimes a contraction of their shoulder blades. A kind of challenging nod to someone, a drier tone, a determination in their movements to overcome tiredness. Anne watches them go. She looks at their hands, which move about naturally in trouser pockets or handbags. Anne recognizes the independence of the movement, she knows it from her own hands. When playing the piano, your hands have to develop an autonomy that is so great, you’re no longer even aware of them and yet you constantly have to react to what they do. After leaving the bistro, the people slow their steps and lower their heads to look at the phones their hands have pulled from their pockets or purses. Anne is now the only guest. The waiter stands behind the bar, his head down. Anne looks at the part in his brown hair. His right arm moves, he must have a telephone in front of him, too. She waits a while for him to look up and finally takes out a bill from her wallet and puts on her coat. She puts the bill on the counter and says, this is enough. Wait a moment, the waiter says, but Anne has already turned away and she leaves the bistro. When she gets back to the apartment, Thomas is in the kitchen. A few of his appointments were cancelled, Thomas tells her. Anne nods and asks if she should make coffee. When she places a cup before him and pours some coffee, Thomas thanks her and strokes her upper arm. It’s an old gesture that has become unfamiliar. She sits across from him. I’m sorry, he says, this will be quick. You’re just like my students with your phone, Anne says. Smartphone, Thomas corrects her. He smiles faintly without looking up. Anne watches his fingers move across the screen. There are messages in the phone. Photographs, too. Thomas taps the screen a few times. Anne could lean over the table and reach for the phone. In it there are weekends they spent together, anticipations and recriminations, reassurances, wishes for sweet dreams, nicknames, a telephone number, an address perhaps. The girl is in the phone. Thomas’ fingers move quickly. He’s typing. Anne raises her
eyes from his fingers to his face. The skin under his eyes is
dull and has the brownish shade that always sets in when he
hasn’t slept enough for an extended period of time. With his
phone, Thomas brings the girl into the apartment every time
he comes. The telephone is a Trojan horse that Thomas has
to watch constantly. If he were to fall into a deep sleep, the
girl would open the secret door and take over the apartment
under cover of darkness. Anne pictures the girl’s face, mock-
ing and curious. Thomas can get by without sleep for a long
time, but at some point he does have to sleep. Anne stands
up and takes his cup to the sink. Wait, he says, there’s still
some left, but Anne has already poured water in it. Sorry, she
says. Thomas waves her apology away. He drinks too much
coffee anyway these days.

In the morning, Anne leaves the apartment. Her purse is
on the stool near the front door. The door to Thomas’ room,
which she once called her office, is closed. Anne heard him
leave the apartment when she was still in bed. She puts on
her shoes and turns off the light in the entryway. Again and
again, she had considered getting a cat. It would get fed
in the morning and in the evening and at night it wouldn’t
know where to sleep. Both bedroom doors are closed at
night. The cat would spend the day on the window sill keep-
ing watch for one of them to come home. As Anne walked
through the apartment early this morning, the draft from her
feet raised flecks of dust from the corners. She decides to
come home early today and vacuum. She spends this morn-
ing, like every morning, in a café. She drinks an espresso and
eats a roll. She likes the first hour or two in the café best. The
people who come this early in the morning, come out of hab-
it. Those who come for a particular reason, because they’re
hungry or have something to discuss or to work on their de-
vices, don’t come until later. They don’t stay long and get
restless as soon as they’ve finished eating and drinking. At
the moment, there are still only regular guests here, there’s
still a sense of unanimity, which the waiters also share in. In
these moments, Anne writes sentences in her notebook that
have nothing to do with the textbook. She orders a second
espresso. The café fills and grows louder, the waiters also
become louder and faster while the regular guests remain
quiet and soon are no longer to be seen. Anne motions to
the waiter for the bill. She bends down for her bag, which
she had set on the floor and just barely dodges a man pass-
ning her table at that very moment. She straightens up. Her
head is at waist height of the people who are moving around
the room. The heads of all those who are seated are at waist
height of those walking around. If you lean to the side at
the wrong time, you run the risk of touching the middle of
a stranger’s body, of bumping into someone’s stomach, hip,
or behind. Anne searches through her bag for her wallet and
sees her cellphone light up. Thomas has called several times
and sent a message: call me. Anne’s first thought is he wants
to move out, separation. Then she thinks of an accident, the
hospital. Then of cancer. She puts her phone back in her bag
and waits for the moment to pass. She places her hands in
front of her on the edge of the table. As if the top half of
her fingers had been torn off. The tips of her fingers numb,
his middle knuckles raging with pain. If he wanted to move
out, he wouldn’t tell her over the phone, or send that kind
of a message. If it were about a divorce, he wouldn’t be in a
rush. And if it were a diagnosis of cancer, she assumes he’d
wait in the apartment until evening to talk to her instead of
calling. If he’d had an accident, he wouldn’t write a mes-

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LAURA FREUDENHALER

GHOST STORY
Anne is early. Thomas is punctual. He sits down, lays his hands over his eyes and sighs. Anne studies the transition from Thomas’ jaw to his throat. His skin has started to become slack. As if it has been stretched out. Thomas takes his hands from his eyes and Anne tears her eyes away from his throat. How are things? Thomas asks. How are things, Anne repeats, you mean: how are you? Of course, Thomas says. He takes a loud breath and pulls the salt shaker toward him. Thomas’ brother hugs him and tells him he looks good. Anne hasn’t seen his brother for a long time. He has gray hair now. Anne, Thomas’ brother says, how are you? She laughs. Is her sabbatical agreeing with her, does she feel younger, like a student? As a matter of fact, Anne says, I’m not quite one of the adults anymore, but definitely not one of the young people. She’s dissolving in an intermediate space. Anne laughs. She usually laughs a lot with Thomas’ brother when they see each other. But then there are long stretches when they don’t see him and they’re filled with worry and thoughts of his depression. Thomas wants to talk with his brother on the phone once a week, he insists on it. Anne isn’t on vacation, Thomas points out, but is working on a book. Obviously, Anne says and Thomas’ brother gives a friendly squint as if he knew better. The bill arrives and Thomas pats his pockets for his wallet. Anne knows he keeps his wallet in his pants pocket. I’ve got it, his brother says. He wants to treat them. Thomas stops his patting. His brother looks at the bill and takes two bills out of his wallet. He had withdrawn the money before coming to the restaurant because he’d planned on inviting them. He, the older brother, has always had less money and Thomas has never had to worry about money. Thomas’s brother leaves a big tip. The dark water sloshes under the floorboards. As a child, Anne had stretched out on her stomach in a boathouse and had peered through a gap in the floor. She had felt nauseous all day. Thank you, Anne says, it’s very generous of you. The bill arrives and Thomas pats his pockets for his wallet. Anne knows he keeps his wallet in his pants pocket. I’ve got it, his brother says. He wants to treat them. Thomas stops his patting. His brother looks at the bill and takes two bills out of his wallet. He had withdrawn the money before coming to the restaurant because he’d planned on inviting them. He, the older brother, has always had less money and Thomas has never had to worry about money. Thomas’s brother leaves a big tip. The dark water sloshes under the floorboards. As a child, Anne had stretched out on her stomach in a boathouse and had peered through a gap in the floor. She had felt nauseous all day. Thank you, Anne says, it’s very generous of you. The brother’s gray hair made his deflecting gesture seem even more helpless. Back in the apartment, Anne sits with him in the kitchen while Thomas brings a blanket and pillow from his room into hers and then makes up the couch, which is normally his bed, for his brother. He joins them in the kitchen and drinks a glass of wine, then another. Anne looks at the dark window. She doesn’t care what Thomas and his brother are talking about, she just wants to hear these voices that have found their way back to intimacy in statements and contradictions, interjections and exclamations, the sounds of agreement and attention, of interrupting and talking past each other, variations of the same elements. Anne is wistful. She wants to talk about how this situation spans so many years. She hasn’t opened her mouth yet and hears a noise from the entryway, a movement, a scurrying. When she looks over, she doesn’t see anything. Thomas’ brother stands up. Anne doesn’t move. Thomas is pale with exhaustion or else it’s the shadow of the lampshade that falls on him when he leans back. They let the moment draw out because they knew, once it’s over, they’ll have to withdraw together into the room that used to be the only bedroom. Thomas’ brother says that he’s going to go to bed and heads towards the bathroom. Anne clears the glasses from the table. She doesn’t even know if Thomas is still there. In his room, Thomas’ brother is sitting on the edge of the couch. Anne says goodnight. He has propped his elbows on his thighs with his hands folded between his knees as if in prayer. He doesn’t answer. Anne closes the door and sees the girl standing in the kitchen. She has sipped the remains of the wine and is looking at Anne from the half-darkness. She quickly raises her hand to the light switch and turns off the ceiling lamp in the entryway. There are no lights on in the apartment. The girl is still there, an afterimage on the retina, a slowly-fading illusion. Anne feels her way along the wall to the bathroom and brushes her teeth in the dark. She pushes the bedroom door open with her shoulder and lies down on her side of the bed, next to the wall. After some time, someone steals into bed next to her, without touching her and without the slightest noise. They lie stretched out next to each other. Anne would like to say something. How are things? She could ask and if he answered she would know it’s not a ghost or the girl who is lying next to her. She doesn’t
dare stretch out her arm. She can’t get enough air into her lungs until she hears something, a scraping noise, his breath catching in his throat, and she finally knows it’s him, his living flesh and blood, chest and stomach, the warmth between his thighs, his scarred knee.

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Anne closes the apartment door from inside. She sets her purse on the stool, looks at her phone and puts it back in the side pocket. She has gotten used to seeing a scurrying out of the corner of her eye, but it still startles her occasionally when she glimpses something disappearing through the open door to the living room as she hangs up her coat. Or when she turns around and has the impression that the door to Thomas’ room had been open and was quickly pulled shut. But the door to Thomas’ room hasn’t been left open for a long time. In the kitchen, Anne is washing the few dishes that still get used when she hears the sound of scraping wood. She turns off the water and, holding the plate in her wet hands, she looks behind her. She can’t remember where the chair stood at the table a moment ago. In the living room, she glances inadvertently at the bottom shelf with the boxes of photographs. One of the boxes is sticking out. Anne walks over and pushes it in with her foot or maybe not. More and more often she simply leaves things as they are. Most times she’s not certain how they were before. A newspaper lies on the floor next to the couch. Anne is often surprised to find that she hasn’t put her toothbrush back in the cup on the sink but on the washing machine next to the sink, or on the edge of the tub, or another time next to the dirty dishes in the kitchen. In bed in her room, she hears Thomas when he comes into the apartment, uses the bathroom, and goes quietly to his room. Anne gets up again to go to the bathroom and drink a glass of water in the kitchen. In the entryway, it occurs to Anne that the pockets in Thomas’ coat and jackets hanging in the wardrobe will have to be emptied. Thomas won’t do it. He never throws any receipts away, even if it’s just for a pack of cough drops. Once in a while, after leaving a store or a restaurant, Anne had tried to get him to toss the receipt in the next garbage can. Thomas humored her, but when he held the receipt over the garbage can, he couldn’t bring himself to drop it and Anne saw his angry expression before he turned away, shoved the receipt back in his pocket and walked ahead with large steps. Eventually he slowed down and finally stopped, waiting for Anne. Lately they’ve started giving a receipt for every little thing and Thomas’ pockets filled up more and more quickly. Once a week Anne empties his coat and jacket pockets and goes into the kitchen, both hands full of receipts, notes and candy wrappers of all colors. She spreads them out on the table and sorts them into three piles. Notes with appointments that have already taken place to the right, together with the candy wrappers and unimportant receipts. In the middle Anne piles restaurant receipts and to the left notes that are still important or those she can’t classify. She throws the pile with the candy wrappers in the trash and puts the remaining notes back in Thomas’ coat pocket. She takes the middle pile of receipts into her room. She goes back to the entryway and gets her notebook from her purse. Evenings, when the girl waits for Thomas near his office or when he picks her up, he asks if she has eaten yet. Of course not, she laughs and Thomas says: then let’s feed you. Anne orders the slips by date. She last entered records in the notebook on Monday a week ago. There are receipts that were issued at midday or in the afternoon, often not far from Thomas’ office. There are receipts that list several coffees, mineral water, tea, a small beer. Those are the afternoons on which Thomas has several meetings, one after the other. There are receipts for two coffees and now and again some from a tea shop for two pots of jasmine tea, but Anne doesn’t know if these were drunk by Thomas alone or by two people. The dinners are usually work dinners with several other people. Anne puts these receipts and those from the long afternoons back in Thomas’ pocket, so he can write them off on his taxes or offset them as expenses in some other way. Anne enters Thomas’ dinners with the girl into the notebook. Late at night, once she
has worked through the week, Anne leaves her room again, puts the receipts back into his coat pocket with the notes and throws the rest away.

The girl flutters, she is a little bird with delicate wings and fine feathers, with a bit of childhood down still along her hairline, and soft, glowing cheeks. You simply can’t get enough of watching the girl’s inexhaustible vivacity. Thomas is very concerned for the girl’s physical well-being when, for an entire day, she only eats a few bites of anything, a half of a cheese sandwich, a container of plain yogurt, a Crown Prince Rudolf apple (those are the smallest). In the evening she answers ‘of course not’ with a laugh when Thomas asks if she has eaten yet. The girl is delighted when Thomas then rushes to get her something to eat. She likes this urgency at the start of their meetings and the nervousness sparked by the excitement of seeing him. The girl doesn’t want to meet Thomas when she feels full. She’s afraid the excitement that is perhaps only possible on an empty stomach won’t come. She has to pull herself together to keep from fluttering with her hands and arms and breath, and she lets loose a flood of laughter and jokes which are clearly too much for Thomas. He can’t follow her, she’s getting him all confused, he says, but the girl knows that her exuberance makes Thomas lively at first and later, after dinner, when she is calmer, slightly exhausted. But then Thomas escapes his own tiredness and he chats and looks at the girl, now warmed up from her dinner, who sometimes ends a laugh with a sigh. Like two riders who loosen their reins and finally fall into pace and deep conversation again after a stretch of road on which one of them had been out in front before the other let his own horse run ahead. And did you really go riding often? Thomas asks. The girl makes a face that shows her irritation. Tell me, Thomas says. Sometimes, the girl replies, I have the feeling that you’d like me to be younger than I am. You have no idea how young you are, Thomas says. The girl looks at the napkin she pushes to the edge of the table. Let’s drink some sweet wine to end the evening, Thomas says, to youth. Anne is surprised by the dessert wine on the receipt. It would have made the girl tipsy. Come on, I’ll drive you home, Thomas said, I’ll put you to bed. When Thomas spends the evening with the girl, he usually doesn’t get home until after midnight. The girl is asleep before he leaves her. She sleeps deeply and Thomas envies her for that. He has gotten dressed, gone into the bathroom and washed his face. He straightened his hair with wet hands and dried himself with the girl’s hand towel. When he turned around in the small, narrow bathroom, Thomas bumped into the shower stall: noise of metal and plastic. He swore and waited for something to stir. Thomas knows how to close the girl’s door without a sound. He also knows how to open his own apartment door with the least amount of noise. Still, Anne wakes up. She hears the key in the lock. It’s no help that he locks the door: the girl is already here. Anne listens as Thomas goes into the bathroom then closes the door to his room and leans against it. Steps, then silence, and then steps again. He looks at his computer and again at his phone. He doesn’t realize that the girls has already climbed out and can’t find her way back in. He doesn’t know much, Anne thinks and, as she falls asleep again, she thinks she should speak to Thomas about the girl at some point.
Laura Freudenthaler was born 1984 in Salzburg. She studied German Language and Literature Studies, Philosophy and Gender Studies. She lives in Vienna. Her collection of short stories "Der Schädel der Madeleine" was published in 2014. For her novel "Die Königin schweigt" she was awarded the Förderpreis zum Bremer Literaturpreis 2018 and the novel was recommended as best German debut at the Festival du Premier Roman 2018 in Chambéry. In February 2019 she publishes her second novel "Geistergeschichte".

Photo by Marianne Andrea Borowiec

Tess Lewis is a writer and translator from French and German, with a penchant for Austrian and Swiss literature. Her translations include works by Peter Handke, Walter Benjamin, Philippe Jaccottet, Anselm Kiefer and five FNL authors. She has been awarded grants from PEN USA and PEN UK, an NEA Translation Fellowship, the ACFNY Translation Prize and the 2017 PEN Translation Award for her translation of the novel "Angel of Oblivion" by the Austrian writer Maja Haderlap. She serves as Co-chair of the Pen Translation Committee and is an Advisory Editor for The Hudson Review. Her essays and reviews have appeared in a number of journals and newspapers. In 2014 and 2015, Ms. Lewis curated the Festival Neue Literatur.

Photo by Sarah Shatz
“An Instinctive Feeling of Innocence” is the stunning second novel from Swiss-Romanian writer Dana Grigorcea and translated by Alta L. Price. With humor and wit, Grigorcea captures a world full of myriad surprises where new and old cultures weave together—a world bursting with character and spirit.

Victoria has just recently moved from Zurich back to her hometown of Bucharest when the bank where she works is robbed. Put on leave so that she can process the trauma of the robbery, Victoria strolls around town. Each street triggers sudden visions as memories from her childhood under the Ceausescu regime begin to mix with the radically changed city and the strange world in which she now finds herself. As the walls of reality begin to crumble, Victoria and her former self cross paths with the bank robber and a rich cast of characters, weaving a vivid portrait of Romania and one woman’s self-discovery.

In the morning I called my parents in Nice again. They have guests and are tipsy. ‘C’est notre fille, qui est rétourné à Bucharest,’ I hear my father say.

‘Ah, oh,’ the guests reply.

‘C’est romantique!’ my mother says, and they all laugh approvingly, ‘C’est romantique!’

I laughed along, but just cannot get used to how loud they are now. During the long summer nights of my childhood, when we had friends over and sat under the grape arbor beside the house, they always spoke softly, almost silently, so that even someone on the second floor would think we were completely silent, or that no one was there. Had there been a spy, he’d have had a heart attack when one of us used the soda siphon to replenish our spritzer. Back then the nights were so dark that I couldn’t tell whether I was still under the arbor or somewhere else, whether my eyes were open or closed, whether I was actually moving or just thinking of moving. At the time I enjoyed that kind of confusion, a staggering feeling of weightlessness—indeed, when I think back, I recall a primal blamelessness, an almost instinctive feeling of innocence.

The scent of linden continues its spread through the nighttime air, following me to bed, where we lie motionless—two warm bodies, unable to cool down in this heat. The sky remains bright and starless. Through the window, on a nearby hill, looms the brightly lit People’s House, surrounded by seagulls floating slowly up and down on the air as if in a snow globe. 5,100 rooms, 200 toilets, 480 chandeliers, 150,000 incandescent bulbs—I count it all and fall asleep.

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Outside, her many dogs bark themselves hoarse against the corrugated metal fence. They’re probably not the dogs I used to hear, but they sound just like they did before, way back when. We talk a lot about my time in Zurich. ‘Zurich,’ Mrs. Miclescu says with properly pursed lips—she has been there, too, and has fond memories of the Confiserie Sprüngli on Parade Square.

I usually sat upstairs at a table by the window, to the left of the entrance, with my bank coworkers; we’d eat Bircher muesli with wild berries and whipped cream, and play I spy. ‘I spy with my little eye something you can’t see, it’s far underground, straight below the tram stop on the 8 line, headed toward Bellevue.’ And then came the questions, ‘Is it paper, and does it belong to an assassinated Eastern European dictator?’ ‘Is it sparkling, and does it belong to the widow of an Arab despot?’ ‘Is it a love letter?’ ‘Is it a gold
trophies from the World Cup?’ I don’t know who actually knew
the safe deposit box contents and who was bluffing, but in
any case it was more fun than our corporate team-building
retreats in Saint Moritz.

One of my coworkers, Daniel, came from a venerable
family and, just like his father and grandfather, was a member
of the Kämibel Guild. Each spring he’d dress up like a Bedou-
in and ride through the city as part of his guild’s procession
for the Sechseläuten Parade, while high-society ladies tossed
them flowers. Once, Daniel told me that he’d like to rob a
bank, ideally the bank we worked at, in his Bedouin costume.
Instead, he asked his cousin to rent a safe deposit box so he
could open it whenever he wanted, using the bank’s back-up
key.

‘This is the safe deposit box of Cupid, god of love,’
he decreed, offering to open it for me.

He had put all sorts of useless stuff in it—a swan’s
feather, a marble, a ballpoint pen, dried flowers. When he
wanted to impress one of his countless girlfriends, he’d lead
her into the vault and open the safe deposit box, about
which he had woven an elaborate story. He’d then let her
take out these cheap objects, about which he had also spun
tall tales, and hold them in her hand. Or not.

‘He’s like my Dinu,’ comments Madame Miclescu.

‘He looked a lot like him, too,’ I admit.

Daniel was my closest coworker, the one I could call
in the middle of the night to come with me for a walk.

‘This flexibility is a sign of my fickle nature,’ he said,
and I shouldn’t read anything else into it.

He lived next to the Supreme Court, where there
were so many chestnut trees that I thought I was back in
Cotroceni, on Heroes’ Boulevard. That’s what I liked so much
about Zurich: I recognized places I had never been to before.
It often felt like my Bucharest, but not quite the same—not
the one in which I only knew a few streets and neighbour-
hoods, but the one I had always imagined: my stairwell with
its pent-up silence and heavy entryway door with the creaky
lion’s-head door knocker; the angle of the raking moon-
light, which cast the geometry of the street into high relief;
the little starling whose call mimicked barking, all night; the
engine that refused to start, its rattle reverberating down the
entire length of the street; all it took was a whiff and sudden-
ly the temperature would change along the way, the scent of
a lilac shrub would send me down a lane I normally wouldn’t
have taken, were it not for the fact that it felt like part of the
winding lanes I’d already started down in Bucharest; I went
onward, through a passageway, and was suddenly strolling
down the long corridor of Mémé’s divvied-up apartment,
towards the bathroom she shared with three or four other
families; taking my bath in its large zinc claw-footed tub, I’d
sail the seven seas alongside the glorious Captain Botev.

We always ended up at the last stop, in Bellevue
Square, and everyone agreed, ‘Too bad everything is closed,
otherwise we could’ve had another nightcap!’

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[from chapter 20]

He wanted to stand on a balcony and look out onto a grand
boulevard. It was to be as massive as the one in Beijing or,
even better, the one in Paris—a Romanian Champs-Élysées
to replace the old boyars’ houses with their rotten roofs and unkempt gardens and winding old alleyways, where epidemics could break out at any moment. And so the entire city quarter of Uranus, atop Arsenal Hill, was demolished, whereupon the city’s twenty-eight-year-old chief architect—whose thesis had been devoted to the ‘urbanization of fallow lots’—gave her comrades the good news that they now had free space to work with, an area ‘as big as Venice’.

‘As big as Venice!’ one comrade or another must have swooned, ‘Venice!’

‘Bucharest’s Champs-Élysées’ had been known—or, more accurately, not known—as the Boulevard of Socialist Victory. It was slightly shorter than its Parisian forerunner, but made up for it by being a full eight metres wider.

Nicolae Ceaușescu never had the chance to bow solemnly down from that balcony, so Michael Jackson did it in his stead, complete with glittering white glove. This was three years after Ceaușescu’s execution, during Michael’s Dangerous World Tour.

Back then hardly anyone left home without their personal copy of his Dangerous cassette—people carried them around just like the Chinese kept Mao’s ‘Little Red Book’ on hand during the Cultural Revolution. Everyone who owned a cassette player, like we did, would play ‘Jackson Poker’. You’d take a pencil or your finger and spin the tape to a random spot. Each player then had to guess what Michael would be singing when the music resumed. After everyone had placed their bets, the cassette was pushed into the recorder, and the person whose guess was closest won the round.

I never knew
But I was living in vain
She called my house
She said you know my name . . .

I had two copies of the Dangerous cassette. I listened to one and kept the other hidden in a safe place, in case the first one broke. When CDs came along, my father bought me the album on CD, in case we ever managed to buy a CD player.

When it was announced that Michael would be brought directly to the People’s House upon landing in Bucharest, I was one of the seventy thousand fans who, under the dark of night, pushed their way into the concrete gorge between the nearby residential blocks, an area known as Via Mala. Before us loomed the steep rock wall of the monstrous building, still under construction. It, too, could have been a night of sorts—a black, starless night, behind which one would find only wasteland and fallow terrain. For the first time, I now stood in front of this building, a massif I had only ever seen at a distance, from the window on Dr. Joseph Lister Street. And I probably never would have come here if it weren’t for Michael.

There were only a few sporadic shouts until the helicopters showed up, piercing the night with cones of light. The crowd’s shouts grew, ‘Michaaael, Miiichaaael,’ ropes were dropped from the helicopters, and everyone looked up to see if Michael was going to slide down to us amid the relentless autumn rain.

‘Is that him?’
‘That has to be him.’
But there was no one there.
We sang his songs to him, all mixed up. Sometimes a song sprang up from the back of the crowd and swept over us like a wave, bringing everyone’s voice upward and forward:

And it doesn’t seem to matter
And it doesn’t seem right
‘cause the will has brought
No fortune
Still I cry alone at night
Don’t you judge of my composure
‘cause I’m lying to myself
And the reason why she left me
Did she find in someone else?

And then another song welled up, initially sweeping the first one away, then bringing it back. This one was about love and betrayal, but above all betrayal, and everyone sang in unison:

(Who is it?)
Is it a friend of mine?
(Who is it?)
Is it my brother?
(Who is it?)
Somebody hurt my soul, now
(Who is it?)
I can’t take it ‘cause I’m lonely.

Out of nowhere the night exploded before us, with a roar and apocalyptic fireworks all around the People’s House.

‘It’s burning,’ a few people cried out, fascinated, ‘he’s going to burn it all down.’
The sound of sirens struck us from all sides.
There we stood at the foot of Arsenal Hill, mythical gathering place of ungodly might, a steaming mass of human beings, drenched to the bone yet strengthened, blessed by the suffering of our ancestors, the chosen few who’d experience the end of it all, the ultimate, decisive battle prophesied in the Book of Revelation. ‘And he gathered them together into a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon.’

‘Michael, Michael,’ we called out to our archangel.
And when the entire People’s House had disappeared behind fire and smoke, someone shouted, ‘Down with the nomenklatura!’ Or it simply came over us all, and everybody began chanting, ‘Down with the nomenklatura’!
‘Free-dom, free-dom!’
Everyone stretched their arms out into the rain, their fingers forming the victory sign—much like the one democrats had flashed a year before, but now with index-finger and thumbs, no longer the V-sign made with the index and middle fingers used in the so-called revolution, since the nomenklatura’s cruel, gruesome spectacle had made us out to be the suckers.

Once the smoke had settled, washed away by the rain, we had a clear view of what was once the mere People’s House, and now revealed itself, in blue contours, to be the Heavenly People’s House, the House of all God’s People.

Heal the world
Make it a better place
For you and for me
And the entire human race . . .

A bunch of light beams came together on the balcony of the People’s House, where a small figure stood and waved. ‘Huuuh,’ Michael shouted into the microphone, ‘huuh’!

Two large screens flashed in the night, each showing an oversized Michael Jackson in the red-and-blue officer’s uniform of the royal guard, complete with golden cords. If you check the history books, you’ll see that it was exactly like King Charles II’s gala uniform, just without the fancy white-tufted cap. Instead, he wore a black hat and mirrored aviator glasses in which the entire enormous square was reflected, teeming with innumerable teeny dots.

‘Hello, Budapest!’ Michael Jackson shouted. ‘I love you!’

It seemed as if, in the blink of an eye, the rain had stopped. Or the raindrops were suddenly stuck, hovering mid-air, just like the surrounding smoke. Dead silence. The End.

[from chapter 21]

I became a Pioneer of the Fatherland when I was ten years old, on a cold autumn day, or maybe a cold spring day—in any case, it was cold, and we weren’t allowed to put a jacket on over our snow-white pioneers’ blouses so they wouldn’t look all wrinkled at the big ceremony. The day had begun badly, because my red carnation had been swiftly beheaded by one of my fellow pioneers. He was small and graceful, but his parents sent him to karate. He was showing off his flying kick, and my carnation happened to be in the way. I was left with only the stalk, so I could’ve dueled with a fellow pioneer who also had only the stalk, but everyone else’s carnations were still intact.

So I had to stand in the last row when we lined up for the patriotic song, hidden back where nobody would see that I didn’t have a flower. It wouldn’t have been so bad had the walls of the old prison not been so cold—the celebration was held in the ruins of Doftana prison, not far from Bucharest, where Ceaușescu and his predecessor Gheorghiu-Dej had been imprisoned, as had the grandfather of one of my schoolmates, a fat blonde named Ileana. She was named after Princess Ileana of Romania, with whom her grandfather—despite his perfunctory communism, or perhaps precisely because of it—supposedly had an affair.

After a dress rehearsal of the ceremony in which we all received our official red ties, we were allowed to break for a short picnic on the lawn. The ground was cold and wet, and we spent so much time in vain, and covered so much ground searching for a suitable spot to sit, that we unexpectedly found ourselves back inside the prison walls, in a cell-block. We played catch, and then hide-and-seek, until Virgil called us. He had found iron handcuffs chained to the wall in one of the cells.

‘Do you guys think they’re real?’
We took a closer look—they seemed pretty ancient, given how rusty they were.

At the time we were all entranced by Alexandre Dumas’s novel The Count of Monte Cristo, and between
classes we’d excitedly discuss the adventurous escape of the innocent prisoner who then appeared before his tormentors as the avenging angel. These discussions usually escalated into major disagreements, because each of us had our own ideas about how the story went, which led us to deduce that everyone else somehow had the wrong idea. Dumas books had to be reserved from the school library far in advance. Their good condition attested to the high value their readers ascribed to them. When my turn came, I, too, covered the book in a newspaper dust jacket, and paged through it as if poring over a priceless manuscript. But even then I couldn’t help scraping the little bits of wood out of the paper, and as those bits came off the surface a word here and a word there invariably came with them, unintentionally making minor changes to the book’s plot. Consequently, I left my own impression on these heroic stories, as I liked to imagine during the many nights spent secretly reading by flashlight under the blankets. The text on the other side of the page sometimes came through the brown paper, which made reading it much more difficult. The tedious process of deciphering each word made me feel like the first-ever, specially chosen reader. Sometimes I even tried to read the other side without turning the page, which meant reading in reverse, in order to anticipate the thickening plot. I always read in secret, hiding the books from my mother, who didn’t want me to bring any library books home—you never knew whether the previous reader had succumbed to tuberculosis or some other contagion. For every page I read, I was ready to pay the highest price, my very life, which I figured was what made me truly worthy of encountering the heroes and martyrs in such stories.

‘Let’s play with the handcuffs,’ someone suggested, and then everyone wanted to be the noble inmate. As fate would have it, however, only Virgil’s delicate wrists fit into the already closed handcuffs.

And who could the rest of us be? We all disagreed.

‘You all can be my guards.’

But that was no fun, so we decided to be his evil torturers.

‘And then we can switch,’ said Virgil in a conciliatory tone, as we left him in his cell and went out to fetch our instruments of torture—pointy sticks to poke and prod him, big stones to smash his bones, and then all sorts of wildflowers we could say were poisonous, and I even found a snake-skin, which excited us all. We held it up against the weak sun, studying its fine patterns until our comrade teacher found us. ‘Can’t you hear when someone’s calling you?’

She was out of breath and close to tears. I don’t know why the ceremony had to start so punctually, there was no one out in this wilderness but us, her, and a comrade inspector, who was quietly playing tric-trac with the bus driver. ‘Go on, run to the entrance wall and line up, quick,’ she commanded, but on the way back we remembered Virgil. And then something funny happened—we had forgotten which cell he was in, and right before our eyes the cellblock grew increasingly labyrinthine. We wanted to call out to Virgil, but our comrade teacher was afraid the comrade inspector would hear us and realise that not everything was going according to plan, and that we weren’t a collective worthy of wearing the red tie, but just ‘a bunch of wretched losers’. ‘Go now, but keep quiet’, she finally said, and we ran from cell to cell whispering, ‘Virgil, are you there?’; only to then
shout loudly over the walls, ‘He’s not here’, and then, ‘Not here, either’!

As I remember it, all of a sudden it was dark, clouds had blown in or night had unexpectedly fallen. When we found Virgil we noticed only from his voice that he had been crying. He could no longer pull his hands out of the handcuffs. ‘Make your hands small’, commanded our comrade teacher, but no one knew quite how that was supposed to work.

She let out a sigh and said, ‘Children, children—why can’t you just behave’?

Then she took off the bunches of bracelets she always wore, which clattered when she wrote on the blackboard and conducted chorus, so that all the ‘big kids’ said ‘Man oh man, we’d have loved to be lucky enough to have such a modern comrade’. Ileana was allowed to hold all the bracelets, and she was bursting with pride.

‘Come on’, said our comrade teacher, and began pulling on Virgil’s arms with all her might. ‘Make one peep and you’ll regret it’, she added for good measure, but his little hands didn’t come out, not even when she spat on his wrists to make the handcuffs slide more easily.

‘Do you want to rest for a minute, and we’ll take over for you?’ Ileana asked in her sing-songy voice, but our comrade teacher paid no attention, because she was busy rolling up Virgil’s sleeves so they wouldn’t get bloodied. His wrists were badly abraded.

‘And now they’re swelling up, too’, said our comrade teacher. When she thought she heard a giggle, she shot back at us, ‘You little shitheads’. She was on the brink of tears, ‘Unworthy! You’re all totally unworthy of the red tie’!

She asked for a clean handkerchief.

‘Grab my bag’, she told Ileana, whose stiff arms were straight out and still holding the many bracelets in her hands, but I had already pulled my bag over. ‘Here, take my handkerchief—the edges smell of eau de Cologne, but it’s clean.’ Our comrade teacher then rolled it up and ordered Virgil to bite down on it as hard as he could, so he wouldn’t feel the pain as much. ‘As hard as you can’, repeated Ileana, ostensibly out of concern for Virgil.

And then our comrade teacher grabbed Virgil’s arms, pulled and pulled, and his eyes nearly popped right out of their sockets. ‘You’re almost there’, said Ileana, and our comrade teacher braced herself against the wall behind Virgil with both legs, yanking harder. When even that didn’t work, she gave up and let Virgil—whose arms appeared as if they’d grown out of the same wall they now looked nailed to—slump into a heap on the floor. And then she took it out on us, ‘Miserable miscreants, go to hell, just hang yourselves with your shitty red ties, why don’t you? Shitty children! Shitty little shits! This shit sucks’!

After this fit she quickly regained her composure, rummaged through her bag, and pulled out a little blue container labeled ‘Nivea’.

‘What’s that’? Ileana asked in her sing-songy voice.

‘A medicinal cream’, said our comrade teacher, ‘can’t you see he’s bleeding?’

She spread the cream on Virgil’s hands and wrists, and with all her strength tried yet again to pull him out of the handcuffs. When that didn’t work, she held on to his limp body and lifted her legs off the floor. A few years ago, I saw a shaky film clip of a woman in Iraq who did the same thing...
with a hanged man, so he would die faster and suffer less.

Virgil wasn’t moving, but couldn’t be freed from the handcuffs either, so our comrade teacher put all her bracelets on again and led us back. ‘Sing as loud as you can,’ she commanded us, in case Virgil happened to wake up and start screaming. We left him there like that, my handkerchief still in his mouth.

I sang loudly, not because I wanted to follow orders but because I was intent on outsinging the overbearing Ileana. And so I was selected—the comrade inspector came to me after the ceremony in which we all got our red ties and said, ‘Have you ever dreamed of giving flowers to our supreme comrades’? Whereupon our comrade teacher burst into tears and hugged me.

Then she invited all the other children to hug me, first Ileana, commandant of our troop division, who was quite confused by this unexpected outcome, and then the girl who was commandant of the window row, because I sat in the row of desks closest to the window at school, and then the other commandants, too, of the door row and the two middle rows. The comrade inspector laughed and said, ‘Are there only girl commandants in your class’? Our comrade teacher cheerfully replied that the top students were always girls, and then the comrade inspector said something like, ‘Girls are always the best, even later’. She laughed the entire bus trip back to Bucharest, and because the comrade inspector accompanied us, we couldn’t go back to get Virgil.

I can’t quite remember exactly how the rest of it went, or I’ve forgotten the order of events at least, but I do know that first of all my parents congratulated me and then, when we were on an afternoon walk and I noticed there was no one in sight, I asked them to tell me the truth. ‘Which truth?’ ‘You don’t like him.’ My mother looked at me, horrified, ‘You mean our supreme comrade’? And then she slapped me, ‘How could you say such a stupid thing?’ and ran home howling.

Only later did I learn that my parents had separated for a bit, for that very reason. I had been sent away for a while, to undergo some medical examinations, so I hadn’t known at the time. But I met a bunch of nice nurses who were convinced I would become a radio star on the show Sing Song Minisong, and travel to Budapest and Prague, and maybe even the GDR. And another comrade class-leader lady also visited me a lot, bringing me sweets and telling me about Mother—that is, our supreme mother, mother of all the people, who liked being addressed as ‘Mother’. ‘Don’t worry, she’s very kind, just like a normal mother, even better.’ This mother’s picture hung in my room, she was young and beautiful as a fairy, with lovely hair and big, bright eyes.

And then came the big day. I got a huge bouquet of red roses or tulips, but I’ve forgotten everything, all the children who were there, and all the songs we sang, and whether I even opened my mouth to really sing at all or just moved my lips like I did at school, simply because it amused Mémé when I told her about it afterward. ‘Mémé, last year I even imitated animal sounds during the anthem. The blonde girl, Ileana, told on me, but our comrade teacher asked me if it was so, and I said no.’ Mémé laughed and said, ‘Oh, that must’ve driven Ileana mad’.

But the reality was different, I had received a royal wallowing from the entire class. Our comrade teacher had held me and walked me past every fellow student, and all my
comrade classmates were allowed to hit me as hard as they could. On that day all my friendships ended, even my friendship with little Virgil, who continued protesting that he had only made it look as if he had hit me, and not even with all his strength. ‘I’ll bet you want to see what it’s like when I hit you as hard as I can, huh?’ he threatened, as I ‘continued acting’ as if I were offended, or so he claimed.

But now I was the one who was allowed to meet the supreme comrades, and I climbed the stairs to steady applause, clap-clap-clap, clap-clap-clap. The sound propelled me forward like a strong wind at my back, I teared up, and everyone I passed gave me a pat on the shoulder. ‘Bravo, child’, ‘bravo’, and ‘bravo, you are the future’. And then the voices of a children’s choir rose from somewhere, singing ‘When we’re no longer children, we’ll all lend a hand’. A sea of colourful flags fluttered over the whole scene, like millions of colourful birds, before unexpectedly freezing in front of the blood-red carpet, forming the exact shape of my bouquet.

Then there was a long silence, no motion whatsoever as far as the eye could see. It was as if I were suddenly all alone, and all the people around me were dolls.

‘Is this bouquet for me?’ asked an old woman with a potato nose.

‘No’, I said.

‘For whom is it, then?’

Out of the corner of my eye I looked toward the comrade class-leader lady, who gazed into the distance with unbridled joy.

‘It is for me’, said the old woman with the potato nose.

‘It’s not for you, because it’s for my mother!’

‘For your mother?’ the old woman asked with an evil grin, ‘And where is your mother?’

I looked around, but everything was frozen stiff.

‘She’s coming’, I said, to stall the old woman until help came.

But the old woman had already grabbed the bunch of flowers and was trying to pull it from my hands. I held on with all my strength. And then came the deafening noise, the applause, and thousands of comrades chanted and waved huge pictures of our dear Mother overhead, as she briefly continued to stare at me.

I stayed on the grandstand all afternoon, since the comrade class-leader lady had begged me to stay by the old woman with the potato nose. ‘Look what lovely braids you have, and such big pom-pom hair ties’, she said to me, ‘have you ever seen such big pom-poms? And you know what? We’ll wait until the end, and then we’ll ask if you can take the pom-poms home with you.’ So apparently I stayed there, shaking my head the entire time so that my braids waved, and they even saw me on TV. By then my mother had already returned home, and my parents watched the whole thing on Rapineau’s TV, with its three-colour layer of film, alongside a bunch of friends and neighbours. ‘What colour was my bouquet?’ I asked. My father laughed with pride, and said, ‘Blue’.
Dana Grigorcea was born in 1979 in Bucharest. She studied German and Dutch philology in Bucharest and Brussels, Film and Theatre Direction in Brussels, and Journalism in Krems. Grigorcea was awarded the 3sat Prize in Klagenfurt at the Ingeborg Bachmann competition 2015 for “An Instinctive Feeling of Innocence”. Her debut novel, “Baba Rada. Life is Temporary and So is The Hair on Your Head” has been awarded the Swiss Literary Pearl 2011. After living in Germany and Austria for many years, Dana Grigorcea now lives in Zurich with her family.

Photo by Ayse Yavas

Alta L. Price runs a publishing consultancy that specializes in literature and nonfiction texts on art, architecture, design, and culture. A recipient of the Gutekunst Prize, she translates from Italian and German into English. Her latest book translations include Martin Mosebach’s “The 21” (Plough, 2019) and Dana Grigorcea’s “An Instinctive Feeling of Innocence” (Seagull, 2019). Her work has appeared on BBC Radio 4, 3 Quarks Daily, Maharam Stories, Trafika Europe, Words Without Borders, and elsewhere. She is a member of ALTA, PEN, the Third Coast Translators Collective, and Cedilla & Co.

Photo by Donnelly Marks
Samir’s parents flee to Germany shortly before his birth, escaping violence and civil war in their home country of Lebanon. As a boy, Samir is very close to his beloved father, Brahimi, who fills his childhood with stories of the beauty and wonder of his homeland; but when Samir is eight years old, his father disappears without a trace. After twenty years of turmoil, self-doubt, tumult, and deep obsession with his father’s reasons for leaving, Samir himself leaves Germany for volatile Beirut, Lebanon in an attempt to find him. His only clues are his father’s journal, a puzzling old photo and the bedtime stories he remembers from his youth. The Storyteller follows Samir on his search for the truth of his father’s past, and of his own identity. It is the enthralling story of a refugee family in Germany, torn apart by a secret whose origins lie in the Lebanese civil war - a moving and gripping novel about the intersection of history with family, love, and friendship.

Excerpt from pages 16-32.
How was I to know I’d be haunted by that photo forever?

Prologue

Bright lights, throbbing sounds. Beirut by night, a sparkling beauty, a twinkling tiara, a breathless trail of flickering lights. As a child, I loved to imagine myself here someday. Now there’s a knife stuck in my ribs, and the pain shooting through my chest is so intense I can’t even scream. But we’re brothers, I want to shout, as they tear the rucksack off my back and kick me till I sink to my knees. The pavement is warm. The wind is coming in from the Corniche; I can hear the sea lapping at the shore and music drifting out of the restaurants along the street. I can smell the salt in the air, and the dust and the heat. I can taste blood, a metallic trickle on my lips. Fear wells up inside me, and rage. I’m no stranger here, I want to shout after them. Their echoing footsteps taunt me. I have roots here, I want to cry out, but all I manage is a gurgle.
I see my father’s face. His silhouette framed in the bedroom door, that last shared moment before my sleepy young eyes closed. I wonder whether time and regret have haunted him. I remember the verse the old man with the beard had muttered: … then no one responding to a cry would be there for them, nor would they be saved. Then I remember the rucksack. But it’s not the money or my passport I’m thinking of—they’re gone. It’s the photo in the inside pocket. And his diary. All gone. The pain is so bad I almost pass out.
I am responsible for a man’s death, I think.
Then, as the blood seeps out of my chest: Pull yourself together. It must mean something. A sign.
The men’s footsteps fade and I am alone; all I can hear now is my own heartbeat.
A strange sense of calm comes over me. If I survive this, I think, it will be for a reason. My journey won’t be over yet. I’ll make one last attempt to find him.

1

Father was standing on the roof—balancing, rather. I was standing below, shielding my eyes with one hand and squinting up at him, silhouetted like a tightrope walker against the summer sky. My sister sat on the grass, waving a dandelion head and watching the tiny seed parachutes twirl. Her legs were bent at the kind of unnatural angles only little children can achieve.
“Just another little bit,” our father shouted down cheerfully as he was adjusting the satellite dish, his legs spread wide to retain his balance. “How about now?”
On the first floor, Hakim stuck his head out the window and shouted: “No, now there’s Koreans on the TV.”
“Koreans?”
“Yeah, and ping-pong.”
“Ping-pong. How about the commentary? Is that Korean too?”
“No. Russian. Koreans playing ping-pong, and a Russian commentator.”
“We don’t want ping-pong, do we?”
“You might be too far to the right.”
By now my head was also caught up in a game of ping-pong, looking back and forth to follow their conversation. Father pulled a spanner out of his pocket and loosened the nuts on
“Don’t forget—26 degrees east,” shouted Hakim, before his grey head vanished back into the living room. Before going up on the roof, Father had given me a detailed explanation. We had been standing on the small strip of grass in front of our building. The ladder was already up against the wall. Sunlight shimmered through the crown of the cherry tree and cast magical shadows on the pavement.

“Space is full of satellites,” he said, “ten thousand of them and more, orbiting the earth. They tell us what the weather will be like, they survey earth as well as other stars and planets, and they relay TV to us. Most of them offer pretty awful TV, but some of them have good programmes. We want the satellite with the best TV, which is just about there.” He looked at the compass in his hand and kept rotating it until the needle lined up with the 26-degree mark on the right-hand side. He pointed at the sky, and my eyes followed his finger.

“Is it always there?”

“Always,” he said, and bent down, stroking my sister’s head before picking up two cherries that lay in the grass. He put one of them in his mouth. He held the other out at our eye level, and, holding the stone of the eaten cherry in the finger-tips of his other hand, revolved the stone around the whole cherry. “It travels around the earth at the same speed as the earth spins on its axis.” He drew a slow semicircle in the sky with the stone. “That’s why it’s always in the same position.” The idea of extra-terrestrial TV appealed to me. I was even more taken with the idea that somewhere up there a satellite was in orbit, always in the same position, always following the same course, constant and reliable. Especially now that we too had found our fixed position here.

“Is that it now?” Father shouted again from the roof.

I shifted my gaze to the living-room window, where Hakim’s head appeared instantly.

“Not exactly.”

“Ping-pong?”

“Ice hockey,” shouted Hakim, “Italian commentator. You must be too far to the left.”
of assurance. His infectious cheer enveloped everyone near him, like a cloud of perfume. You could see it in his eyes (which were usually dark brown but occasionally tinged with green) when he was brewing mischief. It made him look like a picaresque rogue. He always had an easy smile on his face. If the laws of nature dictated that a plus and a minus make a minus, he simply deleted the minus so that only the plus remained. Such rules did not apply to him. Except for the last few weeks we spent together, I always knew him to be a cheerful soul, tipping along with the good news in life while the bad news never found its way into his ears, as if a special happiness filter blocked it from entering his thoughts.

There were other sides to him too, times when he was stock still like a living statue, set in stone, imperturbable. He was buried in thought then, his breathing slow and steady, his eyes deeper than a thousand wells. He was also affectionate. His warm hands were always stroking my head or my cheeks, and when he was explaining something, the tone of his voice was encouraging and infinitely patient. Like when he told me to go in to my mother because he’d just decided to have a party with people he’d barely met.

I went in and helped my mother chop vegetables and prepare salad. The apartment building we had just moved into seemed very old. There were fist-sized hollows in the treads of the stairs, which creaked at every step. It smelled of damp timber and mould. The wallpaper in the stairwell was bulging. Dark, cloud-shaped stains had spread over the once-white walls, and a naked bulb that didn’t work dangled out of the light fitting.

To me, it all smelled new. The boxes we’d moved our stuff in were still piled in the corners of the apartment, and the smell of fresh paint drifted like a cheerful tune through the rooms. Everything was clean. Most of the wardrobes and cupboards had already been assembled; odd screws and tools still lay around—an electric drill, a hammer, screwdrivers, extension leads, a scattering of wall plugs. In the kitchen, the pots, pans, and cutlery had already been stowed. We had even polished them before putting them away, and the rings on the stove were gleaming too. We’d never had such a big and beauti-
There's one thing you should know about my father, a rule I saw proved many times—no one ever refused an invitation from him. Everyone accepted, even if they’d never met him. It was a warm summer afternoon in 1992 when we moved in. I remember it well. We’d left behind the tiny social-housing apartment on the outskirts, where we’d never really felt at home. We had arrived at last, bang in the middle of the town. Now we had a lovely spacious home, and Father was up on the roof tightening the nuts on a dish that was pointing at a satellite orbiting the earth at a fixed position in relation to us. All was well.

“Are you ever coming down from that roof?” Mother called up to him.

“Not till we get it working,” he called back, taking the spanner Khalil handed him. The men around me nodded politely at Mother.

“Ahlan wa sahlan,” they said. Welcome. A man tapped me on the shoulder.

“What's your name, young man?” “Samir.”

“Let me carry that for you, Samir,” he said, smiling and taking the salad bowl from me. All of a sudden we heard Arabic music coming from our living-room window. A few seconds later, Hakim's face appeared, bright red.

“It's working!”

“Are you sure it's not tennis?” Father shouted from the roof. “It's music!” shouted Hakim. “Rotana TV!”

“Music!” shouted another man, jumping up. And before I knew it, this stranger grabbed me by the hands and had me dancing in circles, hopping from one leg to the other and twirling like a merry-go-round.

“Louder, Hakim!” Father called down. Hakim disappeared from the window. Moments later, Arabic music was reverberating from our living-room window out onto the street. Drums, tambourines, zithers, fiddles, and flutes blended into a thousand and one notes, followed by a woman’s voice. People began to dance, clapping to the rhythm. The children twirled in unsteady circles. The men picked them up and spun them around while the women cheered and trilled with excitement.

Then everyone lined up, arms across each other’s shoulders, to dance and stomp the dabke. It was crazy. It was magical! At this moment, there was nothing that would have indicated we were living in Germany. This could have been a side street in Zahle, the city where Father was born at the foot of the Lebanon Mountains. Zahle, city of wine and poetry, city of writers and poets. Around us, nothing but Lebanese people, talking and eating and partying in Lebanese fashion. Then Father came out of the house. He was limping a little, as he always did if he’d been exerting himself. But he was smiling and dancing in quick little steps, whistling to the music, with Hakim and young Khalil in tow. The other dancers created a path for him, slapped him on the back, hugged him, and welcomed him too with an “Ahlan wa sahlan”.

I looked over at my sister, who was clinging in wonder to our mother's leg, her big round eyes taking in all these people who greeted us like old friends, like a family they knew well, a family that had been living here for ages.

I lay in bed some time later, satiated, sleepy, and exhausted. The music and the babble of voices still rang in my ears. Snapshots of the day kept flashing through my mind—the dishes of vine leaves, olives, hummus, and fattouch; the barbecued meat, olives, pies, and flatbread; star anise, sesame, saffron. I saw all the different families. The women wiping the mouths of children wriggling on their laps. The men stroking their moustaches while they smoked shisha, laughing and chatting as if this street was a world of its own, a world that belonged only to them. Hakim telling them his jokes. Yasmin, two years older than me, sitting to one side with pencil and paper, her unruly black locks falling into her face as she drew. Every now and again she would brush them across her forehead with the back of her hand, or blow the strands of hair out of her eyes, giving me a wave whenever I looked over at her. And Mother, smiling that private smile of hers. The happy feeling of having arrived. This was our place, our home. Here people helped each other. Here no one needed a compass. All the satellite dishes on our street pointed 26 degrees east.
And in the thick of it all, Father, who loved a party and limped in circles around all his new friends, like a satellite in orbit.

A few days later, the two of us were relaxing by the lake. The mountain range on the other side etched a restless cardiogram on the sky, spiking into the clouds. We were at rest, though. Father-and-son time. A day to ourselves. At the water’s edge, the densely cloaked fir trees seemed so firmly rooted that nothing could topple them. The two of us on the grass, each holding a sharp stone, with a couple of dozen walnuts on the grass in front of us.

“Careful—try not to damage the shell too much,” Father had said. “Ideally, we want both halves to stay intact.”

I didn’t know what he was planning to do, but it didn’t matter. I was just happy to be here, with him. The days had flown; now the packing boxes were all folded up in the basement, everything had been put away in the cupboards, and the smell of fresh paint had faded. Now the living room smelled of fresh laundry. And if there was no laundry on the line, the living room smelled of my parents, since they spent a lot of time in it. The kitchen smelled of washing-up, or of spices, or of the flour Mother sprinkled on the rolled-out dough when she was making flatbread. The bathroom smelled of soap, lemon-scented cleaner, or shampoo, often with the smell of damp towels mixed in. It all smelled of home. The halls smelled of shoes, but that didn’t matter; it showed that someone lived here, someone who was always going in and out, who came back here, took off their shoes, and walked around the apartment, absorbing the smells of this family. And all around us: more families. Whenever I left the house, someone would nod or give a friendly wave; moustachioed men in berets would be sitting at folding tables near the edge of the pavement, playing backgammon or cards, eating pistachios and blowing rings of shisha smoke around our neighbourhood. I felt at home.

We cracked the walnuts open with our sharp stones, doing our best not to damage the shells. It was a warm afternoon in late summer. Scattered clouds created strange, fanciful shapes in the sky; a gentle breeze whispered secrets across the water. Two dragon flies circled above us. Father noticed that I kept looking over at the fir trees on the water’s edge.

“Shame they’re not cedars.”

“Cedars. Even the sound of the word set me dreaming.”

“But you like them all the same?”

“Mhmm.”

“Then you would love cedars. They’re the most beautiful trees of all.”

“I know,” I whispered. Not that I’d ever seen any—a fact that bothered me. I desperately wanted to be able to join in the conversation when the men sat around together, wallowing in memories.

“Do you know why the cedar is on our flag?”

“Because it’s the most beautiful tree of all?”

Father laughed.

“Because it is the strongest tree of all. The cedar is the queen of all plants.”

“Why?”

“That’s what the Phoenicians called it.” As always when he spoke of Lebanon, his voice was charged with secret longing and imbued with the undertones of someone speaking about a lover they missed very deeply. “They built ships out of cedar. It made them very powerful traders. The Egyptians used our cedar to embalm their dead, and King Solomon built his temple in Jerusalem out of it. Imagine—our cedars on Mount Zion, and in the pyramids of the Valley of the Kings …”

I conjured up images of everything Father described, as vividly and colourfully as any seven-year-old does when their father tells a story with passion and conviction.

Father often spoke of Lebanon’s magnificent cedar groves. In his childhood and youth he must have spent a lot of time in the Chouf Mountains. He would sit in the shade of the giant, centuries-old trees and inhale the reassuring, resin smell of a secure future. In the shelter of the conifers, beneath a dense needle canopy, he would sit with his back against a cedar trunk, his gaze wandering across sparsely populated mountain valleys towards the coast, where the Mediterranean
lay silver and glittering and Beirut shone in the curve of its bay. As I grew older, I often imagined him like this. And again and again, I mistook this image of him for the image of a happy childhood.

From his shirt pocket, Father produced a few toothpicks. From a cloth bag, some red crepe paper. He tore off some and handed it to me.

“For the flags,” he said, and began to tear the paper into small, narrow strips.

We patiently attached the paper strips to the toothpicks, which we then stuck into the nutshells that were still intact. At some point we stopped and looked at the grass, where lots of little nutshell ships lay between our feet. A whole fleet, complete with red flags, ready to set sail.

“Come on.” He stood up, and we went down to the water, which was lapping at the shore. The sun and the mountain chain were mirrored in the malachite-green lake. For a while we just stood there, holding the little ships in our hands, breathing together. “A cedar can grow to be several thousand years old,” he said. “If a cedar could speak, it would tell us stories we would never forget.”

“What kind of stories?”

“Lots of funny ones, I expect. But lots of sad ones too. Stories about its own life. Stories about people who passed by or who sat in its shade.”

“Like you?”

“Like me. Give it a go. Try it with the fir trees.”

As we stood by the water, I thought about the wind swishing through the needles. The sound it made was the fir trees whispering, telling each other about their lives. I hoped that one day they’d remember how we stood here by the water and I tried to imagine what they were saying about us.

As a boy, I felt an insatiable longing to see Lebanon. It was like the enormous curiosity inspired by a legendary beauty no one has ever seen. The passion and fervour in the way Father spoke about his native land spread to me like a fever. The Lebanon I grew up with was an idea. The idea of the most beautiful country in the world, its rocky coastline dotted with ancient and mysterious cities whose colourful harbours opened out to the sea. Behind them, countless winding mountain roads flanked by river valleys whose fertile banks provided the perfect soil for world-famous wine. And then the dense cedar forests at the higher, cooler altitudes, surrounded by the Lebanon Mountains, whose peaks are snow-capped even in summer and can be seen even from an inflatable mattress on the sea far below.

We stood on this lakeshore, breathing the same air and sharing the same longing. In my opinion, after love for one another, there is no stronger bond between two people than a shared longing.

“What would the cedar on our flags say?” I wanted to know. Father smiled briefly. I could almost sense the words on his tongue as he struggled to find an answer. But he just pressed his lips together.

We launched our little ships. Only a small number lost their flags a few metres along the way; most flew them proudly in the breeze. Father and I stood and watched. He had put his arm around my shoulders.

“Like the Phoenicians,” he said.

I liked that. Me, Samir, captain of a Phoenician walnut-shell ship.

“May they sail for a thousand years!”

“May they return with heroic tales!”

Father laughed.

I have often thought back to that day in the late summer of 1992. I know that he wanted to do something to make me happy, and it did indeed make me very happy. Hardly any of our ships sank. Some of them rocked dangerously, but none capsized. We stood there watching until the very last nutshell was no more than a tiny dot, and I remember how proud I was. But I also remember how his arm felt heavier and heavier on my shoulders. His breathing became deeper and deeper, his gaze more and more trance-like, as if he were no longer looking at the ships but at some point in the distance. The reason I remember it so clearly is that it was one of the last days we spent together.
Pierre Jarawan

Pierre Jarawan was born in 1985 to a Lebanese father and a German mother and moved to Germany with his family at the age of three. Inspired by his father’s love of telling imaginative bedtime stories, he started writing at the age of thirteen. He has won international prizes as a slam poet, received the City of Munich literary scholarship (the Bayerische Kunstförderpreis) for "The Storyteller", and was chosen as Literature Star of the Year by the daily newspaper AZ.

Photo by Marvin Ruppert

Sinéad Crowe

Sinéad Crowe is a native of Dublin, Ireland, and currently works as a freelance translator in Hamburg, Germany. Her short-story translations have appeared in "The Short Story Project", and her translation of Ronen Steinke’s "Fritz Bauer: Auschwitz vor Gericht“ is forthcoming from Indiana University Press.

Photo by Norbert Seekircher
Rachel McNicholl is a freelance translator and editor based in Dublin, Ireland. Her translations have appeared in journals and anthologies including “The Stinging Fly”, “Manoa”, “No Man’s Land”, “Best European Fiction” and “The Short Story Project”. Her translation of Nadja Spiegel’s short-story collection “sometimes i lie and sometimes i don’t” was published by Dalkey Archive Press in 2015. PEN America awarded Rachel a PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grant in 2016. In 2018, she had a funded residency at the Europäisches Übersetzer-Kollegium in Straelen, Germany, during which she worked on the final stages of the Pierre Jarawan translation.

Photo by Fiacc O’Brolchain
This novel inhabits a beguiling literary landscape that invites the reader to linger in the author’s quirky, enigmatic imagination. In “Everything Is Still Possible Here”, Molinari sets her characters in a cardboard box factory that is soon to be closed down. Its few remaining employees are caught up in existential reflections, anticipating the demise of their livelihood. Among the remaining workers that remain is the novel’s narrator, the night watchwoman in a place that has precious little to watch, or to guard. A wolf has been sighted on the grounds, and the dramatic possibility of its return shapes the narrative. Armed only with a Universal Encyclopaedia the solitary watchwoman jots down her musings about fences and islands, barriers and borders, along with wide-ranging flights of fancy triggered by the few sparks of conversation around her. Everything Is Still Possible Here raises questions about the boundaries we place on our everyday lives. Molinari’s is a voice that makes us sit up and take note of the unsettling but endlessly interesting margins of our experience.
EVERYTHING IS STILL POSSIBLE HERE
HIER IST NOCH ALLES MÖGLICH
BY GIANNA MOLINARI
TRANSLATED BY KATY DERBYSHIRE

The wolf came down from the mountains, and with it came other wolves, down to the lowlands. Advanced into territories where they’d never been seen before.

They were driven by hunger, the awareness of cubs, the awareness of the cubs’ hunger.

The wolf and the wolves have no names. We call them wolf and wolves. They have hiding places. They move around at night.

I too move around at night, I too stare a lot at the darkness.

I too have advanced into territories.

There is an island inhabited by a creature that has never been seen. Scientists went there and discovered the sensation. They caught the creature with a net and put it in a jar with air holes in the lid. They drank a lot of champagne that night to toast the singularity of their discovery, to toast their successful capture of the creature and no one before them ever having seen it. They were beside themselves with joy and pride, intoxicated by the feeling of playing a part in the game of world importance.

The next morning, they woke up with aching heads and sat down to discuss a name for the creature. Every one of them thought of his or her own name. They had dreamed so long and so often of giving their name to such a creature, with such delicate legs, such intricate and elegant wings. Dreamed of reading their name beneath a picture of the creature in publications. The scientists decided they had to see the creature to find the most appropriate of all appropriate names.

And there and then, on that island on that morning, many a bubble burst: the holes in the lid must have been too large or the creature capable of escaping in some other way.
My job interview was held in the factory canteen. The boss sat at one of the square tables, a cup of tea in front of him. The tea gave off steam. I shook his hand and introduced myself. He introduced himself as well and asked me whether I’d ever worked as a night watchwoman before. I nodded and said I often kept watch at night, it was no problem for me, I was very attentive and reliable, I wanted to do the job.

Do you live in the town, he asked, peering at me over the edge of the cup as he sipped his tea.

Is there no way to live on the factory premises, perhaps workers’ accommodations, I don’t need much, something small’s enough.

Did I not want to look for a place in town, it wasn’t all that far, the boss said. What exactly did I envisage as workers’ accommodation, had I not looked around, there weren’t many workers left here and there’d never been any accommodations. But if I liked I could move into an empty room, water and electricity were hooked up, there was a shower and a toilet off the corridor, but it could get pretty cold, not exactly luxury, not luxury at all, but I was welcome to take a look, we’d come to some agreement over rent and so on.

I move into a large room on the first floor of an L-shaped building. There are other rooms beside and below it. The building is on the factory premises, part of the factory. Opposite the building is the production hall, far larger, far higher. Behind the production hall are two more halls, another one for production and one for storage.

The factory is outside a small town. The few staff still working in the factory live there. There are fields around the factory, and the airport further out. I can see the planes landing and taking off from my window.

Perhaps my room is too small to call it a hall. I still call it a hall. No one has ever lived here before. I’m the first hall inhabitant.

When I lie in bed and stare at the ceiling at night, I sometimes think I’m in the belly of a whale.

I try to distinguish the unimportant from the important. Is the shadow of the bird strafing the floor of the hall the important thing or is it the bird itself, which I can’t see from my chair?

My hands are important, as are my arms and shoulders, my head, eyes,
mouth. My legs are important too. They take me from the table to the bed, from the corners to the middle of the hall, to the windows.

I wonder what the surface of my lungs is like, how dense the network of my blood vessels, what living in the hall will do to me.

There’s a new environment to be explored here. Everything’s still possible here.

The people on the factory premises are afraid of the wolf. I find a note on the door to my hall: A wolf has been sighted on the factory premises. These animals are on the lookout for food and are not afraid of humans. If you see a wolf, please report it immediately.

I have not yet seen a wolf.

Trespassers are forbidden from entering the premises. It says so on signs. The signs also say: video surveillance. The premises are square in shape, with a fence around the outside. Weeds grow up the wire mesh in many places. The fence is bent here and there. I walk along the fence and find three places where it reveals openings so large I could slip through them.

I ask the boss about the wolf.

The cook saw the wolf by the bins, he says, rummaging in the food waste. He’ll have to come up with something, he says, he can’t answer for a wolf roaming around on the premises.

I ask the boss why he doesn’t get the premises newly fenced, the holes mended.

That’s too expensive, the factory’s not worth the investment any more.

Why did you give me the job, then? You’re not an investment, you’re a necessity. I want everything to be above board, I don’t want to make mistakes at the end.

I’m amazed by the tone in which he tells me that, as though even he can’t quite believe he isn’t somewhere else by now.

I’m going to ask the cook what the wolf looked like, how big it was, what it did, how it looked at him or didn’t look, how it moved.

I’m going to go to the canteen, maybe eat a bowl of soup and ask the cook how he reacted, whether the wolf gave him a shock, whether he was scared, whether he couldn’t move, which of them moved first, the cook or the wolf, what direction the wolf went, whether it looked
back, whether the cook could see that. I’m going to ask him all that and eat up the soup down to the bottom of the bowl.

Visible boundaries include the forest line, the line between land and water, between light and shade, the walls of my hall and the fence around the factory. These boundaries are easy to spot. Others are not.

((Illustration 2))

One floor below my hall is the surveillance room. I often sit in the room and watch the four monitors in turn. I rarely see one of the staff leaving or entering the premises, on foot, by bicycle or by car. I rarely see trucks driving in or out.

Since I’ve known there’s a wolf roaming the premises, I’ve often seen cats scurrying across the screen. Sometimes the moving image becomes a freeze frame because nothing in it moves, because the entrance, the exit, the central area and the main entrance go unchanged. The only change to be seen is the light, getting brighter or darker, and the shadows migrating slowly across the concrete ground.

I often sit in the surveillance room and read a book. Then I only peer at the monitors out of the corner of my eye.

Sometimes I think I see a movement mid-sentence. The wolf, I think, but by the time I’ve fully turned my gaze from the page to the screen, the shadow has gone.

The night watch is divided into two shifts, from five until midnight and from midnight to seven. The second night watchman is called Clemens. We alternate six days a week. No one works on Sundays. Sundays are Sundays, the boss says. The same goes for burglars, there are statistics.

And what about the wolves on Sundays, I ask the boss.

That’s an unsolved problem.

The boss leaves it up to us how we divide up the shifts. So we decided to swap the earlier and the later shift in a weekly rhythm, the same way Clemens did with the woman before me.

Clemens lives in the town. He cycles to the factory.

I don’t care about the factory’s wellbeing. I’m interested in the wolf. It won’t be long, a few more months, and then the machines will be switched off, the production shut down. They used to make telescope boxes here, carry packs, mailing envelopes, gift boxes, cardboard boxes, ar-
chive boxes, transport, sales, and presentation packaging of all shapes and sizes, out of corrugated, plain, solid cardboard, paper board or grey board. Now the production is limited to collapsible boxes.

Clemens approaches by bicycle on the monitor. His hat is pulled low over his face. Mid-screen, he raises a hand to say hello, then turns off to the right and disappears from the monitor’s field of vision.

He opens the door to the surveillance room with such energy that it bounces back off the wall.

Have you seen the wolf? He takes his hat off his head and sits down next to me in front of the monitors.

No wolf, I say. I spot isolated grey strands in his black hair.

Anything else?

He asks that every night, and every night I say: No, nothing.

Or should I tell him I saw a mouse vanish beneath a forklift, heard the cry of an owl or some other bird, tell him the moon was not visible, the air was fresh and smelled of swamp, although there’s no swamp nearby, tell him I cast shadow animals on the factory walls with my hands, including the shadow of a wolf?

Right then. Good night.

I get up and slap my hand twice against the table. The monitor images tremble slightly.

I spot him rubbing his eyes, then I walk past him, out of the door and up the stairs to the upper floor, and enter my hall. I brush my teeth and wash my face at a little basin and then get into bed. The bed is directly above the spot where Clemens is now sitting.

I found my table and chair outside the storage hall; Clemens brought me the bed. All I brought along to my hall was a few items of clothing, my camera, and my Universal General Encyclopaedia, which is of great importance. I am continually writing new entries into it or adding to the written ones. Yesterday, I added in tiny letters next to the word BOUNDARY: Walls of my hall, fence around the factory.

FACTORY: I’m not here because of the factory. I’m here because there’s a new environment to be discovered here.

I’ve gotten used to living in a rectangle. If someone were to tell me the world was a rectangle, I’d be happy to believe them. But I think actually the world is the world and my rectangle is my rectangle.
I wouldn’t want to swap my hall. Not for the one-room flat opposite the shopping centre with the neon signs that bathed my room in blue light every night. Not for the ground-floor flat with access to the garden with a low wall in it where lizards lounged in the summer, where I wondered whether that was all, the scurrying and freezing, whether the lizards were capable of anything else, whether they changed colour or jumped high into the air when I wasn’t looking. I wouldn’t want to swap the job as a night watchwoman for my old job at the library. The two workplaces do have things in common. At the library, I looked for books that had been ordered, and collected them. At the factory, I look for a wolf. At the library and in my job as a night watchwoman, daylight is rare. The books people wanted were often missing, and a lot is missing at the factory too: starting with the staff, whom I so rarely see, all the way to the wolf, who is missing entirely.

But still I think waiting for a wolf might be more interesting as a whole than looking for and collecting ordered books. I often see the boss slouching across the premises. I wonder whether he’s attached to the factory, whether it pains him that it’s closing, whether he tried or is still trying to prevent the closure.

No one takes much care of the factory now. Weeds break through ruptures in the concrete and are not removed. Wind and weather make moss grow on the outside walls, make the plaster inside the halls crumble. Time draws fine cracks in the wall, the window grilles are rusted and are sure to rust more.

There’s no need for a night watch here. I don’t know who would take what from these premises. There’s nothing to be had here. A burglar wouldn’t find any more than cardboard here.

I wonder why the boss took me on, whether it’s really about the factory or he has other reasons to let me live on the premises. Clemens and I are probably something like consolation for the boss; as long as there’s a night watch patrolling here, his factory can still be called a factory.

I’m glad of the wolf. Perhaps the wolf lends my activity importance.

WOLF: A wolf is possible.
FENCE: There are far higher fences, there
are fences without gaps.

Two truck drivers are sitting three tables away from me. I hoped I’d be alone in the canteen; then I could ask the cook all I like undisturbed. The truck drivers are eating mashed potatoes and slices of meat, probably pork but perhaps lamb or beef. The wolf will be pleased with the leftovers, I think, and I wave at the cook. He waves back. I go to the counter and the cook ladles mashed potatoes and a slice of meat out of chromed steel containers onto my plate.

I might have slightly over-salted the potatoes, he says.

I’m sure they’re fine, I say.

It’s not my day today. He points at a plaster on his finger.

One of the truck drivers fetches two coffees from the vending machine. Back at their table, they both stir in sugar lumps. The spoons are very small in their large truck-driver hands.

I look at my plate. The mashed potatoes still bear the imprint of the ladle. I stab the imprint with my fork.

The truck drivers put their empty plates on the counter and the money alongside, and leave the canteen. The cook comes over with a cloth and starts wiping down the tables.

Not much up, I say, pointing my fork around the room.

The cook looks at me. Have you ever seen there being much up around here? It was different in the old days, I cooked four menus every day, and made salads and desserts in the old days. These tables were full in the old days.

There weren’t any wolves in the old days either, I say, and I ask him all the questions I planned to ask him.

The cook answers that the wolf looked like a wolf, that it was standing by the bins and he didn’t notice it at first and got a shock. He couldn’t move but you’re not supposed to move in a situation like that, you have to stay calm and maintain your composure. The cook says the wolf didn’t move either and he put the bucket of food scraps down on the ground slowly, not letting it out of his sight – he kept his eye on the wolf and the wolf on him – and then the wolf did make a sudden move. Where exactly it went he didn’t know, into the darkness.

Clemens is standing in the doorway. His coat is wet. A few drips gather on the hem and fall to the ground.

Still no sign of the wolf, I say, and I
Clemens takes a book from his inside pocket and holds it out to me. The cover is damp.

Canis Lupus, I read aloud.


Thought it might interest you. Clemens hangs his wet coat over the radiator. The coat goes on dripping, the drips forming a small island of water.

Why did you come to the factory, anyway, Clemens asks. You could do something else. Study, travel. Why are you here, he asks.

I like it here. It’s a good place. Everything is still possible here.

Even wolves, says Clemens.

Even wolves.

Not long after my job interview, the boss showed me the corrugated cardboard line.

CCL, he said, the heart of production. There’s no factory without a heart. The machine noise in the production hall was so loud I had trouble understanding the boss. I had to step up close to him. The boss pointed at the machine, a steel construction over fifty metres long, running across the whole production hall.

I followed the boss around the hall. I smelled glue and damp paper. The air was warm. A worker in blue trousers and a black T-shirt was standing at a computer, pressing buttons. He kept looking to and fro between the computer and the machine. Seeing the boss and me, once we’d entered his field of vision between computer and machine, he nodded at us. The boss nodded and I nodded. Then the boss’s mouth formed words. They sounded like: Karl-Heinz. But they might have been long lines or great minds.

Suddenly an alarm bell sounded and lots of red lights started flashing. The boss looked at Karl-Heinz, who raised a calming hand. The production cycle seemed to be finished, the machines juddering quietly and then falling silent.

The boss expelled his breath. The processes are set and controlled on the computer, he said. All technology, all very precise.

He pointed at a huge roll of paper. This is where we attach the rolls of paper. The paper goes through the corrugating roll and then the glue application roll glues more paper to the upper and lower crests of the corrugation.

He stepped up to the machine and
tried to reattach the corner of a sticker that had come away from the outer surface. The sticker said: Humidity must be measured for every new roll. He left the sticker as it was and walked on. The machine began juddering anew. I hurried to keep up with the boss.

The bridge, he yelled, then the heating section, the length and breadth cutters and last of all the stacking area; this is where the cut corrugated cardboard sheets are stacked.

I looked at the stacked sheets of cardboard being taken away from the machine on a conveyor belt. At the end of the conveyor was a worker on a forklift, loading up pieces of cardboard. The boss followed the forklift driver, Friedrich – if I understood his name rightly – and I followed the boss to his second machine.

The slotter, he said. This is where the vertical scores are made and slots cut so the boxes can be folded later. At the end of the slotter, the finished collapsible boxes stack neatly in tied bundles.

Impressive, I said, and the boss nodded.

The machines will rust away here if no one comes and buys the factory. If no one comes and buys the machines too, the rust will come, he said.

The boss is probably right about that: everyone knows it’ll soon be over here. Then it will be time to turn off the machines, and the main current switch too. It will be time to lock the doors and windows, close up the loading ramps. It will be time to shut down.

RUST: Rust knows no boundaries.

From my bed, I look at the wall of my hall. It’s dirty. The plaster is crumbling in places, revealing grey concrete. The exposed spots have the shape of islands. I imagine their sandy and stony margins, their vegetation, the creatures that inhabit them.

((Illustration 4))

I read in the Universal General Encyclopædia that islands change shape, that they are marked by the weather and eaten at by the sea, that frost drives indentations into islands and fractures their rock. The islands get worn away. They lose surface area, get smaller and smaller. At some point they will have vanished.

Discoverers from times long ago told of an island where shadow-foots live. Shadow-foots, also called skiapods, are one-footed people who can hop as fast
as lightning; when it gets very hot they lie on their backs, stretch their leg up and provide their own shade. They are lonely creatures, always alone and avoiding the company of others. And they lie on their backs a great deal, because the sun almost always shines on their island.

((Illustration 5))

The fence has holes in it. The fence no longer matters, not for the factory and not for the wolf. There might as well be no fence, just like there could be no night watch. We have not yet had to protect the factory from anything. Clemens wishes there’d be a burglar. I’ve wished for a burglar too.

Perhaps I could surprise Clemens – I’m sure he’d be pleased – if I told him I’d seen the wolf. Then there’d be an importance to our deeds. We’d look differently at the monitors.

I meet the boss in the central area. He’s lifting a cardboard box out of his car boot. A new photocopier, he says. The old one’s too old.

I thought you didn’t want to make any more investments. I close the car boot. You always need a photocopier.

Can I have your old one?
What do you need a photocopier for?
Like you said: you always need one.
In his office, the boss puts the box down on the floor, which is carpeted in grey. His large desk stands in the middle of the room, with a view of the window and out over the premises. Files and folders are piled on its top around a blotter, like cliffs around a calm bay. I try to imagine the boss doing his work with his back bent, looking out of the window or at the pictures on the wall. On the wall on the right is a picture of a blossoming tree, apple or pear, on the wall on the left a portrait of a man who might be his father or his grandfather.

My uncle, he says, pushing the box across the grey carpet to the side of the old photocopier. He owned the factory and before that it belonged to my grandfather.

The way these things go, I say, and I help him to lift the new photocopier out of its box.

Yes, just the way these things go, he says, and we lift the old photocopier into the cardboard box.

I try to draw a wolf. It looks like a dog. I close the Universal General Encyclopa-
dia, complete with my wolfhound. The time on the monitor is 00.04. The door opens behind me and Clemens enters the room.

So, Clemens asks.
All quiet, I say.
He sits down next to me in front of the monitors.
Universal General Encyclopaedia, he reads aloud. Do you mind? Clemens flicks through the pages. Did you write that in there?
Most of it.
He flicks further, then back. He starts searching under C.
No entry for Clemens. What would you have noted down if Clemens were in here?
Probably night watchman.
Nothing else?
What would I write if it was up to you, if Clemens were in there?
For instance, nice and obliging and intelligent.
I take the encyclopaedia out of his hands and note down in the upper margin of the page headed CLEMENTINE:

CELMENS: Furrowed brow, black hair, slightly greying, usually wears a hoodie (blue), 28 years old, nice, obliging, intel-
ligent night watchman.

The boss is standing outside my hall door; I invite him in. No one has seen the inside of my rectangle since I moved in. The boss walks along the windows past the row of books, which is not even half a boss’s stride long. The boss looks out of the window and contemplates the premises.

Nice, he says, and I don’t quite know whether he means how I’ve set up my hall or his factory premises.

The thing with the wolf worries me, you know. It rummages in the canteen bins.

Do you think that’s bad, I ask, pushing the loose sheets of paper on my table into a pile.

I think it’s extremely unpleasant to know there’s a beast like that on the premises.

Do you think the wolf’s really that dangerous?
Wolves attack people.
Not usually.
The possibility exists, says the boss, and he takes a sheet of paper out of his coat pocket. He unfolds it and puts it down on the table.

Here, look, this is the traps plan. We’ve hidden steel traps here and here...
and here. He points at three red dots on the paper.

And here, this one I designed myself, a special kind of wolf trap. It works like a pit trap. When the wolf puts its weight on one end of the board, the board tips downwards and the wolf falls in. Here, look, the construction plans. A hole has to be dug for the pit trap, deep enough, big enough, the boss says. I wanted to ask if you and Clemens could do it.

Can’t you hire a digging machine for it?

He could, the boss said, but it wasn’t exactly a swimming pool he wanted to dig.

I think there are plenty of small swimming pools, and I ask whether he wouldn’t rather put up a photo trap.

Then all we’d have would be pictures, the boss says.

Pictures would tell us something about the existence or non-existence of a wolf.

That’s not enough, the boss says.

I tell him I’ll dig the hole; it will make a change.

The boss starts circling the measurements on the construction plan with a red pen. Three metres long, two metres wide and three metres deep, then he taps his finger on all the trap sites again.

You can keep the map so you don’t step in a steel trap.

I’ll take care, I say, folding up the plan.

WOLF: In times of poor food supply, the wolf eats both carrion and food waste.

I leave my hall and the building, following behind the boss. Wolves come in packs, that’s well known, he says. We have to be aware we’re not only dealing with a single specimen.

They also migrate alone, I say.

Up to ten of them, just imagine it.

The boss dashes ahead, checking the trap plan.

The wolf will have its reasons, I want to tell the boss. It won’t come onto the premises voluntarily, it’s hungry, I want to say. In times of poor food supply, the wolf also eats food waste.

The boss stops still, looks at the ground covered in high grass and underbrush, says here and fine and ideal ground. He takes three large boss strides in one direction, stops, turns ninety degrees and takes another two strides.

I look down at the piece of ground selected by the boss. There are a lot of dandelions growing on it.
I remember a film I once watched. It opens with a scene in a supermarket, by the refrigerated section. A woman stands in front of a wall of yogurts. She stands there a long time, the camera not moving; the woman paces to and fro. Then she walks up to the shelves, reaches for an apricot yogurt, then puts it back, reaches into the shelves again, this time for a vanilla yogurt. Puts that back again as well. In the next scene, the woman is sitting in front of a television. On the TV, a volcano erupts and people are killed by bombs. The woman sits at a kitchen table, filmed from behind. We hear newspaper pages turning. The camera zooms in on the woman, in on her back, shoulders, and over her shoulders in on the newspaper. There’s a picture of a destroyed city in it. The woman eats bread and butter and the earth is on fire before her. And then suddenly, a sparrow flies in through the open kitchen window. The woman puts her bread down and tries to shoo the bird back out of the kitchen. In the attempt, she beats the sparrow to death. The camera films the kitchen. Zooms in on the kitchen table, the newspaper still open on it with the dead sparrow on top. The camera pans to the open window and out of the window. There, the woman appears on screen, walking down the road and pulling a wheeled suitcase.

I haven’t killed any sparrows, but I have left my home. I doubt that the security I live in corresponds to reality. I long for insecurity, perhaps for more authenticity, for reality. I’d like to be able to distinguish what is important and what isn’t. I’d like to be part of a story or many stories at the same time.

Perhaps the woman in the film went to the Himalayas, the Carpathians, to Madeira or another island.

I went to the factory.
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Photo by Christoph Oeschger

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Photo by Anja Pietsch
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This year marks the 10th anniversary of Festival Neue Literatur (March 28-31), the first and only festival to spotlight German-language and U.S. fiction together. We would like to honor the tremendously gifted authors who have participated in FNL thus far—more than sixty of them whose exceptional works draw on the maps of the past to reveal the shape of the present. This special 10th anniversary celebration gives festival goers a chance to reach back and reflect on the many writers, thinkers and cultural critics who have joined us in creating this rich, hybrid tradition, and to look forward to the new growth still to come.