



**FESTIVAL NEUE LITERATUR READER**

**VOLUME 11**

**TURN AND FACE THE STRANGE**

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Featuring book descriptions and translated excerpts by Festival Neue Literatur 2020's chosen authors: Anna Baar, Isabel Fargo Cole, Judith Keller, Benjamin Quaderer, Sasha Marianna Salzmann, and Ivna Žic.

Festival Neue Literatur brings six of the most important emerging and established writers from Germany, Austria, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland to New York City, where they join celebrated U.S. writers Joshua Cohen and Helen Phillips in a series of conversations and readings.

Although the April 2020 event has been postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we hope you enjoy these texts and invite you to stay tuned for upcoming announcements of festival-related virtual events and online readings.

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## Letter from Curators Alta L. Price and Tess Lewis

Dear Readers,

We have an amazing lineup for you, although we're deeply disappointed we won't be able to see you in person this spring. We were excited to announce that the eleventh edition of the Festival Neue Literatur would invite authors and attendees alike to *Turn and Face the Strange*, but had no idea just how fully we would all be asked to do precisely that, in every aspect of our daily lives. Continuing the tradition established by the festival's first decade, we are once again bringing powerful literary voices from contemporary German-language countries and the United States into dialogue—but this year, for the first time, we are in the strange new position of needing to do so from a safe distance.

Having investigated themes ranging from identity to memory, humor, queerness, the concept of belonging, and love and money, this year's guiding theme is the strangeness, uncanniness, and eeriness that sometimes lurks just beneath the surface of daily life and can break out full force in times of change—whether large or small, internal or external, real or imagined, spatial or temporal. We start with out-of-body experiences, the loneliness of a con man in a tiny country, a lost twin, time travel in and out of complicated pasts and no less complicated presents, poisonous bees, a miracle or two, along with a series of far-fetched women—and then things get really strange.

The new decade is off to an odd start, and rather than asking whether this is the new normal, we've chosen to run headlong into the changes. This year's authors include Anna Baar, Isabel Fargo Cole, Judith Keller, Benjamin Quaderer, Sasha Marianna Salzmann, and Ivna Žic. They come to us from Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and—for the first time in festival history—Liechtenstein. We chose to pair them with U.S. authors Joshua Cohen and Helen Phillips, whose latest books are already out and can be ordered from your preferred local indie bookstore.

In addition to these readings, this year was to again feature the popular translation-centered event. "Translation as Cultural and Political Activism" would have explored literature's ability to test power structures, expand our notions of who we are, question the history we inherit, cherish the stories we pass on, and increase the ways we express what urgently deserves to be heard. We're teaming up with Sant Jordi Virtual to adapt much of this as a series of online events, so stay tuned to [festivalneueliteratur.org](http://festivalneueliteratur.org) for updates.

*"There are certainly more things in heaven and earth than most of us have dreamt of or ever will. The thrill of Festival Neue Literatur is having eight writers challenge and expand our notions of what is ordinary and what is strange. When was the last time you looked, really looked, at what you take for granted and at what makes you feel unsettled? Let's do this, in April, together."*—Tess Lewis

*"FNL is the country's only German-language literary festival in English; how obvious and yet odd a proposition that is. Sometimes a small shift in perspective can bring your world into new focus. We're thrilled to present these stories from afar and marvel at how they resonate with our own experiences of what it means to exist right here, right now, in these bodies, and in this society."*—Alta L. Price

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**Excerpt from *Die Farbe des Granatapfels* (“The Color of the Pomegranate”)**

**Anna Baar**

**Wallstein, 2015**

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*Summary*

The protagonist of Anna Baar’s “The Color of the Pomegranate” remains torn between the two different countries and languages in which she grows up. A stranger in both cultures, aimlessly wandering without ever truly arriving, the young girl learns to face the strange by expressing her own “mirrored longing, a mirrored absence.” She spends summers with her grandmother in an archaic fishing village on the idyllic Dalmatian island of Brač, a world unto itself. The rest of the year she lives in southern Austria, a provincial place still strongly shaped by the National Socialist past, where Yugoslavs are viewed as unwelcome guest workers. Baar’s novel figuratively delves into “the foreign within the familiar,” and intriguingly intertwines both individual and collective histories. In October 1991, when the Croatian capital of Zagreb is bombed by the Yugoslav People’s Army, it becomes clear that the troops glorified under Tito—who the main character’s grandmother admired—have become the enemy, and the family is forced to retreat into hiding in the basement. Such changes are portrayed with the precision of disturbing glances into a mirror, as the characters come to grips with their lost sense of country, home, and self.

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*Excerpt translated by Sophie Duvernoy*

Then the summer arrived when she stopped coming. *At my age, it’s best to be near a hospital*, she said on the phone. I hung up in fury and threw the phone against the wall and wailed, because I understood that our patch of earth would remain lifeless, this patch of earth into which she had seeped, as if through a bloodstream branching wildly beyond her own bodily dimensions, a deep web of veins forcing its way through foundations and dirt. Her final departure from this corner of the world seemed to me like a premature death. I was inconsolable. And relieved. For the first time, I had the prospect of a summer without fear and war.

That summer, the weather went haywire. After countless days of tropical heat, it cooled, the cicadas fell silent, the rain streamed down, splashing and gurgling over the roofs and in the gutters and cisterns, a moody, percussive concert: trickling, dripping, babbling, then roaring, rushing, and thundering like wild applause. The earth exuded its scent, breathed, and brought forth its tiny creatures, a feast for lizards and blackbirds, wild pigeons and sparrows, who gave thanks in reverential songs, which drifted gently through the din of the pattering drops, shrill whistles, calls and coos, always, as one says, *con spirito*.

The warm earth steamed, so that thick fog rolled over the land, and in the hot, humid air lay a stirring, a wild sprouting, budding, and blooming, a return to oneself, just as if creation had, after a feverish delirium, recalled its purpose again.

But for the potted flowers on the veranda and the terraces, the rain and cool air came too late. The poor things, whose sensitivity to sun and heat had incited Nada's doggedness and defiance, were withered, *usahnuti*: such a bleak word for death that she could not help but revolt against the laws of nature, if only for the sake of a few sickly plants, which she had latched onto because of their beauty, though they drank up precious water meant for throat and hide.

Even the house is crumbling. Ants and termites hollow out the beams of the pergola and the handrail of the wrought-iron fence, endless streams of workers carry out sawdust and heap it into small mounds in the corner of the veranda.

The light of my glowing cigarette illuminates the blind spots of my memory and I see Nada painting the weathered handrail, the beams, the window frames, splashes of paint on the walls of the house, splashes of paint on the white marble floor, pearls of sweat on her brow. I see her working, always working, fighting against the ravages of time and the grasses growing wild. Yet just like the ocean swallows the shore during stormy winters, decay spreads, as if overnight, over all things. The garden twines its stems and leaves around her efforts. The withering pleasure garden, its tongues curling in the heat. *Da barem kia padne!—If only it would rain!* Someone heard her plea.

What must she have felt! She had only to turn her back on the garden for a day and it would send out shoots and ruin everything she had worked so hard for. A weed was growing in the spot she had just weeded yesterday. Ivy snaked around the almond tree, the ashes from the fire were scattered across the floor, even though they had just been swept up.

She yanks and rips at the vines and weeds with bare hands, her fingers rubbed raw and bloody, grumbling alone at the mosquito bites and thistle pricks, a cigarette in the corner of her mouth, flinging out quick prayers like curses, wiping her brow, sweaty already by early morning, with the dirt-covered back of her hand—dirt under her fingernails, splinters in the soles of her slippers, refuse in the plastic bucket missing its handle, which she would, when she felt no one was watching, empty in the neighbor's garden.

And who knows? Perhaps phantoms had long since crept up on her, stalked her, quietly whispered into her ear as she bent down and weeded and puffed and ash fell to the ground, *to dust you too shall return*. Perhaps they did so in those moments when she grew short of breath and looked over at us sullenly, because we didn't lift a finger, though everything had grown beyond her control.

Mother, Teta, and I couldn't keep up Nada's dogged struggle against dessication and overgrowth, this rebellion against God's plan. For many years we reproached her for fussing over the house and garden, partly to mask our own laziness, which was perhaps more reluctance, because everything had to happen according to Nada's wishes, because she had taken everything upon herself while claiming

to do it all for us, to work and suffer only for us, for the children. Had she ever asked me? Oh, generosity and kindness: the last morsel of yesterday's bread, mother's blood, pain, all for us, as if her pain hadn't also been ours. You didn't suffer for me, Nada, but against me! Not for my sake, but for my harm.

Now idleness set in, as if we wanted to prove to each other that we were right and Nada was wrong. We neglected the scraggly flowers, let the lavender grow wild, justified the leaves underfoot by claiming the garden needed a layer of humus anyway. When the rain finally relented after days, we haphazardly sawed at the olive branches hanging over the garden path, which year after year had lovingly scratched our faces and mussed our hair.

After weeks of lethargy, Mother and Teta were gripped by a curious frenzy of activity. They outdid each other in disposing of this and that, junk Nada had stubbornly clung to until the end. They were like children who secretly enjoyed turning the house on its head while their strict governess was away. There was no one shuffling after them now, no one throwing her hands up in despair. Free reign, at last. Eagerly they stuffed sticky, smeared pickle jars filled with flour, sugar, lentils, spices, and jams, along with hundreds of empty yoghurt cups into black plastic bags, as well as pots and pans of all sizes, canned fish from the nineties, even the broken, discarded crisper drawer of the *Obodin Deluxe Frigidaire* and the standing fan which had given up the ghost. But no one had the heart to get rid of a single one of the garden gnomes we children had bought her, glad that Nada could be so easily made happy, though we mocked her love of kitsch; how could we have persuaded her to let go of this girlish indulgence, which embarrassed her but which she couldn't give up?

These were fruitless days. The figs were ready to be picked, but we let them wither; the weeds had to be pulled, but they took over. Nada was gone, gone from every room and nook, from every space, every plant, every stone of this overgrown garden, even from the butterfly wings and larvae, from the spirals of the empty snail shells which had been my trophies long ago. *One day, when I'm no longer here, you'll know how good you had it.*

Sometimes I see her walk past me without a word. She looks through me. I don't dare speak to her. I rub my eyes, but she's still there. I run cold water over my face, but the image keeps returning. Eyes can't be trusted. Then I feel as if I hear her: the scrape of the brushwood broom, the trickling of the garden hose, the tinkling when she sat on the toilet at night with the door open and we worried whether she would find her balance when she stood up and shuffled back to her bed half-asleep, cockroach shells crunching beneath her slippers, to which the human blood of crushed mosquitos stuck; in the late morning, the clatter of dishes, the hiss of the gas lighter, the creaking wickerwork of her old cane chair, the *katriga*, the pop of her pill-box and blister packs in the mornings, afternoons, and evenings, *Popila sam Apaurin!*, the hiss of the iron, the hiss of nitroglycerin spray, her coughing and wheezing, scratching at the burn marks on the tablecloth. I listen tensely, my breath shallow, but don't hear anything except a ghostly silence that wraps itself around my head like a cloth soaked in vinegar, drugging me quickly.

Sometimes Nada appears in a different form, as cigarette smoke that enters my nose and makes my eyes tear up. It rises behind white linen cloths, trembling on lines strung between olive trees, snow-white sails moved gently by the Mistral.

I search for Nada in everything. I want to find her. I stare, sniff, listen, wander through the rooms as if we are playing a dark game of hide-and-seek. I find her ancient brushwood broom and sweep every corner, every nook of the house, find traces of her ash in the cobwebs which she could no longer see, comb the fringes of the carpet, which Mother, as a child, in an attack of wild distress, had tried to cut off with scissors so she wouldn't have to keep them straight.

Under the chest of drawers opposite the mirror, I discover a mousetrap containing a small, grey, furry thing, which on closer inspection is a moldy piece of bait that Nada, blind in one eye, short-sighted in the other, must have placed under the spring-loaded bar years ago. A piece of lard, perhaps. I open the drawers and find nail files, rusty pincers and scissors, needles and thread, caked shoe polish, always applied so sparingly that it had become unusable, lipsticks in fiery colors, broken sticks of kohl eyeliner, dried-up mascara.

I tug on the knobs of the drawers, greedily breathe in the scent of tools, oil, and medicine, find a stack of paper—the same one from which I, as a child, would sneak a leaf to write on without having to show Nada what I'd written—and the ancient gauze compress with which I had once bound my growing breasts, half a pack of Ronhill Super Lights, Nada's pocket calendar, 1989, with phone numbers and addresses written in cursive on the first two pages, urgent care at the top, the other pages empty, her notebook with the sayings and quotes she had collected somewhere and then repeated to herself over and over, to impress them upon herself, to make life comprehensible: *A clever man learns from his mistakes; a wise man learns from the mistakes of others.*

At every moment, I expect her to appear behind me out of thin air, to creep up on me, take the notebook from my hand, slam the drawers shut, and ask what business I have here, just as she had done at every turn. From the top shelf, I take out the elixirs and healing potions she had amassed over the years in her blind belief in the wonders of pharmacology. Healing came from the fatherland. On each package of medication covered in German writing which Mother had brought her from Austria, Nada had written in her beautiful, spidery hand its use: *Protiv bolova—for pain, Za srce—for the heart, Za spavati—for sleep, Protiv straha—for fear.* And even if there was an herbal remedy for every ache and every fear, for everything except death—*Protiv umiranja*—the optimistic promises of the package inserts written in the murderers' tongue remained incomprehensible to her.

I discover several blister packs of Valium and remember how I once stole the tablets from Nada's white ostrich leather purse, the cigarettes too—for Hanin's sake.

The Bora had torn the leaves from the trees and scattered them across the garden path, where they remained for days. The piece of cardboard with the words *Room to let*, which Nada had affixed to the back garden gate last year, had been softened by rain and wind. No one bothered to remove the rest of the tape with which she had tacked up the cardboard sign to attract foreigners no one really wanted. I sweep the path to the *aleja*, pull every leaf out of the cracks between the flagstones, which have become loose. The beeping of her electronic blood pressure monitor sometimes mingles with the cries of the cicadas. We didn't get very far, Nada, in our quest for a brief escape: just to the garden—but at least we got that far!

In the potpourri of leaves, stones, and grass, I discover pomegranate seeds and olives, as well as stray screws, cigarette butts, plastic filters—*Imam cigaretsšpic!*—some of the ends still red and greasy with lipstick. *Will you cry for me, my child, will you be sad?*

The garden gnomes are sun-bleached, *hurt*, as Nada always said, each one too often toppled by the Bora and set upright again, by her, even the one who had his head severed by the fall. She simply placed the chipped, hollow head back on his shoulders. The little great-grandchildren were frightened of him at first. Then they grew used to him, just as one grows used to everything. A movement sensor was put into the garden gnome with the broken head. In the first year, it still whistled when someone approached the house, whistled through its demolished skull (no one thought to exchange the dead batteries).

The ugliness which she clung to, clings to still, and always will—dead or alive—is my most difficult inheritance. Now my own heart clings to it, shuts out the new. They are already bringing in new stuff—the children, Mother, Teta—practical things, they say: a hygrometer with an integrated thermometer, plastic chairs, and a tea cart made of white plastic—*tanti piccolli fa un grande*. The objects oppress me, the junk and bric-a-brac, the violent ascent of the new rulers, saplings eating at the remains of the rotten motherwood. They have gotten their hands on my refuge and extinguish, like ceremonial candle-snuffers, the smells, the sounds, the aftertaste. I can do nothing against this work of destruction, which they think is improvement. The words say everything: they say nothing. I am silent. It's their turn, not mine.

Some nights, Nada appears in my dreams, puts out her traps, scatters ant poison over the veranda. Ashes on the kilim, in the fringe of the carpet, in my nostrils, on my tongue.

On one of these afternoons, she calls me up. *Are you well?* What else! She immediately asks whether we are watering the garden, if we have guests, if everything is the same as ever and is fine. She'll ask about the fringe of the carpet now. I flinch. She doesn't ask. Maybe because she no longer relies on the fact that I will cleanse the truth of unpleasantness to protect her. Maybe because she has forgotten to broach the subject. Maybe because she doesn't give a shit. She asks whether I've been to the flea market. I don't ask which flea market she means, or what day. I carefully lay out every sentence so there is nothing to bump against, no sharp corners, so she will not notice her mistakes, not notice I've outgrown her. *We've padded all the corners of the house so you won't hurt yourself.*

She'd dyed her hair, she said, and was enjoying the summer days on the terrace, walking around her house in Zagreb every day—*oko mog svijeta*, around my world, as she said. And she *in heaven, sa neba*, would be proud of me one day, when I would turn ninety. When I was a child, long before I had lain on the cross with God, she tried to convince me that there was nothing up there but clouds and air. She had seen it with her own eyes from an airplane: no angels, no God, nothing. Perhaps, I had thought then, her heaven was not beautiful enough to hold God.

When the cold comes, it gets into her bones, and when the days grow shorter, fear comes. Maybe she will take a look at the Jewish nursing home that Teta recommended. *Nursing home*, I think. I have to swallow. I can't swallow.

I don't tell Nada that Mother and Teta use oil and teabags only once, that they bought a dishwasher, that they throw out yesterday's bread and cut the unwanted rinds off fresh bread for the grandchildren, who have never been hungry. I don't tell her that we leave the lights on, even when we go out for hours into the village: *lit up for a feast day!*

*Da baram kiša padne!* Nada, it rained, it rained buckets! Now, of all times! I step out onto the veranda, spew wild curses at the southerly wind. *Why now?* The silence dissipates. Something makes me forgive God and her. A starved cat appears. It gets frightened and ducks when it sees me, but then approaches, rubs its purring side against my leg, and I cry like a child.

Were you ever so close and dear to me as you are now, when you are gone?

*Go to the sea*, she says, perhaps as an excuse to end the phone call, *Idi na more*. She says it entirely without sadness, not like someone who will never see the sea again, hear it, breathe it in, but as if she'll be right there, and she says it just as joyfully as always, so that it sounds like a single word: *idinamore*, because going to the sea can only be one single, holy word, a call to embrace life—*idinamore*.

I follow her as I always do: I dash like a dog that's been let off its leash, wipe the day from my eyes, turn them inward, see us both at the beach, one heart and one soul, see us laughing and fighting and needling each other—two unyielding figures at odds, I somewhat more yielding than she. I see us inhaling smoke, expelling it angrily, see her lifting the newborn child from its cradle with sticky, floury fingers, *my child*, blond, blue-eyed, babbling in the murderer's tongue, whose name she loves because it doesn't belong to the fatherland: *Rahel*.

Coughing fits, spurts of laughter, quaking shoulders. The dry seaweed trembles in the wind, *lažina*, the old women say. It seems as though the beach is moving under the twitching of thousands of tiny creatures. Small crabs scurry to the sea as I approach. Waves creep up, spit salt and foam. I can hear its trembling, and think of the countless hours in which I walked beside her, see us hand in hand, marveling at wonders, stepping close and jumping away, and then? *Pay attention to your feet when you walk!* And then? Children's bare feet on hot sand: on tiptoes, balancing. And then? Her hand turns to ash because I squeeze it too hard.

I see wizened women in black stockings, pointing out Baba Roga's rock to their granddaughters. They are half-grown girls, arms crossed in front of their naked, budding chests, pale pink like the noses of newborn kittens. They count the days, not knowing that the matchmakers and the spoilsports will ruin the days of their bloom, whether they are faithful or beautiful, for all wishes will one day turn into sacrifices. In the evenings, the old women scrub stained sheets and plait thorns into their hair and tell the virgins to swim in the sea only when they are bleeding, so the sea god's sperm won't get in.

The girls catch dragonflies, fly paper kites, load up paper boats until they capsize, force their friend underwater until he no longer struggles, pull him onto shore, adorn him with shells. I bend over the drowned boy and see Hanin's face.

*Idinamore*, she said, and in farewell I pressed my lips against the phone, kissed her on her sweaty brow, inhaled the scent of her hair. It felt like old times, when she tiptoed away and I

pretended to sleep. Once again, a final farewell, because the angel of death must be spreading its wings out over her, though she is haggling for time and won't go quietly.

On the day before my departure, I go to the cemetery and observe the back and forth of ebb and flow, the sky reflected at my feet. Occasionally, something breaks the surface, snaps at food or air, and plunges below again before I can tell what it is. *If you dip even your little finger into the sea, you'll be joined to all the oceans of the world.* I stood here—holding Nada's hand, in the frightened dreams which faded with the first pale rays of light and turned into their opposite, for in the early morning hours, in which the air was still abundant, the fright had passed and the day unfolded like a peacock's fan. *Will you be sad, my child?*

Here, at the cemetery, we are together in a strange way. I kneel in front of Beppe's gravestone, stroking the little five-pointed star chiseled into the marble slab, Nada's guiding star, the star in a sky that couldn't even change the weather when we wished for rain.

I place a sprig of oleander on Teta Franka's tomb, and wipe away pine needles, dried wildflowers, and the hard, crackling remains of fire lilies and chrysanthemums from the rough tombstones, which have metal rings in them large as children's fists, inscribed with the chiseled names *Pjero, Frane, Lucija, Lodina*, as well as the name of the other cousin, the one with the beautiful eyes who bore an inbred bantling, and the names of the cut-throats and abortionists and even those black widows of yore, who had tried to outdo each other in their grief over the dead, jealous of the happiness of others, quick to put their fingers to their lips when someone made a joke so they would never be suspected of having fun or succumbing to a fancy, even though they would have liked nothing better than to spit on their husbands' graves, since the wearied heroes were good for nothing more than pulling out their wallets on payday and shielding the children from them every now and then.

When I was a child, I asked myself if I might manage to lift one of the slabs—and see what? Could a child be rotting in there, staring wide-eyed? Sometimes I put an ear to the stones to hear the whispers of dead children, to feel afraid, since fear was my ownmost feeling, my shelter, my refuge. Perhaps they stuffed up the mouths of the little ones with stones and dust so they couldn't complain about all the hands that had *slipped*, which were only a sign of love, just as everything happened in the name of love—*spare the rod, spoil the child*. A sign of love, even the Judas kiss of the mother, since sad mothers are the measure of all things—and sad as well those whose children were too small for a gravestone, the miscarriages and aborted fetuses, which they buried hastily under cover of darkness under the trees, or birthed into plastic bags and threw into the sea, with a heavy heart for their sons and a lighter one for their daughters. Woe to those mothers when the sea spit the sacks back on shore and the children were not allowed to open them, because what if there were kittens inside? These tiny children took on the voices of strays at night, and when the cats vanished in the dark, their cries turned into children's cries.

Sometimes I feel as if Nada's voice is joined with the tossing waves. *Don't stare at death like that! You'll never be able to forget it!* And then, when we walked back from the cemetery: *What's that look on your face?*

This land is no paradise to be regained. Perhaps it never was one. The abortionist, who never hurt a single fish, sits by the *Riva* in the evenings, making lace doilies and selling them to strangers. You can't see the blood on the crochet hook anymore—*Blessed be the fruit of your womb*. The children's summer camp is a refugee camp. The flowers on the graves curl in the heat and snake away. The cries of swallows cut through the burbling of the dripping air conditioners, which hang like growths on the façades.

This land can do nothing about the satellite dishes and brightly flapping laundry on the balconies, the ever-growing throngs of people in front of the churches, standing in line for confession, the empty or occupied houses of brothers turned foes—*Oče naš, otpusti nam duge naše!*—but those who curse their brothers won't reach heaven. It can do nothing about the new faces of those exiled from regions turned into war zones and hot spots, nothing about the checkered flag, nothing about the losers of the past war who have been brought into this new land and given positions and honors, nothing about the damage and destruction wrought upon the monuments for the war against fascism and the murdered victims, nothing about the new street names, which I don't want to translate, just as I've never wanted to translate anything, because terms are only valid in the places they originate, if they are valid at all. It can do nothing about the *Ulica Domovinskog rata*, which is not Nada's war, but the war of brothers that, instead of ruins, left behind new houses with corrugated fiber-cement roofs.

I don't greet people in the village and they don't greet me, but sometimes I stand next to complete strangers who look like me. Our land is an airship on fire, sinking in the sea. Only its shadow still glances off the water. There is no local time. There is no real time. Everything will be fine. When the time comes, Nada will return to this place. As ash, at least.

During my visit to the Jewish nursing home in Zagreb, I wheeled her through Maksimir Park, wedged a Ronhill Super Light between her flaccid lips, 0.4 mg nicotine, 4 mg tar, pushed her as close as possible to the large pond, pointed at the ducks, herons, and turtles teeming in it, *Look at them, look!*, was touched when she anxiously checked the brakes of her wheelchair, pushed her even closer to the water's edge, until she cried out and scolded me. Didn't you say you weren't afraid of death? Come on, show me you want to live!

I count the goodbyes. Last time, I'd already feared that her answer to my question about her health might worry me. I won't ask anymore. You didn't stick to the rules, Nada, you said you wanted to die. Twice now, I've said goodbye forever. The die was cast, but nothing happened.

*The border is gone*, I said.

Nada looked at me expectantly.

*Yes, we've united now. Somehow we're one big country. We're Europe. What do you think about that?*

*The border, yes*, she mumbled, and nodded.

In Maksimir Park, I handed Nada a package of sugar wafers. She crumbled them between her fingers. A flock of sparrows alighted beside us, and disappeared seconds later as a cloud into one of the hazel bushes. *The trees here are old*, I said. *You can tell*, she replied. I kissed the tips of her fingers. They smelled like smoke. Her fingers were still laden with rings, they'll have to bury them with her or pry them off with crowbars. As we noticed the distant grumbling of thunder, she began to sing—*Grmi sijeva, oluja se sprema, a ciganke varošanke još iz sela nema*. I found an empty snail shell, laid it on her lap, and she continued: *Pužu, mužu, vadi roge van, da ti kuću ne prodam staroj babi za duhan*.

I didn't mention that shortly before, I'd been to her house in Zagreb, which she will never see again. I didn't tell her about the smell of childhood that greeted me in the hallway like an old friend you embrace after a long absence and don't want to let go of. Time, frozen! Teta had moved the old Bösendorf grand piano against the wall, one of its legs all crooked, and taken the heavy, dusty pink velvet drapes to the cleaners. A massive, unframed mirror still hung on the hallway wall, my reflection growing ever taller. Pictures still stood on the piano, framed photographs in several rows: the children, the little cousins, my brother and I, the great-grandchildren, Rahel, Ivo, Ana, the in-laws at the El Shatt refugee camp.

I wanted to look at one of the pictures more closely, lifted the silver frame up from the Bösendorf, and noticed that something had fallen out of the frame and onto the floor: a black-and-white portrait of the Admiral which she had hidden behind a childhood photo of me, maybe to look at it secretly in moments of devotion or merely to know that he was there amidst all her other loved ones, between the small and large sculptures made by sculptors who were her friends, between the porcelain vases with the hairline cracks and the crystal ashtrays. *O partigiano, portami via!*

In the cabinet are the same old books, awards, insignias, and between them the clay figures I gave her as a child, which she loved just as much as her medals for bravery. They'll be thrown away, they're not even good enough for the flea market.

I sit down at the old Bösendorf, under which there are boxes now—*play, just play!*—find the first chord of the *Pathétique*. I've played it a thousand times and can't even finish the first bar. *Think how much we spent on piano lessons!*

I'm still the foolish child who shot up too fast, until I was as tall as the top of the mirror. Now the cabinet isn't at eye level anymore, but level with my chest. The drawers of the old German sideboard contain silver flatware, napkin holders, an ancient Easter egg. The bathroom is full of dried-up hotel soaps, which Teta Svetlana brought back from her spa visits in Abano and Montegrotto, here and there an old piece of candy, a tube of mascara with an Austrian supermarket price tag.

A small statue of the Virgin Mary now stands next to the General's bust, which is as big as a head of cabbage. *Would you like to take the bust with you?* she'd asked the last time I'd visited her at home and we'd sat, enveloped in heavy swaths of smoke, in the poorly heated salon over a glass of cordial—*I'm not cold. Ever!* Not since that winter in Bosnia. *I live in Carinthia*, I answered. She seemed to understand immediately and looked at the bust, as if she were quickly thinking of how we could manage it, little and frail but erect and stubborn with the ever-present look of a little girl on her face. *Ha!* she cried, as if the world belonged to us, and shrugged her shoulders. *Where would I put it?* I asked, sheepishly. But on the next day, I forgot it after all.

I won't tell Nada that when the times comes, I will remember those summer days on which she lay down to die, neither for the first time nor the last, and tried to calm my fears by imploring me not to be sad. No, she wasn't afraid of death, because as long she was alive, it wasn't there yet, and when it came, she wouldn't be there anymore. Don't be sad. She'd had a rich, long life, and death was something to laugh at. I bite my tongue for her sake, say nothing about the ripe figs and lemons for fear it could make her sad, stir up longing. I don't tell her the old almond tree has been cut down.

I threw the bougainvillea, which I had brought her from the island, into the garbage bins behind the nursing home.

No one waves, no one follows the car as it drives away ever more quickly, no one hands me a plastic bag with snacks for the road, no tears are shed, none of those things that make my throat clench up too soon. *Will you be sad, my child?* Should I be?

*Sretan put!* says the sign at the island's exit, *Have a nice trip!* The sea bubbles and foams behind the ferry, lights reflect on the horizon, twinkling like mica. At the *Pazar* in Split, I buy a few peaches for my onward journey and pass a stand with embroidered cushion covers. One says, *Call your mother—she worries.* Quickly, I take my cellphone out of my bag, dial Nada's number, and want only to hear that she's alive, forget that she's had some bad days lately, days so bad that even she, the *junakinja*, thought of giving up. But her spark of life is a hellish heat fanned by every breath, every drag from each cigarette. *Hoilalila-hoilala, umro miko hoilala*—I see myself staggering through the funeral home in a wild spin, at my wits' end. Smooth down the edges and corners in the house, so I won't run into them, the way I ran into your love!

I don't want to see you like this: bloodless ears, heavy tongue, hair that no one dyes blond for you anymore, so that you are startled every time I push your wheelchair past the mirror in the nursing home's long hallway. Nothing will save you this time, Nada, no trenches, no hiding-place. Not even Mother. *I told you, she'll come soon*—always and forever: *soon*. I'm afraid for you. Die, then it'll finally be over! Cough up your life, spit it out! You haven't missed a thing. Except for Rome, perhaps. My God, Rome! I break the broom into bits, fall to my knees, bite off the carpet fringe, spit it out before your feet, crush the flowers in the garden, throw the rolling pin sticky with potato dough against the mirror so that it shatters into a thousand pieces, roll the kilim into a cigar and light the fat end. The flames eat through its weave until it crumbles into ash. *Hoilalila-hoilala!*

Nada picks up. I shout, *It's me, it's me.* I shout louder. Passers-by look at me, shake their heads. Everyone can hear me except Nada. Then, on my second attempt, a young woman's voice answers: *The person you have dialed is currently unavailable. Please try your call again later.* Later? For us, there is no later!

Recently, she stopped smoking. From one day to the next, as if she had simply forgotten. And who knows, perhaps she'll forget to die as well, and be forever content to exist in a twilight realm. She's shrunk, as if she wanted to expunge herself from the world, as if she didn't want to leave us her

mortal remains, as if she wanted to dissolve into the void—become the long ash at the end of a cigarette, which rolls first over the veranda, blown by the Bora, and then scatters in all directions, while laughing, of course—what else?

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***Das Gift der Biene* (“The Poison of the Bees”)**

**By Isabel Fargo Cole**

**Edition Nautilus, 2019**

**Rights: Katharina Picandet, lektorat[at]edition-nautilus[dot]de**

*Summary*

Can East Berlin in the mid-1990s be the only place where history isn’t over? Christina, a recent college graduate from New York City, seems to believe so. While studying at Humboldt University she meets free-spirited Meta, who runs a “salon” in an otherwise abandoned building behind an old tenement. Young squatters occupied the complex in the final years of the GDR; now the front building has been renovated, and the former squatters have moved back in with subsidized leases. The tight-knit community strikes Christina as a veritable socialist utopia, and she finds the omnipresent past fascinating yet baffling. A film project takes Meta to Israel, and then a stranger moves in upstairs—the young, gifted, shy painter Vera Grünberg. Meta returns and manages to coax Vera out of her shell, but her interest in Vera is also tied to her new obsession: the late Rabbi Grynberg, a reputed miracle worker Meta learned of while in Jerusalem, who supposedly lived in this very building before the war. During renovations, water begins to seep out of a wall in the salon, producing mysterious visions and inspiring Meta’s new art installation: a room of honeycomb walls, built in a collective act of beekeeping. But as the utopia begins to deteriorate and Vera withdraws into her own world, it becomes clear that neither history nor the miracles are over yet.

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*Excerpt translated by Isabel Fargo Cole*

Meanwhile the semester had started. The vaulted corridors resounded; I stood in line, sat on the floor of packed lecture halls, vanished in the crowd. The main campus on Unter den Linden was as intimidating as a ministry. But who or what presided here? The Brothers Grimm or Humboldt, or Karl Marx, whose words gleamed in gold on the foyer’s grand staircase?

*The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.*

No one would tell me how the system worked, what courses were required or how to earn credits. Now that I wanted Prussian discipline, it was nowhere to be seen. The students disappointed me. In class they were passive, guarded, taking notes but holding back. In the seminar on *Berlin Alexanderplatz* no one bothered to read the book, so I tossed it aside half-finished. Back home the prof would have kicked us out! I thought. I couldn’t find an opening for my theories on utopia. Everyone seemed preoccupied with other things entirely. Cafeteria gossip—indignant or gleeful—about professors who’d been fired, demoted, replaced by West Germans. A general sense of upheaval. When class was over all the others hurried off as if they had places to go—real apartments,

real jobs, or the train station for a quick trip to the seaside. I wished I could follow, find out what their real lives were.

I never would have thought I'd end up following Meta. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, before our seminar on *Berlin's Jewish Intellectual History*, I'd see her sitting with the Goths under the chestnut trees in the courtyard. She was the only one who didn't look like a child playing dress-up. Her black clothes were well cut and she had no piercings whatsoever. I liked that—I was too much of a coward to get any myself. Her long hair, dyed black, made her seem even paler and thinner than she was, and a good deal younger than me. She radiated energy, her sweeping gestures seemed to hurl it out over the others. The first time I saw her sitting there, I stopped a safe distance away, as though the group, under her spell, were about to launch on some adventure, even whirl off into the sky. But a moment later they scattered like billiard balls struck by the cue ball, Meta, who glided ahead of me into the classroom.

In our seminar she offered ideas on everything, impetuous questions that left everyone stumped. It got on their nerves: *She likes hearing herself talk*. But I felt that Meta wanted *them* to talk just as heatedly—then someone at least might make the breakthrough we needed. But no one accepted her challenge; her enthusiasm embarrassed them. They snubbed her like a gifted child. She'd swallow the disappointment and stride off afterwards with her anklets jangling. When I finally got up the nerve to disagree with her in class, she grinned at me.

She volunteered for the oral report on Jewish mysticism, I followed suit, and the professor let us prepare it together.

"Do you have the Kabbalah, by any chance?" she asked me. I wasn't even sure quite what the Kabbalah was. I couldn't ask Ethan; I still owed him an e-mail. "I bet my neighbor has it. Are you free now, want to come along? It's right nearby."

This was the way I walked home from Mitte to Prenzlauer Berg, along the elevated tracks, across Museum Island and Hackescher Markt, with its faded mural for socialism's defunct Museum of German History: a woodcut peasant from the Peasants' War, waving a flag that said *Freedom*. Whenever I saw him, I wanted to follow him into battle.

"To be honest," Meta said, "I don't have much use for religion. My mother always dragged me to church, and I hated it. Oh, sorry, you're an *Ami*, aren't you? You're all so..."

"I was raised as an atheist. I'm from New York. When I was a kid I was afraid to go into churches. My parents like churches for the architecture. But I always felt like we couldn't go in. Because people in church think atheists go to hell. I thought we'd go to hell if we went inside a church. But I like going in churches now, and maybe that's why."

"In East Germany we had it the other way around. If you went to church, you went to socialist hell."

She asked how long I'd been here, how old I was, what my plans were. As for her: since 1988; twenty-eight; wanted to *do something with art*, was looking for inspiration. "This summer I'm going to Israel for six months, one of those things that just came up, totally by chance. I've never taken that long a trip, I've never been on a plane, I've never thought about Judaism, it's a whole new world for me, and now the mysticism, *art as golem*, there's an idea—or spirits, ghosts, death could be the

medium....” What does she know about death? I wondered. “...The material is the artist’s medium, but the artist is the ‘medium’ of the material...”

Twenty-eight, she was twenty-eight already. The age I’d be at the turn of the millennium. So would I still be young then, as young as she seemed? Her grey-blue eyes protruded, as though they’d outgrown her face. She had a little girl’s skin, every shadow like a bruise. But her hands were rawboned, chapped and red, as if she knew what real work was.

I knew this empty lot along Rosenthaler Strasse, I knew the row of grey buildings behind it, where one stood out, butter-yellow. When you walked on, the yellow house would slip behind a derelict back building where a footpath led, winding through the weeds. Now I followed Meta along the footpath. The yellow house loomed immaculate and glowing like a computer simulation. Its terracotta patio jutted into the wasteland. Just off the patio, in the tall grass in front of the back building, stood chairs and a table: cups with coffee dregs, the wooden cutting boards Germans eat their breakfast from, half a loaf of bread. The door to the ruin was open.

“Is it really okay to go in?” I asked.

“All property belongs to the people,” said Meta. “Besides, I live here.”

It looked just like my favorite bar: worn floorboards, tattered Turkish carpets, wallpaper hanging in shreds, family photos bought at a flea market, treadle sewing machines for tables, a tile heating stove like an ornate white skyscraper. Behind a massive wood counter, mirrors and bottles caught the light.

The yellow house and the back building had stood vacant for years; the squatters moved in shortly before the Berlin Wall fell, Meta told me after making espresso and taking it back outside. She’d moved her jewelry workshop into the ground floor of the ramshackle back building, where none of the other squatters ever stayed for long. The yellow house had just been renovated, but the back building, its ownership unclear, had been spared. During the year-long renovation the former squatters, housed elsewhere in the meantime, congregated in Meta’s salon, watching the façade of the front building be replastered and painted yellow. The tile stoves were torn out and the tiny flats merged to make larger ones. In January they’d all moved back in with socially subsidized leases. They’d gotten soft—they’d never dream of squatting the back building now. Meta was left holding down the fort with her salon. No, it wasn’t what it used to be, but anyway it was a real community. When people wanted a drink, they came to her, when they wanted a book, they went to the Wolf. Well, she’d just run up and ask him about the Kabbalah and so on—and she vanished into the yellow house.

She was gone for a good fifteen minutes, waving at me once from the second floor, where strange music came faintly out the window. Were there people besides me who listened to Gesualdo? Swallows wheeled over the wasteland, and the smell of lilacs, the sound of hammering and sawing drifted up from the horizon. The squatters had been... what was the opposite of *expropriated*? With their communal breakfasts they’d earned the right to the house. *This* was utopia, small and habitable. A door slammed, steps clattered, Meta appeared with a book and a power drill.

“I always thought the Kabbalah was a book. But actually it’s lots of books. Wolfgang only has *The Book of Splendor*. Why don’t you take it? I can’t read it this weekend anyway. Be sure not to bend the spine. Okay, I have to kick you out now.”

I gave her my phone number, and she gave me Wolfgang’s, because she didn’t have a phone. At her front door she hugged me goodbye. That was a thing the Germans did, just a gesture, I’d always thought, like a handshake. But her hug seemed to snatch me up, whirl me around and set me down somewhere else entirely. I walked out through the stairwell of the yellow house and around the corner to the streetcar stop where I’d waited many times before. But this time I was sober.

The telephone rang as I unlocked the door to my apartment share.

“I always think of things too late. Want to come camping with us? Tomorrow night at 11 at my place. Do you have the address? C...strasse 24.”

The name of the street doesn’t matter. You could say it no longer exists, you could say it never existed at all.

I was so excited, I could hardly sleep. But when I woke up, exhausted, the invitation seemed like an onerous duty. I took the streetcar to Mitte that night, but with a hankering, the strongest in a long time, for *my* Mitte, for wine, for a walk in the rain, for the streetcar ride home and the return to my desk. When I got out, the rain was coming down hard. The front door of the yellow house stood ajar in the draft. If it hadn’t been open, I would have gone on walking. I was supposed to ring Wolfgang’s doorbell, and I’d never met him before.

This is what secret Spartakist meetings in the 1920s must have looked like, I thought as I peered through the salon window: candlelight, Meta in a leather jacket gesticulating to a shadowy group. She poured me a tea. Did I have a sleeping bag? I was completely unprepared.

A mutter from the corner, a dialect I’d never heard: “She can take mine, I’m not coming anyway.” That was the Wolf. They were trying to talk him into coming, but he was putting up a fight—all this fuss for one night’s camping, it was raining, and he wanted to go to the flea market tomorrow. He ducked his grizzled head warily.

We set out just before midnight to catch the first train with the special weekend fares, and by then the sky was clear: it would be the first fine spring weekend. Wolfgang, still undecided, walked with us to Alexanderplatz, and then didn’t feel like walking home alone. So he came after all. On the train, I asked Meta where we were going. I didn’t understand the answer.

“Poland,” she explained. By sheer chance I had my passport on me. Wolfgang insisted that if we were going to go to Poland, it had to be—another name I didn’t understand—that place where the forest was, he’d seen it on TV, Europe’s last primeval forest. Otherwise there was no point in going to Poland.

The others smoked and let him talk. They were endlessly indulgent. They didn’t know I hadn’t slept, never did sleep, couldn’t stand cigarette smoke, wasn’t human without coffee in the morning, I was a monster and the problem was mine—no one knew, so maybe it wasn’t true. I had the *Book of Splendor* in my backpack. Meta lay with her head in the lap of the Russian who played the violin in the

underpass at the Friedrichstrasse. His name was Volodya, and he'd been the first violinist of the Irkutsk Symphony. I had given him money once.

Wolfgang sat across from me. He had the face of a young man. He opened a tin of herring and handed it to me, and I ate as if I ate herring every day. When they passed around the vodka, I took a swallow and leaned back in the corner. The door between the cars was open, the night wind blew in, the summer with schnapps on its breath.



I never slept in the apartment share again. My American roommates gave shrugs of disapproval. *He could be a murderer for all you know.* Meta helped carry my two bags up the stairs of the yellow house. Had she meant to hook us up? After all, who'd gone on the camping trip? Three couples, two sisters, and us two. And there'd only been the one sleeping bag. But Meta seemed taken aback. Wolfgang was a wonderful person, she said—we were sitting in the back yard, waiting for him to find the bottle of Saxon wine he'd been saving for a special occasion ever since the time of socialism—but he had his little quirks. If I ever felt like climbing the walls, I could always come over to her place. In July she was going to Israel for six months, so as far as she was concerned, I could move into the salon and keep an eye on things. Anyway, she really hoped I'd stay that long.

He was back, grinning crookedly. "Let's drink to that."

The Wolf, short and wiry, with shaggy grey hair, cooped up in a hoarder's home. Profession: private librarian. Employer: Self. Why look for a job? *The future is a thing of the past.* Anyway—if he could start all over again, he'd want to be a cabinetmaker, work with his hands. No university, no Library Science, no Medieval Studies, no ten semesters without ever making the interim exams. Above all, no buying books: in East-times every West-book, in West-times every East-book that fell into his hands. No stacking books so prodigiously that his rooms turned into landscapes: Wolf Peaks, Wolf Ravines. Instead of bookshelves he would have built a house.

So far he'd "finished" one room, the big one facing the street, had lined its walls with shelves of books two or three deep. No bookstacks on the floor here, just his workbench and tools, and a jumble of furniture that he'd taken apart and put back together differently. *All this is yours now*—like something in a fairytale. It left me speechless, the chaos, no, the system. Everything had its place: the preserving jars used as bookends, filled to the brim with watch gears and dials, the animal skulls on the windowsills, the cacti potted in antique typewriters. And me. Wolfgang kept the two small rooms in the back: before the remodeling, that had been the whole apartment, with a hotplate for a kitchen and a toilet on the landing, that his ex-girlfriend Claudia had squatted in 1988. He had come from Dresden to join her. Before that he'd never have dreamed of moving into a ruin—if a building wasn't being lived in, he figured the state had to have its reasons. Claudia made him question those reasons. But just a year later she'd left him for a woman.

"Poor Claudia, the woman was just as bad as me. Maybe if we'd had more space... it's important for you to have your own room. I'll move my workshop into the basement. But the books have to stay."

That was fine with me. Five years in dorm rooms and apartment shares with nothing but a computer, a lamp, three posters—and now a mosaic of book spines and pictures, fitted close as if a

gap would make everything implode. Like my childhood room in New York. The pictures—Cranach, Schiele, Klee—could have hung in my room. But then there were the photos: the Saxon farmers, the grandfather in uniform who hadn't come home from the war, Wolfgang's fatherless father in the hand-carved wooden shoes of the war's aftermath. And the Wolf, just as black-and-white, a ghost. Like me, he'd been an ugly, sulky child. But his gauche 1970s were already faded.

Scattered among the family photos were snapshots of the squatters and their visitors, with Mohawks or mullets, dark lipstick and kohl around their eyes, fishnet stockings and torn jeans showing bony knees or childishly plump ones, lounging against crumbling walls or in graffiti-covered stairwells, pictures like record covers of underground bands I wished I was cool enough to appreciate.

Now they lived in the two immaculate yellow wings of the renovated building. The stairwell, still smelling of fresh paint, hinged the front building to the right-hand wing that jutted back into the empty lot. On the left, past the patio and the linden tree, the ramshackle back building stood surrounded by tall grass like an otherworldly image of *Before*. We lived in the front building, below us Dora with her little dressmaking shop; above us Eva and Bruno, unemployed Russian teachers who'd just moved in; and on the top floor the twins Susi and Michi, who studied sociology and biochemistry and went dancing. Next door, in the side wing, was Holger, who sold junk. Downstairs from Holger was the workshop of Bielagk, the frame maker, upstairs was Thorsten, who had studied informatics with Holger, and above Thorsten was his mother Karla, who'd once been an actress and now grew orchids.

As we sat under the linden with the Saxon wine my first evening, they walked past one by one, eyeing me, and vanished in the back building. Wolfgang and Meta exchanged nods and I followed them into the salon. The babble of voices embraced me like their reminiscences had by the campfire in Poland: Meta's life as a punk, Thorsten's black-market deals with West German records, Eva's and Bruno's hitchhiking trip through Siberia. Well, they said, at least the whole fiasco had given them some good stories. The *fiasco*—they meant the fall of the Wall, the fiasco they meant was *freedom*. I'd listened in shock, sitting by the campfire: Was nothing sacred to these people? But Wolfgang had started griping: *Just you wait, pretty soon you'll be kowtowing to the System*. What does he mean? I'd wondered.

I just wanted to go on listening, but Wolfgang insisted on giving me a proper introduction. He threw me to the lions, and Meta sat by and watched.

"This is Christina. She comes from *Ami-land*."

So they had my number right away: *I was the System*.

Ever since seventh grade I'd been saying *democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others*. I'd never dreamed this cynical attitude could still leave me open to attack. But suddenly I was under fire from all sides. Meta watched, smiling, to see how I'd hold up. The last defenders of the socialist German Republic seemed to be barricaded in this ruin. I had to convince them to surrender, or at least bring them the news that the war had ended years ago. Faced with their fierce resistance, I put up an unconditional defense of democracy. It *had* triumphed, after all.

But for them the triumph of democracy was the proof of its inferiority. *Back then* they'd rejected socialism, but they'd changed their minds in the meantime: it had failed like all things too

good for this world. And democracy had prevailed like all things cheap and vulgar. Wolfgang, though, allowed that democracy might redeem itself by failing too. Yes, its downfall was imminent, you could almost start feeling nostalgic.

I got up and left so they wouldn't see me crying. Ten minutes later Meta rang the doorbell. They were worried about me. And Wolfgang had turned around and started defending me.

"No I didn't—" he burst in after her, "—all I said was, the Amis will come out on top, just wait and see!"

We drank a round of schnapps that gave me a coughing fit. "Don't worry, you'll get the hang of it," they said, pounding me awkwardly on the back.

Wolfgang showed me photos, whole albums and boxes of them, a full briefing on the twenty-nine years of his life. Kindergarten, Young Pioneers, *Jugendweihe* (a sort of socialist communion), elite high school. And all of a sudden: the Wolf in uniform, under a banner with the word *Grenzausbildungsregiment*—Border Training Regiment.

"In Berlin?"

"No, on the Green Frontier, in the Harz Mountains."

"I never would have recognized you."

"I gained twenty pounds in the army." He lapsed into a mumble, a barricade of dialect. That was his way of being honest. "I was a nervous wreck, spent all my free time hanging around the kitchen—at least you could eat all you wanted."

In the photo he looked as if he'd burst with zeal. Like a schoolboy called onstage to get a medal, believing for one moment that all the kids who'd always mocked him would suddenly admire him.

The same year he'd been sent to the border, I'd been in Berlin, peering into the windows of the guard towers. What was it I'd needed to know, a few years later, when I tried to write a story about a border guard? For example, how did they choose you for the border? Wolfgang didn't know himself. All he knew was, if he'd refused they wouldn't have let him study—but he'd never even thought of refusing. For him, the Wall was the *Anti-Fascist Protective Barrier*. The unease set in once he was there, once he met Kuno, who opened his eyes almost wordlessly to the power structures, the empty slogans, coercion for coercion's sake. The senselessness of their mission: if it was true that they were there to block the imperialist NATO invasion, then all they were was cannon fodder—they'd be crushed in an instant. But nothing had ever *happened* in that year and a half he'd spent at the border—only once at the very end he'd had a... bad moment when everything... got confused, or maybe it was just a funny feeling. Someday he'd try to describe it for me.

In my mind I took down everything he said. But it was as if I couldn't see his face, as if someone on TV were confessing off-camera. I smiled more and more understandingly, the person sent to obtain his confession. I put my shoes on.

"Where are you going?"

"I have a lecture."

I didn't hear a word of the lecture. I kept seeing Wolfgang as a shadow in a guard tower. Be careful what you wish for, I told myself. I'd blundered into another trap. Did I really need to know all this, was it any of my business? After the lecture I walked home wondering how to tell Wolfgang that I was sorry but *we had no future together*. He was asleep on the couch: grizzled head, youthful chest, childish feet. He'd shed twenty pounds, and what else? I had to shake him awake.

"I thought you weren't coming back."

"No."

"I had a bad dream. I always have bad dreams on the couch."

He was drenched in sweat. I flinched at the smell, as if his fear might infect me, then checked myself. "Poor Wolf."

He relaxed when I covered his eyes with my hand.

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***Die Fragwürdigen* (“The Questionable Ones”)**

**by Judith Keller**

**Der gesunde Menschenversand, 2017**

**Rights: Matthias Burki, info[at]menschenversand[dot]ch**

*Summary*

Full of quirky humor and wry insight, Judith Keller’s micro-fictions unravel the fabric of daily life. Keller delves into the aporia of language by taking idiomatic expressions literally, unpacking the multiple meanings of words, and confounding expectations. Her characters are hapless and far-fetched, trying to find their footing on shifting ground and grateful for what happiness they can find. In just a sentence or two, Keller unlocks metaphysical trapdoors.

Seven Zurich tram stops provide the framework for these familiar yet absurd portraits of passersby, fellow passengers on the tram, the unemployed and the overemployed, the innocent and the suspicious, young mothers and confused elderly.

***Casting***

*A police car drives slowly along the streetcar tracks in front of the central station. The officers scrutinize the waiting pedestrians through the window. Most of those waiting here are out of the question. But there are some who do come into question. These are the questionable ones.*

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*Excerpt translated by Tess Lewis*

***BUHEGGPLATZ***

**Art**

Patrick is an art student. On one of his pictures is written: *I love my parents*. Everyone thinks this is funny. But Patrick is serious.

**Literature**

The boy came in and sat at the table. It was his favorite dinner, but he didn’t say a word. After sticking a French fry into his mouth, he suddenly burst into tears. When his mother stroked his head, he buried his face in his arms and sobbed. His mother was not one to ask many questions, but we know that he was grieving for Winnetou, who had died on page 474.

## Five Women

Theodora doesn't want any children, yet she's always expecting. Augustine would like everyone to miss her. Gudrun is always getting into something. Claire is always said to be on her way. Veronique is a very promising woman. However, she doesn't know what her promise is. Not keeping something—that's what she's always afraid of.

## The Brothers' Visits

Once a year, one brother would visit the other. They both looked forward to it. When the brother was there, the two were annoyed that they could never think of anything to talk about. After three days, the brother would leave again. He would always write about a month later of how pleasant their time together had been. Until the next visit, they both believed the time spent together had been pleasant. Then, for three days, they no longer believed it. Afterwards, they'd believe it again for almost an entire year. Only three days a year were they sure they didn't like each other.

## A Moral Tale

With regard to Mrs. Ochsenbein, she is currently on vacation near a lake in which mountains are mirrored. Mrs. Ochsenbein has come up with a new variation on encountering burglars. This is her new method: At home, there are three wallets on her kitchen table. Two are empty. In the third, there are a few twenty-rappen coins. The three envelopes surround a note which says: *Burglar, this is all I have. The rest is in the bank.* And when Mrs. Ochsenbein explains her method to the other hotel guests, she slyly adds that of course there are a few hundred francs in the apartment, namely, between pages 306 and 307 of *Green Henry*. At this the other guests nod just as slyly. When Mrs. Ochsenbein returns home from vacation two weeks later, she finds the lock on her door has been broken. Yet the apartment is neat and the bills are still in *Green Henry*. The note is on the kitchen table. Under her lines, an unfamiliar hand has written: *Fair enough.* Since then Mrs. Ochsenbein has been tormented by a guilty conscience and as far as slyness goes, she has given it up completely.

## Relationship

A man wishes that the woman he's with would knock him out. Because she won't, he can only appreciate her. The fact that he can only appreciate her and that she won't knock him out fills him with a complicated sense of guilt he tries to put into words on long Sunday afternoons. She, however, would much rather be appreciated by him than knock him out. They aren't quite on the same wavelength.

## Freddy or Maximilian

A man named Freddy or Maximilian always took views that those around him at any given time did not share. He wasn't sure if the views he took were sound, but with his eloquence, he could convince everyone. While he wasn't sure if his views were sound, those around him suddenly were. He would

then let himself be convinced by them. But what others said never completely convinced him. As a result, he was never convinced of himself either.

### **The Son-in-law**

The family of the newly married bride expects their son-in-law to behave as the family members expect him to. But he wants to behave in ways they don't expect in order to train his in-laws not to expect anything of him. He does this because he doesn't want to disappoint his in-laws under any circumstances.

### **In Principle**

Ferdinand only meets women who, in principle, want him.

### **Xavier**

Xavier always falls in love with women he doesn't like. He never notices this while he's in love. But he does see it afterwards.

### **Anticipation**

Muriel is one of those women others prefer to think back on than deal with directly in real time. Thus everyone is grateful for the memories they will have of her and so leave her with a certain sense of anticipation.

### **Trust**

She believes him when he tells her he's lying. He believes her when she tells him she's lying. That is enough.

### **Fidelity**

In being true to him, she's afraid she's not being true to herself. She doesn't know if she'd like to be true to herself. It's not clear to her to whom she should then be true.

### **Usefulness**

Instead of living with him, she now lives with her heartache. It's almost the same thing. When she could use him, he's not there.

### **Rüdiger**

Rüdiger has no idea what to do with himself. Anyone have a suggestion?

### **Geraldine**

Everything looks familiar to Geraldine. That's why she can't find her car.

### **High Time**

This afternoon, a far-fetched woman is crossing a vast, brightly shining gravel covered lot, at the far end of which tiny people are pottering about in flower beds. Behind them rises a gleaming housing development that looks like it landed there. The air is saturated with rain; the first drops have fallen and disappeared into the meadow. The heavy sky is blue and gray and it's as if the development were illuminating the sun, which shimmers far away in the sky like a silver fish. The development gleams silvery dark green in front of the forest and it swallows all sounds, even those of the children who are carrying heavy shopping bags home to their apartments, past the ducks swimming wildly back and forth in the elevated decorative fountain. Behind it, there it stands—the distribution substation, just before the forest. She has been waiting until it's high time for a good while now.

## ***SCHWERT***

### **Memory**

Sometimes she thinks she sees him from a distance. She almost follows him. But then she remembers: he is already much farther away.

### **Missing**

She misses him. She can't do anything about it. But he is missed. Although there's nothing she can do, he can be missed. But she has to be there, because he can only be missed if she's there. She's there so he can be missed. It's the only thing left he can do.

### **Time**

After he died, she felt that his time could no longer run out. Now it still counted.

### **Assignment**

Mrs. Vogelsanger was not happy when a lovely word occurred to her. Then it occurred to her that there were lovely words. In the last few years she had become smaller and had withdrawn into a small part of her body. When she walked, she seemed to lose ground, that is, to go backwards, even though she was going forwards. She recently received an assignment in the middle of the night. She got out of bed, put her clothes on, and slowly limped downstairs. She greeted the surprised cleaning lady, opened the heavy door, and—the sky was still almost completely dark—went to the train

station. "Tonight, I fulfilled an assignment," she said to a trembling woman sitting in the restaurant and waiting. She positioned her sentences so they were clearly visible in the air and looked up at them from below, always speaking rather triumphantly. She tensely searched her listeners' reactions for the meaning her sentences acquired. "Following the instructions, I took the train," she said and waited to see how the expression on the shivering woman's face would change with this information. "You only dreamed of the assignment," a thin voice said. It was the voice of another woman also sitting in the restaurant, who had sharp ears. Mrs. Vogelsanger became dejected. She slowly made her way back to her room, supporting herself on the wall the entire way. Exhausted, she sat on the edge of her bed. When she took off her wool jacket, she noticed the ticket that proved she had taken the train at five thirty that morning. She wanted to keep the ticket and laid it carefully in the waste basket.

### **Mrs. Sägisser**

Mrs. Sägisser wants to set out to help her parents make hay. She rushes in the good weather. The sliding doors open. Cars drive slowly past. A younger woman, who looks familiar, stands next to her and asks, "Wouldn't it be nicer if you visited your parents tomorrow?" Behind the cars is the church and behind it is the hill on which her parents live and between the hill and the church is the cemetery where her parents lie. Mrs. Sägisser shrinks back, the sliding doors open behind her, she steps into the elevator, enters a room, Mrs. Züger lies in bed, asleep; in her sleep her mouth has shifted—a crevice in the middle of her face—she snores, the television is on, the church bells ring, the heat, the hay, the hill, the hay, what's with the hay, Mrs. Sägisser gropes her way to her room, looks out the window, the weather is beautiful, relief spreads through her, she no longer knows why.

### **High Time**

Tonight, a far-fetched woman is walking through the city. The air is warm and saturated with rain and in the direction from which the evening sun had earlier thrown a sharp rectangle onto the houses, she senses someone looking at her. Empty tramcars with open doors stand, unlit, at the stations. The drivers stand next to trams, talking at them as they smoke. People in sombreros are also waiting and gradually the night mosquitoes arrive. Dark water streams from the ground and a truck crosses the bridge. Before long the far-fetched woman passes single family houses, catalpas and their scent. She feels she's being watched by a glowing pink head, sticking out from under the room's heavy curtains, which is also a lamp gazing out into the night. The terrain is stepped with trees and garbage bins, mosquitos and flowers. As she walks down a long street, she sees on a staircase below her a fox that stops when she does. Behind it stretches the valley, filled with shimmering lights. When she turns away, so does the fox, or, when the fox turns away, so does she. She doesn't look back, walks past the bundles of cardboard boxes, through the thick undergrowth, and leaves the rain-covered plates and the glass take-away table they're lying on and follows the arrows. At Schwert Station, she stops. It's drizzling and there are night mosquitos. She drinks white wine and eats braided bread. She listens. She has been waiting until it's high time for a good while now.

## **MICAFIL**

### **Paragraphs**

Last night the paragraphs appeared in her room again. They advanced through the darkness, stood at the side of her bed for a long time, letting their gaze rest on her. Their feathers rustled in a draft of air. She sat up and opened the window. "Off with you," she said, and a fluttering motion spread through the paragraphs. Indistinctly they left the badly heated room and entered the forest. The next morning, once again, there was no letter in the mailbox.

### **Casting**

A police car drives slowly along the streetcar tracks in front of the central station. The officers scrutinize the waiting pedestrians through the window. Most of those waiting here are out of the question. But some do come into question. These are the questionable ones.

### **Extraterrestrial**

It's not possible to cross this desert. It's not possible to climb this fence. It's not possible to cross this sea in a rubber boat. Those who saw him coming were blinded. From far away, he had shone like a never-before seen star. But when he reaches shore, he's one of the ones wearing a gold space blanket. The people on the beach can't believe he's still alive and greet him a bit incredulously, like an extraterrestrial. The farther away from the shore, the less they believe he was ever in danger, because if he really could have died, then he would have. It's not at all possible that he's still alive. And anyone who's not alive is impossible.

### **No Papers**

A few years ago, Esperance fled over the sea in a boat. She didn't drown, but now she lives underground.

### **War**

He declares war on them. They don't understand him. He declares war on them. They don't understand him. He tries one more time. They don't understand him. Because he can't explain it, he has to return to the war. There's no time to waste. There's only one seat left on the plane.

### **Cecilia and her Friends**

A group of unkempt people are sitting at the table. They're friends. It's already late. They can tell by the reflections in the window, in which one woman spots herself like a discarded sketch. They can tell by the feeling that their brains have shifted slightly because of the wine they'd started drinking when the half fir tree was still visible through window in the twilight. The tree's missing top left a clear view

of a window behind which first a woman ran past, then a man, as if they had to divide up the time. Maybe it was an argument, however not much could be heard.

The woman, who lives on the third floor where the friends are gathered around the table, sometimes notices that she lets a lot of things happen but nothing ever happens to her. Those who always want to come over have become her friends. Every evening they sit around the green metal garden table in her living room and talk. When a glass is put down on the table, it makes a banging sound. The woman these people gather around is called Cecilia. She welcomes her friends every evening with a friendly, desperate smile to which they've grown accustomed. There are breadcrumbs on the table, along with cheese rinds and the foamy ashes of many cigarettes; the friends bring something to eat every night. Anyone who looks into the others' faces at a late hour sees their features far away through the smoke. The friends turn their innermost parts outward and talk about their fears and what they've observed about themselves. They often speak in astonished tones. Every evening they empty several bottles of wine from the corner store; no one ever gets seriously drunk. To Cecilia, it all appears very far away and she watches herself and her friends like cyclists lost on meadow paths.

She's not sure she wants to hear everything her friends say. When not talking about themselves, they tend to analyze Cecilia and tell her how she is. They don't believe Cecilia is in a position to free herself on her own. Cecilia nods sweetly and pulls out a cigarette with her slender fingers. She encourages those who are speaking with approving nods because it's good to talk late into the night and to push further back those days on which night advances like the imperceptibly shifting fir trees at the forest's edge. Besides, everything she hears about herself seems clear to her. She now hears a languid voice saying that the speaker is afraid to walk past a group of people unless they have a few tired dogs with them. Cecilia nods because she would like to support everything that is expressed. What gets into a sentence seems comprehensible. Only later does she ask herself if she's the one who said the sentence, but it probably wasn't. Cecilia's friends enjoy her approval and that may be a reason they come. They always come as a group. If they came alone, they would feel trapped by Cecilia's shyness and would sit there mutely. When Cecilia talks about herself, she has the impression she's merely maintaining something, even when she tries to pull something out of herself so that afterwards it won't be there anymore.

She says in an astonished voice: "Before, a tree's beauty moved me to tears but now I seem to be dried out; nothing touches me anymore." Moreover, she always seems to be nodding. Her head sways slightly as if it were shakily trying to keep its balance on her neck. Some of the approval others have experienced from her could perhaps be attributed to this particular physical trait.

The door to the living room opens quietly and suddenly a little curly-haired person who can't sleep appears in the doorway. Confident she's not interrupting, she scampers over to Cecilia on thin, little legs. Cecilia is alarmed at the late hour and the clouds of smoke through which she notices her daughter only after some time. She feels ashamed because she senses her friends think she has no authority but is ruled by her daughter, just as she herself has always thought. She strokes her young daughter's head and tells her in a friendly voice to go back to bed. But the girl pulls on Cecilia's leg and pushes her cheek out with her tongue. Cecilia can see her friends looking askance. Cecilia summons all her courage and says, "I can also remember feeling as a child that having to sleep at night was a humiliation." The friends hear her high, helpless voice, which Cecilia also notices as soon

as she hears herself with her friends' ears. The friends are hoping the child will be considerate and recognize the barbarity of robbing her mother of this moment of freedom and intimacy. Does the child, with her large eyes, not see the tears of shame above her mother's friendly smile? The friends now intervene and start shooing the child away in Cecilia's stead. Once again, they've taken something out of Cecilia's hands. She is only just able to see it, before she understands again.

The process takes a long time. Many pedagogical pronouncements are made; the friends' voices harden until a thin, hairy man comes up from downstairs. He greets no one and resolutely picks up the small, now screaming daughter, and carries her to her bed in the dark room with glowing stars on the ceiling, which at night seem to be harboring rather pointed plans. He will tell her she must sleep and then he will leave the room. Cecilia will be stricken with embarrassment, which will bloom heatedly over her face. At the same time, she envies the thin man his power. In the living room, the mood has become strange. The friends are not fond of the thin man and for good reasons, which are now laid out on the table. They blame him for Cecilia's state. "Is there even a shred of pride in you?" she is asked. When he comes upstairs again to make himself a snack, one of the friends asks him why he's with Cecilia when he obviously looks down on her. The thin man with the long face says with a sneer that only people who haven't done anything with their lives ask questions like that. The question fills the early morning hours. Anyone listening closely is aware of the first birds and sees a branch on the fir tree sway. The friends discuss how Cecilia can be helped. Meanwhile, Cecilia studies her grimacing face in the wine and worries that her reflection has recognized her. The friends are certain that Cecilia must leave the thin man with the tattoos. Cecilia's mouth wears a friendly smile as she listens to them. She understands everything and, behind her lowered eyelids, collects all the fluid helplessness flowing inexorably into her.

Dawn has broken and the half fir tree is visible again. The friends are still there, but their sentences have grown sparse. The first heads are sinking onto the tabletop. Others stretch out on the sofa or directly on the floor. The friends are everywhere, breathing deeply. Cecilia stands still for a long time and listens. Then she steps quietly over the sleeping bodies and slips downstairs and out of the house. The early morning air greets Cecilia as if it had been waiting for her for a long time. She shivers, but nothing seems easier than to go, now, walking along the street with long steps, walking on and on, out of the city, past the gas station towards the wintery horizon that is rising like a bright line over the houses, it even turns slowly and clearly towards her so that now she is walking directly towards it, towards the horizon – and yet her legs have turned off into a side street and entered the first open bakery. Cecilia only wants to buy one roll, but her hoarse voice has conspired against her. She buys several.

## ***ELEKTROWATT***

### **Ambition**

She wanted to do things well, but she found she wasn't able to. "I accept the fact that I can't do everything well," she said, but still didn't accept it. She wrote a suicide note. In her opinion, it wasn't very good. She's still alive only thanks to her ambition – her suicide note was never good enough.

## **Regarding Animals**

“Regarding animals,” Gregor said, “I just want to say that after my dog charges cyclists, barking and baring his teeth, he lies on his back behind the hedge, laughing at the faces they make. Loud, clearly, and without restraint.”

## **The Universe**

She tries to get interested in something. But whenever she gets interested in something, she has to think of the universe.

## **GLATT**

### **A Bleak Beginning**

At this very moment, Marie develops—why will forever remain a bit of a mystery—an intense fear of dirt. Marie is in a train. She should get out at this stop but can’t bring herself to touch the button on the door. She stands motionless in front of the button. She’s not able to push the button at the next station either, nor at the one after. More stations pass, distant names on the station signs. Marie simply can’t touch the button. The train is empty. Marie travels from station to station. She can’t get out. Marie travels to the train depot. A kind train conductor frees her. Thirty trains are lined up next to each other as in an enormous stall. They are completely still. Marie looks at them for a long time as darkness falls. After many hours of waiting, her uncomprehending parents come and get her. Marie’s inability henceforth to explain her reaction to them has its bleak beginning here in the nightly train depot.

### **Albertine**

It’s said that Albertine feels very well supported in her relationship, at work, in her apartment. Without her ever having heard this said, the moments when she feels supported increase. Suddenly she looks down at the ground, far below her. Despite her efforts, she can’t reach it, she’s too light. She’s awake while sleeping. Sleep lies below her like a dark river. In the middle of the day, she has a fear of heights. It’s evident when you look at her. Someone lays a calming hand on her shoulder. She’s grateful. She is surrounded by good people, all at a loss.

### **Potential**

People say that Josephine remains far below her potential. Even she notices how she tilts back her head. There it is—my potential, she thinks looking up at the scaffolding that extends metallicity in all directions. Far below, Josephine can hear the wind shake it. She calls out, “My potential, come down, I’d like to stay with you a while, I’m with you, I’m part of you.”

### **The Announcement**

One evening, Mrs. Finsterwald prepares a special dinner. She has an announcement to make to her family. "I've got an announcement to make," she says, first looking down at her plate, then into her daughter's eyes, then into her son's eyes, and finally into the eyes of her husband. "We'll have to find a solution. I'm sure we can find one." She gives each of them a long look, her husband, her son, her daughter. Then she gets up from the table. "I knew we were a strong family." She leaves the dining room to give her long suppressed emotion free rein. She'd like to jump for joy. She has forgotten that she hasn't yet made her announcement. She'll remember soon; that's not a sight we'd like to see – quick, let's leave!

## **WALDGARTEN**

### **Max**

One summer Max felt the need to reinvent himself. He reinvented himself on a cruise ship. He reinvented himself exactly as he was before. But this time Max knew that he was the one who'd invented him. And everyone agreed that Max had finally found himself.

### **Nepomuk's Jealousy**

Nepomuk has the characteristic of always reminding others of someone they once knew and loved. They approach and hug him. This happens all over the world. He doesn't know who that person might be. But he's certain it's not him. A profound jealousy begins to rage inside him.

### **Beside Herself**

Melanie has a bad back. At night she is beside herself with pain. When she is beside herself with pain, she realizes that she's never beside herself. There's just her.

### **High Time**

Tonight, a far-fetched woman gets out at the underground tram station Waldgarten. A man wearing a uniform a size too large and carrying a flashlight gets in the elevator with her. Above is the warm night. A Dachshund waddles past, the forest rustles and sways back and forth behind the house like an enormous pelt. The houses are flagged for demolition. During the day, he fishes in the lake; at night he wanders through the tunnel. Every night at exactly 1:31 AM, when all the doors close, he sets off from Schwamendingerplatz. He always takes 35,000 steps but adds another hundred every night. The distance between the tram stops grows, the universe is expanding. He looks at his watch. "It's high time," he says and steps into the elevator. The door closes behind him.

## **SUCCULENT COLLECTION**

### **Hope**

You see him always holding out hope. With a view of the lake. He holds it with lots of ducks so that it's heavy. If it were light, he couldn't bear it. But it only gives him heft when he can bear it. It's the only heft he can hope for.

### **Long Life**

Jacqueline decides not to contact him anymore. The first day lasts an eternity, the second a week, the third a month, and the fourth an entire year. During this entire year, she doesn't hear from him. She assumes that after a year, it's alright to get in touch again and ask him how he's doing. She writes him and asks how he is and whether he'd like to meet at some point. "Why not?" he replies. When they meet, she notices that he has remained far back in time. He has missed an entire year. From this point on for Jacqueline many long years pass in a short time. So that she can lift off into the future again right away, she only wants to see him every four days. When her friends ask how she's doing, she tells them, "Somehow I've overtaken him."

### **Shy**

Amalia is familiar with the reproach that she's work-shy. But she clings to the fact that work is just as shy. Work comes to her tentatively or not at all, and even when it does come, it disappears again immediately.

### **High Time**

Tonight, a far-fetched woman is walking through the city. The wind blows scraps of paper and beer coasters her way. She leans forward like she's walking uphill. But she's walking along Bahnhofstrasse, towards the lake, around the metal garbage cans, around the ticket machines, always bent forwards and under the gaze of the store window mannequins. She passes groups of swarming bankers and teenagers, moving down the streets like stingrays. Above them the beer coasters rub against each other in whirls. A jangling covers the city and there are gleams where the streetcar tracks run. The gold lies far below, in uneasy dreams. The seagulls have come as have the foxes. Now rain sets in, dripping from the gulls and from the foxes' fur, and the grounds gleams, too, and the shadows follow right behind her. She marks those places on the houses that will fold when they fly. She walks past them, up the walls, always leaning slightly into the wind. A loud rustling and the beating of wings will sound. Soon the time will have come. She has been anticipating it being high time for a good while now.

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***Für Immer die Alpen* (“The Alps Are Forever”)**

**by Benjamin Quaderer**

**Luchterhand, 2020**

**Rights: Gesche Wendebourg, [gesche.wendebourg\[at\]randomhouse\[dot\]de](mailto:gesche.wendebourg@randomhouse.de)**

*Summary*

It's not easy being the number one enemy of the state. This is true even when the state is one of the smallest in the world: the Principality of Liechtenstein. Johann Kaiser—globetrotter, son of a photographer, and master of manipulation—lives under an assumed name in an unknown location. With the sale of stolen client data from a large bank, he's received so much money that he could live carefree for the rest of his days, if it weren't for his fellow Liechtensteiners libelously calling him a traitor. In an attempt to reclaim the power to chart his own course in life, Johann reaches for pen and paper. Benjamin Quaderer has written a daring debut novel about the power of money and the power of storytelling—the portrait of a swindler who reflects the society he betrays.

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*Excerpt translated by Elisabeth Lauffer*

My name was once Johann Kaiser. You've probably heard of me. I'm fifty-four years old, Aries, and currently living under an assumed identity at a location I can't disclose. It's for my own protection. Here's what I can tell you: there are clouds and trees here; there's grass and animals that eat the grass. We have running water and electricity, not to mention sunshine. People live in houses here. Houses with roofs and windows, balconies or porches. The average house has two floors, not including the basement, as this does not serve as living space, but instead as storage for food, photosensitive materials, and all manner of secrets. I, too, live in such a house. I sleep and shower and work here.

Aside from the chirping of birds and the sound a tree makes when seized by a gust of wind, things are quiet in the neighborhood. It's mostly families around here. The robotic lawn mowers that most households own are as remarkable for the precision with which they clip the grass as they are in their silence. When I prepare my breakfast every morning, they're already at it, trundling across the adjacent plots like electric moles. I like the discipline of their movement, the geometric forms they follow.

I boil an egg and toast two slices of bread that I coat with a thin layer of mustard and dress with cheese, tomato, and avocado. I arrange a glass of orange juice, a cup of coffee, my toast, and my iPad on a tray patterned with peaches and carry it out to the porch. I work my way through the daily papers as I eat. I read *Le Monde*, the *Guardian*, the *Sun*, the *New York Times*, *El País*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *BILD*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *BLICK*, *Tagesanzeiger*, *Liechtensteiner Volksblatt*, *Liechtensteiner Vaterland*, *Der Standard*, and on Thursdays, *DIE ZEIT*. I save PDFs of articles relating to my situation in a folder labeled “Me.” I load the dishwasher, adding my plate and silverware to the dirty dishes from the night before, fish a tablet of detergent from the box,

and select the appropriate setting. I usually go for the automatic wash cycle, and will occasionally opt for light wash, but never china/crystal. Glorious, the sound a dishwasher makes. I know to be careful not to grow accustomed to the things around me. Intense emotional attachment, whether to people or objects, leaves nothing but a void when it's gone.

I'm unable to reach any conclusions about the people who lived in this house before me. Someone went to great lengths to remove all sign of earlier tenants. There's no wear and tear on the furniture, the walls are freshly painted, and if the walls ever did have holes in them, they're so well spackled, I couldn't say where they might have been. There's a kitchen equipped with premium appliances where I do my cooking, a living room where I can sit and relax, a bathroom where I wash multiple times a day, a bedroom where I sleep and masturbate, a basement I don't use, and finally, a roomy space under the roof I've converted into an office. It's so quiet up there, the only sounds I hear are those I create myself: my breathing, paging through a book, sharpening a pencil and writing with it in a notebook, cutting paper, punching holes in those sheets and later filing them in a ring binder, typing on a keyboard.

Given my professional situation, I have felt compelled these past few years to change my whereabouts on a regular basis, most recently a few months ago. I was in a café, drinking the best espresso I've ever tasted, yet again re-reading *The Disappearance of Data*, by the criminal psychologist Dr. Jan Mayer, in which he depicts a fictionalized version of our encounter. In the book I'm called Marius Fritz. A woman in her mid-forties sat at the next table, paging through the local paper. For as long as I can remember, I've been intrigued by dubious characters, which is why the headline on the back page caught my eye. "Would You Trust This Man?" the newspaper editors asked their readers, but I couldn't see the photo, because the woman's hand was in the way. As I purchased a copy at the next newspaper stand, I had no way of knowing that that would be the last espresso I'd ever drink at this latitude. The man whose trustworthiness the newspaper called into question was me.

I was beside myself. I got in the camper and drove down endless roads until the sun had disappeared below the horizon. I finally stopped hours later in a grocery store parking lot and dialed the number I had been instructed to, should such need arise. My whole body was trembling. The contact's voice was quiet and cool. I imagined she wore a suit and sunglasses. There was something arrogant about her composure, a real know-it-all air that sent me over the edge.

"Is there nowhere I'm safe, goddammit?" I barked into the receiver.

I slammed my forehead against the steering wheel and cried. Everything came rushing back. The torture in Argentina, my escape across Europe, then the fabrications sown by those who aimed to brand me a traitor. There's simply no escaping, I thought in despair. Not from yourself, and certainly not from Hans-Adam II and his cronies.

Since moving into this house, I've become even more circumspect. I maintain an amicable yet distant relationship with my neighbors. They think I work in the so-called IT sector. I make sure to be seen regularly, but not too often. We wave over the hedges or engage in brief conversations. Otherwise, I rarely leave the house, and when I do, it's to swim laps at the pool, send documents from the post office, or run little errands. I buy fresh milk, bananas, and mint every day. Beyond that, I work.

The first half of the day I spend reading and preparing excerpts, then turn my full attention to the text following a light lunch. The diligence of the scientist and ambition of the writer are to blame for the fact that I spend so much time formulating pithy arguments intended to resonate with readers. The truer a sentence, the more beautiful it is.

Despite the constant danger I face and consequent urgency, I have made it my business to research and cite sources wherever possible. For you to understand why I acted as I did, I need to do more than simply provide a comprehensive picture of my character and personal history. I must also depict the circumstances under which I found myself flung to and fro, like a pinball. Because this story—my story—is all I have left in my defense against those who wish to see me dead.

Wishing you a pleasant yet stirring read,

Johann Kaiser

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### **Book One**

(1962–1971)

#### 0.

In September of 1962, Alfred Kaiser, a young amateur photographer from the Principality of Liechtenstein, was vacationing on the beach. In Badalona, a town just outside Barcelona, he bought a few cans of beer, parked himself on a wall along the boardwalk, and gazed out at the infinite blue blur on the horizon. Shrieking gulls circled overhead, and neon-colored swimsuits glowed in the sand before him. Accustomed as he was to the ubiquity of mountains that clearly delineate the landscape and demarcate where one thing ends and another begins, he came to realize that the sight of the sea frightened him. He finished his beer and escaped to a shadowy café, attracted by its dark blue awning. It smelled of stale smoke and deep fat fryer oil. A few Spaniards played pool as Alfred downed one shot after the other.

When he awoke the next morning, his head was pounding as if a road crew were at work inside it. Alfred was in a room that contained nothing but the mattress he lay upon. It was terribly drafty. First, he noticed that the walls were unfinished, then that the room had no windowpanes, and then that the view was breathtaking. What floor was he on? Alfred took a picture. Given the sound the camera made, he must have snapped an entire roll of film the previous night. After leaving the skeletal high-rise and having a little lunch, he looked for somewhere to get the photos developed. He then ambled through the streets, ate an ice cream here and there, and spent his evening watching TV in his hotel room.

A few days later, Alfred laid eyes on the best photographs he had ever taken. In the first two, young men assailed one another with broken pool cues. The following pictures showed an electric fan lying busted on a stone floor; a counter flecked with light; men in straw hats playing cards; lobsters crowding an aquarium; a flash of a dog sleeping soundly against an overturned paddle boat; and his own name, written in the sand. The remaining photos depicted a black-haired woman, whose age

Alfred struggled to guess. She could as easily be fifteen, or maybe nineteen, as twenty-five. She had delicate features and a slender, almost frail body, but her gaze was severe. In what Alfred considered the most accomplished of the photos, she stood in the glow of a streetlight, pulling her salmon-colored top—which contrasted gorgeously with her tanned skin—up over her navel. The photos led Alfred to two conclusions: first, he had to make a career of his hobby and become a professional photographer. Second, he had to find that woman.

Alfred was finally successful on the second-to-last day of his trip. The owner of a neighborhood ice cream shop knew that the photogenic woman worked at an indoor market near Badalona. He took the bus to the city limit, then walked until he reached a large building with people streaming in and out. He walked among the stands, on the lookout for her. Was that her? He carefully approached and examined the apricots on display, weighing one in his hand. He didn't notice his hand was sticky until the Spanish invective reached his ears. He hastily searched his pocket for coins to purchase the crushed fruit, but was grabbed by the shoulder and yanked around before he could locate his wallet. It was her! From the way she was talking, it seemed she remembered him. Alfred smiled. The woman slapped him. Her hand was very warm.

They didn't say a word on the ride to Badalona. When they reached the bus station, the woman gestured toward a bar located across the parking lot. They sat at a table in the corner, a man brought them beer, and as soon as one glass was empty, he placed another full one beside it. Why doesn't the waiter take the empty glasses with him? Alfred tried to ask his companion, but his Spanish wasn't good enough. He sat silently, she sat silently, four empty glasses, two full, then the woman laid her hand flat against her chest and said, "Soledad." "Alfred," Alfred said. Six empty glasses, then eight, and suddenly ten. Soledad stood and said, "Tú." Alfred looked at her uncomprehendingly. "Pagar," she said, and Alfred paid. There were no farewells that night. Alfred stood sheepishly under a streetlight as Soledad pulled him into her building. He followed her up a dilapidated stairway, and when they reached her one-room apartment, Soledad pointed at the cot against the wall.

Following his return to the microstate, people felt Alfred had changed. It came as a big surprise when word got out that this young man, who'd always been such a slouch, had applied for work as a news photographer at the *Liechtensteiner Volksblatt*. Even more surprising was when the ne'er-do-well got the job. The mailman told everyone about the letters postmarked in Spain that Alfred—whom no one had ever written in the past—had been receiving these past few weeks, and the word among regulars at Café Matt was that the godless boy had discovered his faith down there. How else could you explain the many times Alfred had visited the priest since his return?

The actual explanation, however, was decidedly more secular. The priest, who had been a missionary in Guatemala for a number of years, spoke Spanish. He translated Soledad's letters to Alfred and responded in Alfred's name. The priest translated Soledad's "I'm pregnant" as "I can't wait to see you again, my darling," while Alfred's "I thirst for your thighs" became "Please move to Mauren." He delivered the news to Alfred that she wasn't going to keep the baby and he should send money by explaining "I can't afford a trip to Liechtenstein." He reformulated Alfred's "I want you" in response as "I will provide for you and the child." Alfred signed at the end, tucked a train ticket in the envelope, and brought it to the post office.

Soledad and Alfred spoke very little leading up to their wedding in May of 1963. A month after Father Ritter witnessed their vows, Soledad gave birth to two children. Twins Luise and Lotte looked so similar, Alfred had a hard time distinguishing one girl from the other. While he crisscrossed the microstate to photograph various events, Soledad tended to the children and the household. She quickly learned the language, and when it became possible to converse with her husband, she discovered it would be best to keep communication nonverbal in the future. Their relationship was defined by a special type of magnetism. The attractive force that governed their bodies morphed into revulsion the moment one of those bodies made use of its voice. As a result of the former, at 2:33 in the morning on March 31, 1965, a big baby boy was delivered in the National Hospital in Vaduz. That boy was me.

1.

How very cold the world was. How inhospitable and bleak. The light in the delivery room was dim, and raindrops pelted the window. Alfred sat on the bed and cradled his leg. In an outburst of extreme anger, he had kicked the coffee vending machine in the hallway, because it had eaten his money without offering anything in return. Trying to get me to laugh, he leaned over and made a face. Horrified that I should spend the rest of my life with this person, I let out a cry that rattled the windowpanes. The cry echoed its way out of the building, swirled around the tip of the church steeple, and fired off twelve strokes of the bell inside. It forced its way through a crack in the door to the seat of government—what’s great about Vaduz is how compact it is, everything located within a stone’s throw—and swept through the parliamentary chamber before gaining access to Dr. Gerard Batliner’s office, where the prime minister was asleep with his forehead on his desk. At the sound of several binders tumbling from the shelves, Dr. Batliner awoke and didn’t know who he was. The cry howled through the capital, shattered the windows at Huber Fine Watches & Jewelry, and sped up the hill until it reached the castle enthroned there on an outcropping. It penetrated the thick walls, roared past the royal family treasures housed in the basement—past the Picassos and Rembrandts, Cranachs and Botticellis—until it reached the upper apartments to find the princely couple of Liechtenstein dreaming in a four-poster bed. Prince Franz Josef II embraced Princess Gina in his sleep—he was the big spoon, she the little one. The cry then whooshed past the other slumbering princes and princesses and entered the room of the eldest son and heir to the throne, Hans-Adam II, who awoke, heard the roaring cry, and quavered with fear as he pulled the blankets up over his nose. The cry vanished into the night and climbed to the microstate’s highest point—the summit of the Grauspitz is 8,527 feet above sea level—before detonating with deafening volume. The sound echoed in the valleys for a long time to come: the Data Thief, the Data Thief is born.

“Typical Aries,” the midwife said with a smile. Alfred sulked by the window. The skies split open and displayed a crescent moon, which flooded the delivery room with silvery light.

“Interesting,” the midwife said, pointing at the starry sky. “Look at that, Herr Kaiser. A large concentration of planets in the second house, the house of Taurus.”

“Ah,” said Alfred.

“Remember that the second house symbolizes the world of concrete objects. The moon, Venus, Saturn, and the minor planet Chiron are all present tonight.”

Alfred nodded impassively.

“The moon,” the midwife explained, “stands for property and permanence. Venus suggests both business acumen and sensuality, while Saturn is a sign of thrift. Chiron stands for ambition and the need for security.”

“Oh,” said Alfred.

“To hear the stars tell it, little Johann will put a lot of energy into amassing property.”

Alfred’s ears perked up.

“Johann will be a frugal person,” the midwife continued, “who earns a lot of money through hard work.”

Alfred reached for my hand. The midwife smiled knowingly. As it happened, she would never discover how right she had been. She died three years after my birth, in a skiing accident in the Swiss Alps.

The room I occupied those first few years was painted pale blue, with gentle shimmers of pink still visible in spots. In the middle of the room was a bed enclosed in wooden slats that seemed to me to reach all the way to the ceiling. I would lie there and watch the shadows of tree branches move across the drawn curtains. It was like in Plato’s Cave. While the real world blossomed in every color imaginable outside my room, I—the human trapped in a crib—was left with no choice but to settle for simulacra. For colorless, sad shadows.

It was light during the day and grew dark at night. Although I’d become an expert in darkneses in recent months, this one was different from those that came before. This darkness had eyes. This darkness pierced. I turned toward the movement, and as I did, the darkness assumed the shape of a body. Hands. This darkness had hundreds of hands. It would prick me on one side while jabbing a finger in my ear on the other. It bopped me on the nose and yanked my toe, and when I opened my mouth to ask what was going on, it hissed, “Quit crying, you rotten little traitor,” and covered my mouth with another one of its hands.

Mamá appeared at first light. She was holding two braids attached to two identical faces. Both had bushy eyebrows and full lips as well as freckles covering cheeks damp with tears. The missing incisor in the left one’s mouth was all that distinguished it from the one on the right.

“This is Luise, and this is Lotte,” Mamá said. “Your sisters.”

She had to pull my sisters’ hair harder till one of them finally said: “Hello.” The other one added: “Nice to meet you.” “My name is Johann,” I tried to respond, but instead of speaking, I started to cry. “You must be hungry,” Mamá said, unbuttoning her blouse. As I suckled at her nipple to be polite, I spotted the girls standing in the doorway. The one missing a tooth slowly drew her outstretched index finger across her throat.

Having a “family” was peculiar. Everyone but me had something to do. The twins went to work at “kindergarten,” Alfred went to work as a “photographer,” and Mamá went to work on me. She had jet-black hair and the peculiar ability to bring things into being using the simplest of resources. Here’s an example: she might say “come,” then “changing table,” and suddenly I found myself on a wooden surface. If she said “change,” followed by “diaper,” an unpleasant smell wafted up to my nose. Then

she said “powder,” and the stench dissipated. “Curtain” meant light entered the room. “Johann” meant she was kissing me. Best, though, was the word “door.” It promised nothing short of amazement when opened.

“Living room,” “kitchen,” “garage.” Fascinating, the things a “house” contained. There were “carpets,” “pillows,” and “sofas,” not to mention “lamps” and “curtains,” and in the same way “curtains” were what encased the “windows,” “outside” was what encased the house. “Outside” was called “Mauren.” And Mauren was where “the trees” were. There was a “sky,” and the white spots on it were “clouds,” and when the “neighbors” wore “hoods” on their “heads,” it meant that the clouds were dripping. That was “rain.” Only “morons” left the house when it was raining. “Alfred,” for instance. Alfred left the house every day.

The most peculiar object in this house, peerless as it was in its assemblage of peculiar objects, was located in the room Mamá called “my bedroom.” She opened the door, pointed at the wardrobe in the corner and said, “Look.” You could see into the wardrobe through a rectangular window in the wood. Two people lived inside. A woman and a baby. The woman was so beautiful. And the baby. What a beautiful baby. The woman appeared to agree. Whenever she stroked the baby’s head, I could feel something touching my hair. “That’s you,” Mamá said, and the woman pointed at me. “That’s me,” she said, and the woman in the wardrobe pointed at her. The baby didn’t seem to understand. It reached out its hands and grabbed the woman’s cheek. Mamá’s skin was very warm. “My darling,” Mamá said. “Once you’re a little bigger,” she continued, pointing at a photograph taped above the wardrobe window, “we’re going to move.” The picture showed the sun sprawled out over the rooftops. “Spain,” Mamá said. “Alfred promised.” Was the woman in the window crying? “Do you understand?” I gurgled. She kissed my forehead and said, “Genius.” The baby gave me an imperceptible nod.

Alfred came to see me on the days the *Liechtensteiner Volksblatt* was printed—Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. He entered the room, newspaper clamped under one arm, and shook my hand in greeting. He showed me which pictures he had taken and read aloud the articles he considered especially accomplished. You had to watch out for Communism, he said one Tuesday, when the topic turned to the Soviet satellite that had been orbiting far above our heads in recent days. “The Soviets are everywhere.”

One night, I noticed something red blinking in my room. I clenched my fists. “Freeze!” I yelled at the Soviet satellite that had clearly come for me. I climbed out of bed and followed the glow into a room where Alfred was asleep on the couch. The satellite whirred around his head, and I took a careful step closer, until I was just inches away. I sensed its warmth, its pulsation, but as I swooped in to destroy it, the room morphed into my nursery. The darkness had lifted. It was morning. I was back in bed.

Mamá interpreted the idiotic babble that issued forth, as I tried telling her about the satellite, as a sign of hunger and stuck a nipple in my mouth. What had come so naturally the night before—bipedal movement, verbal expression—had at daybreak reverted to the old immobility and futile stabs at communication. Maybe the Soviets weren’t so bad, after all, I thought, folding my hands the way Alfred did when he wanted something.

It seemed there existed a qualitative difference between places. Those I frequented with Mamá were the unspectacular ones. They were those of light. Whereas lightness forced me into a straitjacket, the places that took shape upon the return of darkness granted me unrestricted freedom of movement. I loped through cornfields, soared above forests—if not on my own, then on the backs of birds—explored the bottom of the ocean, or sang my name from the mountaintops. There was nothing I couldn't do there. I eventually realized that darkness was a condition I could induce on my own by closing my eyes. I wasn't always successful in falling asleep, though. The more I tried, the more fitful I grew, and being fitful made me cry, and because Mamá couldn't stand me crying, she said, "Want to see a trick?" I looked at her in anticipation. "One," she said, and paused. Then she said, "Two." What kind of stupid trick was this? "Three." Because she, "four," ignored my quizzical look, I decided to play along at "five." "Six." What did I have to lose? "Seven," "eight," "nine." She lowered her voice, "ten," with every word, "eleven," and my initial irritation "twelve," slowly gave way, "thirteen," to relaxation. "Fourteen," "fifteen," "sixteen." Weirdly enough, it was kind of nice, "seventeen," to have someone sitting beside me, "eighteen," just, "nineteen," saying words, "twenty," I didn't understand. "Twenty-one," my eyes closed, "twenty-two." The distance between Mamá and me grew. "Twenty-three." It wasn't scary, though, "twenty-four," because I knew, "twenty-five," she was right there. "Twenty-six." Always there. "Twenty-seven," floated in from afar, and I barely heard "twenty-eight." "Twenty-nine," I was so tired "thir—."

I only returned to the light of the world in order to eat. Summer had arrived, and I was busy running through irregular verb conjugations when a tremendous hunger forced me to leave my study. The twins' faces appeared above me like two suns.

"Mamá isn't here," Lotte said.

"So we're going to feed you," Luise added.

While Luise fetched the light blue pillow with the big fish on it, Lotte lifted me from the crib and laid me on the floor. Then they tossed the pillow back and forth above my body, and I reached for it, squealing with delight.

"Do you want the pillow?" Lotte asked. I laughed.

"Well, here it is," Luise said, planting it on my face.

"Do you know who this room belonged to before you?" I heard one of the twins ask.

My perfectly enunciated "No" was swallowed by the pillow as the pressure increased. It was getting harder to breathe, and I didn't like the darkness anymore. I tried to remove the pillow from my head, but I wasn't strong enough yet. Then suddenly, the light returned. I took a deep breath and vomited. Alfred stood before me, two braids in each hand, pulling the shrieking twins off me like rabid dogs. I closed my eyes and counted to thirty. There was nothing to hold me here in this world.

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*Außer sich*

by Sasha Marianna Salzmann

Suhrkamp, 2017

Published in English as *Beside Myself*, translated by Imogen Taylor (Other Press, 2020)

*Summary*

*Beside Myself* is the disturbing and exhilarating story of a family across four generations. At its heart is a twin's search for her brother. When Anton goes missing and the only clue is a postcard sent from Istanbul, Ali leaves her life in Berlin to find him. Without her twin, the sharer of her memories and mirror of her own self, Ali is lost. In a city steeped in political and social tumult, where you can buy gender-changing drugs on the street, Ali's search—for her missing brother, for her own identity—will take her on a journey for connection and belonging. This powerful debut novel spans from post-Soviet Moscow to present-day Istanbul via a refugee center in provincial West Germany. Sasha Marianna Salzmann writes about the upheavals and solidarity of a refugee family with confidence, profound perspective, humor, and sharp insight into the younger generation of these "homeland wanderers," a generation fighting for their own linguistic, political, and sexual identities. In a fascinating voice all their own, Salzmann describes anew the many ways reality has of thwarting the personal dreams of this globe-spanning generation. Europe grows larger in this book, yet still doesn't quite become home.

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*Excerpt translated by Imogen Taylor, Other Press, 2020*

### **The Beginning**

Anton had written a postcard. Well, "written" was going a bit far. A postcard had come to the house, a black-and-white photograph of a narrow street lined with dilapidated buildings that leaned crookedly against one another—and printed on the photo in red and white letters, the word: *Istanbul*.

His way of saying he's all right, thought Valya.

She was holding the card balanced on one corner when Ali came into the kitchen, steadying it with her index finger and flicking it back and forth with her thumb, her eyes fixed on the tiered cake stand. She'd heard her daughter come in. Ali had kept a key when she moved out nine years ago and made use of it every six months or so; this was the first time she'd dropped in since Anton had disappeared. The key jammed slightly and only the initiated knew that you had to lift the door and push against the frame to get the lock to budge. Ali shoved open the door, muttering something that Valya didn't catch, but was pretty sure wasn't a greeting. Valya heard the sound of shoes on the hall linoleum, and the smack of rubber as Ali kicked off her sneakers. She crept into the flat and had soon disappeared, turning off into a room and leaving the place silent again.

*Roditel'skii dom nachalo nachal, ty v zhizni moei nadezhnyi prichal*, crooned the black-and-white image of Leshchenko in Ali's head. *You're a safe haven to me, my parents' house, beginning of all beginnings*. The legendary Russian musician sang with bloated face and twisted mouth, his eyebrows leaping into his forehead, his arms waving about, urging the audience to join in. And join in they did; the entire Soviet Union sang along. It was a mystery, though, what he was doing in Ali's head.

She'd forced herself to tread firmly before entering the flat where she'd kind of grown up, or at least spent an important part of her childhood. She remembered the corner where she'd been made to stand in disgrace after biting Anton's thigh—there on the left when you came into the living room. She used to hide her toy car in here so her brother wouldn't find it, and over there by the window, the plastic fir tree they had at New Year's, not at Christmas, had wobbled when the pair of them pulled at it.

Ali's eyes were drawn to the spot on the floor where she and Anton had singed the carpet trying to fetch the big red star down from the top of the plastic fir. They'd buried each other in tinsel, pulling it off the tree like spiders' webs, pouring it over each other's heads, crushing the colored foil between their fingers, nibbling at it with their teeth. The burned place was now covered by a new leather sofa. Ali pushed it aside and squatted down to examine the tiny brown hairs around the hole. Then she remembered the burn hole in her parents' flat in Moscow and wondered if it looked the same as this one. It had been the same game they'd played—the same chewing around on the tinsel, the same attempt to topple the red star, the same drunk father who'd wept and then taken himself off to bed.

The pale brown of the new sofa made her eyes itch. The chipboard TV table was still there, the imitation oak scuffed now from all the dusting and the constant shunting back and forth of the TV magazines. No one read books here anymore.

The finely woven cotton curtains were also new, and too long; they trailed on the floor, stirring slightly when you passed. Ali reached out a hand and rubbed a corner of the cloth between finger and thumb. The wallpaper was polystyrene white with an embossed pattern of roses. Anton had traced over the roses behind the door, and Ali had told on him. The glass-fronted cabinets were filled with the busts of strangers and unframed photos leaning against cheap cut-glass vases—photos of Shura, Etya, Danya, Emma, Valya and Valya again, photographs of the children. All the photos of Ali showed her with hair down to her waist; nothing here told you she'd had her head circumcised. Beside her, Anton smiled broadly, his hair combed in a way that was unfamiliar to Ali, but then she'd never been able to resist mussing it up. She'd wanted hair like that too, but cutting hers was out of the question; *hair was a woman's honor—and you wouldn't throw your honor in the trash heap, would you?*

“What if I'm not a woman?”

“What are you then, an elephant?”

Everyone laughed, especially the visiting aunts with their spoonfuls of jam and their glasses of black tea and lemon. They shook their heads; one day the little thing would understand—*it's her*

*age...head stuffed full of nonsense...not good for her to play out on the street... running around with the boys all the time...refusing to wear a bra.*

Ali stood in the doorway, leaning against the improvised growth chart that was marked on the wall in blue Biro. The habit of measuring the children at the living-room door was one they'd brought with them from Moscow: the year alongside the height and then ever upward, always measuring, always remarking on how time flies—*one meter twenty, one meter forty-seven, one meter sixty—goodness me, slow down a bit, won't you!* But Ali and Anton were less interested in the passing of time and their own growth than in the pretty pattern these made on the doorframe. They tried to join up the lines; Anton in particular was always trying to extend them into loops and curves, and getting cuffed on the head for it. "How often do I have to tell you not to draw on the walls?" Kostya would shout, tearing the pen out of his hand.

"Why can't I draw? You do!"

The growth chart Ali was leaning against began at *1996—141 cm*. Running her fingernail over the lines Anton had drawn, connecting her height and his into constellations, she glanced over at her mother in the kitchen. There was nothing new here and Ali shrank once again to the child at the growth chart and smelled the old smell of naphthalene clinging to her hair. It seemed to linger no matter how short she cut it, as if her scalp began to exude the stuff as soon as she entered the flat. A trickle ran down her face; nothing had changed. All right, so her hair was gone, but nobody here noticed. To her mother, this woman sitting at the window staring at a cookie on the cake stand in front of her, she was a transfer picture of a memory with long hair and a different smell—maybe her glands produced naphthalene so that her mother recognized her.

Maybe I'll get a face job, Ali thought. I'll have my nose enlarged and see if she notices. Valya didn't move. She was looking neither at her daughter nor at the cookies, but at the cake stand itself, gold-edged black china painted with red cherries. She wondered why she hadn't chucked the tawdry thing ages ago. How long had it been there? Maybe fifteen years—definitely ten. It was old, that was for sure. So was the tablecloth. I should chuck the lot, she thought.

The skin on her cheeks was taut with dryness; she'd forgotten to moisturize after her shower. She'd stood under the water crying for a long time, then she'd dried herself and come and sat at the kitchen table—and here she was now, wondering, as she waited for Ali, whether she shouldn't do something about her face, inject a bit of poison into her cheeks, have the corners of her eyes lifted, or just some permanent makeup for the time being. Then she felt panic—what if the doctors made a mistake? What if she ended up looking so different that her own daughter no longer recognized her?

When Ali had cut her curls off, Valya had felt every snip as if someone had been chopping away at *her*. She'd wanted to gather up the hair and keep it for better times when Alissa would finally change her mind and stop running about like a boy—even more of a boy than Anton. Is that what it was about—being more of a boy than her brother? What was she trying to prove? If she was a dyke, she could be one with long hair, couldn't she? There were no rules against looking nice.

“They the cookies I brought you last time?” Ali asked. The question tumbled out of her and came to rest on the linoleum.

Valya smiled. She wanted to reach out her hand to Ali and ask her to sit down and talk about herself; instead, she pressed her fingers into the postcard on the table.

“Yes, it’s possible, I don’t know.”

Alissa edged along the wall, cupboard by cupboard, looking at the crooked hands on the clock that had stopped years ago, counting her steps. When she’d made it to the benchtop, she clutched the kettle in both hands and flicked up the switch. Splashes of red and brown had dried on the kettle’s white plastic belly: red splashes of pomegranate juice (there were still a few squashed seeds on the marble surface); brown splashes of tea. The hiss of water coming to the boil was a damp jet in front of Ali’s face; she inhaled deeply and began to press the air slowly through her closed mouth, making her lips vibrate, bubbling along with the kettle, trying to keep pace. Then she opened the cupboard above the sink and took out a mug. It was navy blue with a cartoonlike sketch of a map of the Black Sea.

“Look, Crimea’s on here.” Ali turned to her mother, holding the mug in the air.

“Course it is. Where else would it be?”

Ali turned back around again and pulled open the drawer where the tea was kept. There was a strong whiff of bergamot.

“Uncle Misha painted that; it’s old,” Valya said to Ali’s back.

“Who was Uncle Misha again?” Ali rummaged in the drawer, feeling her mother’s gaze on her body. She was wearing a men’s gray sweater over a baggy white shirt, both tucked into men’s black trousers. Her body vanished beneath the layers. Ali saw Valya close her eyes and then open them. She poured water over the tea bag and sat down opposite her. Valya folded her hands and pursed her lips slightly.

“Shall we go and get you some new clothes?”

Ali pulled down the sleeves of her sweater, burying her fingers in the wool. She clasped the handle of the mug. “Do I know Uncle Misha?”

“He drew all the children’s cartoons you used to watch. Why do you dress like that?”

“Can I have this mug?”

Valya stared long into her face.

“You can have anything. Take what you like.”

Ali pondered what she’d take from this flat—her grandmother’s earrings that she’d never wear? The photos that would lie yellowing in cardboard boxes just like at her mother’s if she took them home? All the toys had been sold or given away years ago; the pictures on the walls were poor-quality reproductions. Maybe her father’s shirts, but she couldn’t suggest that to Valya. She looked through the open door into the hall and her eyes fell on the doorframe with the growth chart. That was what she wanted—to carry the doorjamb with the growth chart out of here on her shoulder and lean it against the wall in her own flat. Ali opened her mouth and said:

“It’s dark there now.”

“Where?”

“In Crimea. Pitch dark. They’ve cut the power lines. The trolley buses aren’t running. Wonder what they’re doing there now, in the dark.”

Ali glanced across the table; the other side seemed miles away.

“You can have the mug.”

Ali pushed her fingers into her curls and looked out of the window onto the street of this dried-up West German town where the neighbors knew whether or not you watered the flowers in your front garden and who’d stabbed next-door’s cat. She’d learned to ride a bike on this street. Her father had given her a push and shouted after her to look straight ahead and not back at him. She fell off a lot and was always grazing her knees, while Anton rode around her in circles, laughing.

“You do know, if the idea behind your clothes is to stop people looking at you, they have the opposite effect.”

Ali stared out of the window.

“You look like a scarecrow. Did you get the things from the Red Cross?”

“Yes, Mum.”

“Can you explain it to me?”

“I’m not in the mood for this discussion.”

“I’m sorry. What would you like to talk about?”

About the gravel path down there—my knees still remember. About mugs painted by people I don’t know, but who mean something to you. About the way you’re waiting for me to fling my arms around your neck as a faint compensation for everything you couldn’t have in life because you had me instead. About our need for intimacy and what we should do with it. About teeth discolored by cigarettes and black tea. About why you still haven’t moved out of this museum here—do you need this fug? Why not just burn everything, rather than buy new furniture to cover up old burn holes? Why not give away your clothes—donate them to the Red Cross for all I care—move to another town, move in with me, no, not in with me, please, but not too far away either, come and look for your son with me—but don’t let’s talk about it; let’s just pretend we’re going on vacation together. About this sense of lack I can’t stop feeling. And nor can you, it flashed into Ali’s mind. She said nothing.

She saw Valya bite her lower lip and breathe out through her nose.

It wasn’t all the same old stuff here in this flat that Ali had run away from at the age of sixteen—first run away and then come back to pick up her things—and Valentina wasn’t the same either, or perhaps she was gradually reverting to some old self Ali knew nothing of. Ali had no idea that the boys on the Arbat had once twisted their necks to look at her mother; she couldn’t imagine them begging to be allowed to paint her. Ali had once found oil portraits of Valya in a cardboard box, but she hadn’t made the connection with the swollen face that nagged her to school every day and

wasn't there when she got home. She hadn't stopped to wonder who the young woman was with the broad cheekbones, the boyish smile, the pointy chin, the piercing eyes. For Ali, these pictures of her mother were as fictional as postcards at a kiosk. The face she knew was like a ball of cotton wool that had soaked up the lousy food of asylum-home canteens, the musty smell of dorms, the lack of sleep and decent cosmetics. It had shriveled up on her short neck and looked as if it were digesting itself. Since her divorce from Konstantin, though, there was movement in the ball of cotton wool; the cheekbones were visible again, the eyes were once more deeper in their sockets; Valentina was a step closer to the beautiful young woman who had strolled along the Arbat, that small pedestrian precinct that Europeans talked about as if it were a big cosmopolitan street, though in fact it was narrow and lined with buskers and street artists and women selling woolen scarves. Her mother had liked the Arbat; she'd bought books there and got herself in trouble with her in-laws for wasting money, because if she had time to read books, she could just as well do the dusting instead—and Valentina had to lock herself in the john to read. Now everything was possible—everything; she could read and go for walks and do whatever she liked. It was too much. All that Valentina had once been was squeezing itself slowly back into her face, through the moles and broken veins on her cheeks—but how was Ali to know all that? She'd never even been to the Arbat.

“Anton's written.”

Valentina held out the postcard her hands had been resting on.

Ali grabbed it with as much control as she could muster.

“When did it come?”

“Yesterday.”

No writing. No greeting. The address was written in a nine-year-old's scrawl. Not so much as an *I'm well*. Anton or a *Hope you all rot in hell. I don't give a fuck how you are*.

Ali looked up from the blank card into her mother's face.

“Maybe he's touring the world.” Ali clicked her tongue.

Valentina nodded. She looked as if she hadn't slept; the bags under her eyes were stained blue. She might even have been crying, but that was hard for Ali to imagine. She'd never seen her mother cry.

An image flashed into Ali's head of Valya's face the day she'd called the relatives in Moscow to ask whether Anton had turned up at their homes. That was after the police had been called in and said that if he'd had the time and leisure to pack his bags properly, things couldn't be so bad; he'd turn up somewhere, sometime—though he hadn't. Ali couldn't hear what the relatives were saying; she couldn't even hear what Valya was saying, only saw her face, switched to mute, and realized that of all the situations her mother had ever been in, this was the most humiliating. Ali stopped hearing altogether that day. At first she'd only felt pressure in her left ear, then it had spread, opening out like a flower behind her forehead and bursting. The doctors diagnosed acute hearing loss; they couldn't say how long it would last. Ali wasn't afraid it would stay; she was afraid it might one day go away. That happened three weeks later.

“Tell me, when did you last eat?” asked Ali, laying the postcard aside.

Valya nodded.

“Have you eaten?”

“Drink your tea, it’ll go cold.”

Ali got up and went to the bread box that was hand-carved by her grandfather and said *khleb* on the lid in curly writing. *Bread*. Even that had come to Germany as a souvenir of the dacha on the Volga, though it was empty now, just a surface to put things on. Ali went to the fridge and rummaged for white bread. Everything edible in the flat was kept in the fridge: butter, tomatoes, gherkins, plums, an empty Emmental packet that she threw out, a net of Gala apples, an open pot of cottage cheese, a can of sprats, a dead-looking lettuce—that, too, she dispatched to the garbage—a pear, jam, honey, even a loaf of Borodinsky, the black bread with coriander seeds on top.

The white bread was at the back, frozen fast; Ali had to prise it off. She cut two doorsteps, sliced butter as thick as her finger, laid it on the bread without spreading it, found the sugar basin where it always was, and strewed the butter with sugar until you could hardly see the bread on the small plate beneath the white crystals. She put the plate down in front of Valya.

“Eat.”

Valentina nodded, looked up from the plate, nodded again and smiled.

“You must eat. I can tell you haven’t eaten for days.”

Valya smiled again, a proper smile this time.

“It’s bad for your head.” Ali sat down opposite Valya again. “Low blood sugar.”

“So now you’re trying to kill me with a sugar shock?”

Ali watched her mother reluctantly move her hand toward the plate. Valentina looked out of the window, then at Ali, then at the glinting sugar crystals. Her eyes grew more alert. She reached for the bread with her right hand and her teacup with her left hand. For a moment she froze, arms outstretched, and Ali clearly saw Anton’s face smile in Valya’s.

Anton had taught Ali to read. Not that he could read when he was three, but he’d explained the letters to her as if he’d invented them himself. He ran his finger over the pile of the red-and-green Turkish carpet in the living room and made sounds, and Ali repeated them, staring at his lips, watching them forming objects—an apple, a crescent moon hanging points down, a wide-open window sticking out its tongue. She grabbed his face as he traced the imaginary letters on the carpet; she ran her fingers over his lips and crawled her fingertips into his mouth. Like sticking your fingers in blancmange, she thought. Anton drew alphabet patterns on her legs. Like drawing on blancmange, he thought. Gran came and pulled them apart, scolding loudly about something the three-year-olds didn’t understand.

The twins slept on the foldout sofa; their grandmother often sat beside them, stroking Anton's head, and Ali would lie there, her eyes half-closed, watching the sinewy hand with the veins sticking out of the skin like bones. She too would thrust her hand into Anton's hair and rub it between her fingers, until Gran's big gray hand knocked her little one away and hissed: "Go to sleep now!" But eventually the hand disappeared along with the hiss, and Ali sank eight of her ten fingers into Anton's curls and fell asleep with the feeling of fine wool tickling her palms.

Because they had hardly any toys, they played with one another, moving each other's arms at the shoulders and elbows, turning each other's heads like balls, grabbing hold of each other's ribs, comparing each other's movements, freezing and mirroring one another. It wasn't that nobody bought them toys, but the toys they were given always went straight to the top of their grandparents' wardrobe, whose smooth walnut surface was too slippery to climb. They weren't supposed to play with toys; they were supposed to do homework and then they were supposed to do the extra work that Valya set them—reading books, improving themselves. "Only stupid children with time to waste play with toys," said Valya, but they didn't know what their mother meant; they were only five when they started preschool.

Valya was driven by the fear of not having enough time to cram her children with all the knowledge they needed if they were to get out; you had to move so fast—quick, quick, out of here! Read, learn, or you're lost! She was convinced that the only thing really worth instilling in children was a dogged ambition oblivious to health and self-respect, to make sure they didn't end up where she'd ended, in Chertanovo.

She'd say to Anton: "You must be the best in school, much better than the Russians. If you can be three times as good as them, you might end up half as good, then you can be a good Russian doctor. If not, you'll be a poor put-upon Jew for the rest of your life." In Germany, she said the same, replacing the Russians with Germans.

Anton didn't understand, so he made nodding movements with his head, because even a child knows that's the thing to do when a mother gets that look of panic in her eyes. He nodded and thought of her breasts, comparing them with the breasts of the woman upstairs, which were even bigger.

Alissa was told: "You don't want to be the most beautiful; you want to be the cleverest. Beauty does you no good and doesn't last. But if you're the cleverest you can always convince everyone that you're the most beautiful, and you'll get a husband who'll buy you whatever you want, even good looks."

This made no sense to Ali; she couldn't follow her mother's logic and, unlike Anton, she didn't nod. Valya had little confidence that her children were adaptable enough to get the better of the Soviet Union with its unjust natural laws. They were too quiet for that, too wrapped up in themselves; they cleaved to each other and tumbled over one another, as if there were no outside world. Kostya wasn't much help either, but she was determined not to leave her children's future—or lack of future—to chance. She didn't want her son in the army with the highest suicide rate and her daughter playing whore to some banker. She wanted them to make something of themselves, so she got them out, with an application for settlement, twelve suitcases crammed into a train

compartment, and even more boxes. The toys stayed behind on top of the walnut wardrobe, but the children were allowed to pack as many books as they liked.

The Chepanov family's first room in a German asylum home was at the top of a converted hotel, on the sixth floor. At first Grandfather had one of the bunks, then he was moved down to the second floor to share with an elderly man who told himself work-camp stories in his sleep, waking Grandfather who would go and sit on the man's bed and put his hand over his trembling mouth. Valentina and Konstantin attended language classes and did their homework in the communal kitchen, along with twenty-five other emigrant couples, enveloped in the greasy smell of broth. The smell made Ali feel sick. She roamed the corridors, going in other families' rooms, opening ceramic jars filled with jewelry, peeping in bags of terry bed linen, sniffing at the bottles of Red Moscow perfume she sometimes found in the bathrooms, and filching cigarettes whenever she found an open packet lying around. Anton didn't accompany her on these prowls; he was too busy pursuing his own passion for balancing on narrow metal rails.

He'd climb onto the banisters and stand there, bobbing up and down, white-sneakered feet at an angle, knees bent. He stretched out his arms like a skateboarder and looked straight ahead, his eyes fixed on the wall opposite as if he were challenging it. The first time his mother saw him on the banister rail, she froze. Suppressing the instinct to cry out in fear and risk startling her child, she crept up to him, wrapped her arms around his tummy and pulled him down. From then on she followed Anton on tiptoe wherever he went, arms extended, fingers like claws, and when she sat in the language class, trying to conjugate verbs, she'd see her son plummeting down the stairwell.

Every week she went to the home manager and asked to be moved to the ground floor or into the basement, next to the kitchen. It might stink of broth, but at least there were no banister rails down there. She explained the situation to the manager—the two small children she couldn't control: one of them was always trying to jump off things, while the other smoked under the covers in their room. She only had one pair of hands and there was the language class to practice for too. She begged him, but the mustached guy with the grease stains on his collar only said: "You must learn to take better care of your children, Mamasha; moving into the basement won't change that."

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Excerpt from *Die Nachkommende* (“Those Who Come Later”)

by Ivna Žic

Matthes & Seitz, 2019

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*Summary*

At the height of summer, a young woman travels from Paris to Croatia where, like every summer, the whole family awaits her return to their ancestral island. She reflects on the man she’s had a relationship with for the past year—a relationship that never really went anywhere. The man was a married artist, a painter who no longer paints. She is not alone on the long train trip: her forebears take seats beside her in the sleeper car, and her dead grandfather is among them. He, too, was a painter and he, too, stopped painting. These two absent-yet-somehow-present men become her companions on a journey into the past and the memories that make up the family narrative. Her parents’ emigration just before war broke out in Croatia sparked myriad consequences. One recurring family trait is the tendency to quit, to give things up, and Žic invites the reader to join her main character as she asks why. The tensions between geographical and linguistic shifts explode our compartmentalized sense of history, simultaneously examining present and past as well as presence and absence.

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*Excerpt translated by Alta L. Price*

**YEAR YEARS GRANDFATHER**

She’s snoring. The woman below me is snoring, she’s snored all night. Pale calves poke out past the edge of her bed, dotted with mosquito bites. She’s sweating, I’m sweating, her bug bites have been scratched raw, the soles of her bare feet are bandaged yet bear welts from her sandals, blue veins, and stubble. The roomette smells of bad breath and sour armpits.

It’s no longer night.

I sit up. The blanket is too short, but after awhile it stops mattering how much my body has to bend, I’ve been en route for almost twelve hours already, once again having hardly slept, once again taking this trip that neither ceases nor resolves a thing, aside from its own repetition, aside from its duration—these twelve familiar hours—and where do they all accumulate, anyway, these ever new, nearly twelve-hour trips? They must be piling up somewhere in this bent-over body, I think, trying to think them away, brushing them off along with all these trips. A hundred times, or has it been five hundred times already, or just a whole lot? For one lone body maybe it’s already too much. Once it was just three times a year, then four, and then came the years when only summertime and Christmas trips were possible, so these hours and their almost exact same quantity grew inevitable, determining our movements toward and away from one another once again, ever since the day we packed our bags, closed up our place on the top floor of the apartment complex in Novi Zagreb, as

the second generation became the first to leave, and my mother put me in the yellow-striped skirt, strapped my brother to her belly, and we boarded the flight. Well packed, well prepared, well organized: an apartment, job, and kindergarten awaited us, and we traded all that was familiar—the streets, the complex, the entire neighborhood, my grandparents, my aunt who lived in the city, the many parks and green getaways, the sarma and stuffed peppers, the little animal-themed chocolates with collectible wrappers, Zagreb, the city, and the whole country, which was a different one back then, one that would soon change—for all that was new: a new degree of distance and its value, the recollection that from now on everything would be different, bilingual dreams and vacations that flew by too fast, always too little time for our many relatives, always too little time for real conversation and connection, always run, run, run! Easter, Christmas, Easter again, already Christmas again—and in between, beforehand, and usually afterward a bad conscience, a tangle of language, and a howling somersault, meanwhile a childhood by the seaside far away, *anke* for *butter*, back home it was *putar*, and *Grüezi, Ade, Merci*, Mrs. Rüedi, the Nadines and Stefanies and Chrigis and Sämis at *Chindsgi* and in school, meanwhile a course of study, now even farther away, all beginning on that day my mother put me in the yellow-striped skirt, strapped my brother to her belly, and we boarded the flight. A short storm, a spilled Coca-Cola and then touchdown in Zürich, where father awaited us, a snapshot for the family photo album, in which just behind us you can make out the partial words *KUNFT ZU*, the end of the city's name, Zurich, obscured by someone's head in the background, the beginning of the word *ankunft*, "arrivals," cut off by the camera. Switch those bits around and you get *Zukunft*, "future." This marks our ground zero, from which everything then sprouted out in two directions. The hours in between and the hours always missing must be piling up somewhere, into a stack so high that it can no longer be carried away.

Outside it's now the suburbs, the countryside is gone, the morning sun shines brightly, grey concrete blocks rise up, suburbs, the big city, it will all become a ghost town, the train now half empty. In a seaside country, by August everyone has left town. The ground is ablaze, dusty, almost all the windows in the concrete blocks are open, and AC units, as well as the occasional satellite dish, dot the exteriors.

I turn around.

Three days ago, yet another train.

I turn around.

It starts three days prior, I turn onto my stomach, onto my back, onto my side, and it ceases, I turn around, in a train to Paris, three days ago, I turn around, in a purple-and-red high-speed train, body ablaze in an ice-cold compartment, silence surrounding me, I turn around, and through this silence slink out to the bathroom, change, in the hope that no one will notice, as if anyone would even care whether I had changed, whether I now looked better, or worse, or simply different, an insecurity that, all in all, mattered to not a single person on the train, aside from him.

I'm lying on my back. I'm lying still.

And yet his hands and eyes know every inch of my body by heart, they know the dips between my shoulders, in the crooks of my arms, around my collarbones, even deep asleep they could trace the outline of my chest, my ears, my throat, hands that have penetrated so deeply, that have disassembled and then reassembled my body over and over again, I changed, as if such a small decision were capable of determining all the others, as if it were armor in which I might step out feeling fully secure, or at least a little more secure. If I could come to a clear decision while on this too-cold train to Paris, then it must mean I'd be able to reach yet another one again after my arrival. And yet there was no such thing as secure or insecure when I thought back to our encounters and embraces, there was just me, and him, and there was no armor with which I might fight for the one or the other, and so I invoked this act of changing, I invoked my underwear, my shirt, my pants and socks, I invoked every part of my body to protect this encounter. I could do no more in that too-cold train compartment three days ago, as I headed for Paris, perhaps in order to come to a decision. And yet I already knew. I had already known for awhile now. I knew that we never said goodbye, not after any of our encounters, and so we wouldn't this time either. I knew we'd never find an end, and that nevertheless, for some time now, in a certain way it was already over. I nevertheless went, three days ago, just as everything else had nevertheless happened over this entire year.

As the train arrived in Paris, I left my invocations in the compartment. We've taken no vows and have no timid trysts.

I turn around.



Now Zagreb Zapadni Kolodvor.

Now the West Station.

Now the Westin Hotel,

which we go past, heading right.

Now it's early morning, no longer night.

Now she says, up close: Where have you been off to again for so long?, with a hint of reproach. As she says this, my grandmother carefully strokes the stinking, wrinkled shirt lying on my suitcase: Where were you again? And: Aren't you tired? Sure, of course I am, but I don't say so, as all my ancestors come in, greeting me, slowly pushing in one after the other. They sit down all around me, and soon fill the entire compartment. Their voices carry a hint of reproach, but I know just the same you're all happy to see me again. With you all. Us all, with one another. Shortly before arrival, language twists around on your tongues, you all say: Now you're here again, now you can say "us" again, not "you all." All of us are us, anyway. But what "us"? You're all dead! There's my cross-eyed aunt, who never found herself a husband and was one of the few daughters allowed to be buried, or maybe forced to be buried, in my great-grandfather's family plot in the tiny cemetery on the windswept island. And there's my hunchbacked great-uncle from the same windswept island, his hands smell like he's been working the fields, his skin has been wrinkled by the same winds sweeping

the island itself, he has no teeth left. Next to him are four more siblings of my island grandmother, then countless more siblings from my island grandfather, then my grandmother from the city, the pianist in high heels with curlers in her hair and freshly manicured nails, then my mother's great-grandma, then her great-grandpa, then my aunt the milliner, and finally, off in the corner, sitting still and utterly silent by the window, watching the landscape go by, my grandfather, who's from yet another, third place, somewhere between the island and the city, with no other family connection but my grandmother, whom he still looks at lovingly and who turned him into my grandfather from the city.

This placeless grandfather holds himself steady with one hand and awaits our arrival even more impatiently than I, since, as soon as the train doors open, he'll light a cigarette the moment his foot hits the platform. His silence develops into strength, taking up the entire space and making the others look smaller. He waves hello, now sits down next to me, and we'll arrive in this city together.

And, like always, he doesn't say a word. And it gets ever louder.

A little over half a century ago, my grandfather himself traveled to Paris. Back then he made the opposite journey, from the south, from the east—from here, where I'm about to arrive, he left, from what was a fairly new country at the time. Deda, I say, since you were never really grandfather to us, you were our chain-smoking Deda, and when you spoke no one could believe a single word. And now you're mum. Before, you'd tell one story after another. Now you don't say a word but you still smoke, he always smoked all day, he'd sit in grandmother's kitchen separating the egg whites from the yolks for the cakes she baked every Sunday, he'd separate the whites from the yolks just to spend time with her. In the wintertime he'd stitch sections of sweater patterns grandmother had knitted for us grandchildren together into sweaters, also while sitting in the kitchen smoking, yellow fingernails, long grey hair, white beard, long grey hair combed back, bushy eyebrows, pitch black, and even in the coffin those eyebrows stayed bushy, full of life, they kept growing, and his mustache ends turned yellower. When he was my same age, grandfather went to Paris, from Zagreb, but he never told us about it. I can only try, can only begin to recall how your daughters and nieces told me the story, which is how I'll tell it to you, the way the images came to mind, since words from any and all sides were scarce, so if you have any objections then just let me know. I was told, or, once upon a time, twice, thrice, five times upon a time there was my grandfather, who was young, maybe he was even a little younger than I am now, but back then Zagreb was already called Zagreb and back then the Sava also flowed right by the city and back then at noon sharp each day a cannon shot was fired from the heights, shaking the entire city. The country was really the only thing that had just changed its name, and he went to Paris, maybe his trip to Paris was an attempt at forgetting this country with a new name, at least for a little while, since it was where a war, a bombing, and an exodus had taken place—three hefty words, too strong, three fingers, too clear, forming a salute that didn't belong to him, a false symbol, a new country, it was one of the untold journeys, the journeys with no stories, and now I whisper, I carefully whisper into his ear: Look, and we're already insecure, just how are we supposed to talk about all that, above all: How am I supposed to tell you, Deda? Are you listening, or looking away? Are you looking out the window and seeing what Zagreb and its surroundings look like now?

I see a young man back then, a little younger than I. Was he still called an orphan boy, or already considered an orphaned young man, when one of those three hefty words destroyed the rest of the family, blowing it into a thousand bits? Learn, go to school, grow up, I hear the aunts who now have to take care of him say: one more mouth, one more burden, but in the end we're family, here's some money, there's a room, probably about as big as this train compartment, and his aunts press some money into his palms and keep mum, just asking every once in a while if his studies will be over soon, since he's pretending to study architecture while actually studying art, and who's going to pay for an orphan, a penniless young man, this dark-haired, adolescent orphan to study painting? In that light, in between, you needed something, anything for you yourself: A year in Paris. You hide a bit of money in a bar of soap, in a train compartment like this one, heading the opposite direction: To Paris.

My grandfather had painted, just like this man who isn't my grandfather and who no longer paints used to paint but stopped painting, just like my grandfather, shortly after he'd returned from his Paris. There's no doubt about such stopping points.

It's too hot, I should get up, climb down the little ladder and open the door, get a crosswind going, let some air in to waft over my ancestors, but the swollen feet of the reeking woman below have fallen out of her bed and block the way. It's always the people closest to the door or window you'd like to open who fall asleep, those closest to the exit or the heat you'd like to turn up. I could softly ask her if I can get by, or gently push her feet aside, or both. Don't make such a fuss now, I hear my grandmother say, you'll be there soon, as my great-uncle in the corner starts to stand up, you're far too polite, he calls over with a laugh, I don't say a word, don't move a muscle, don't move an inch, the only touch I feel is that of my own sweat. He never once touched my body, nor I his. And I won't go to the island where my parents, my grandmother, and all my other island relatives are now sitting in the heat waiting for me like every other summer. But that's not right, I hear murmured at me from every corner of the compartment, you're never there anyway. I'm always there, I counter, and you all are always there, I never travel alone, but it's not always easy to be there and there and there, there's always just too little time together. And the ones who never complain about it are the worst: Go, then, if you have to, they say with deep sighs, and their Go-if-you-have-to begins to sound like Gu-il-ty, which stings. But I do miss you all. Mostly. Now tell us about you, they murmur, you're always busy telling all our stories, but none of us here know what's going on with you. I think up a few excuses but, before I can even answer, a trilingual, stilted, monotone voice interrupts me to announce that in just a few minutes we'll be arriving: Welcome to Zagreb, *Willkommen, dobro došli*.

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### **TURQUOISE, NO PLACE**

Upon awakening I grasp at the breast that's still there, that was gone, that in my dream was gone, cut off, no, but like an old, shrunken balloon, deflated, just hanging off my body, the smell of winter moths strikes my face and outside the evening sun is already sinking, the apartment hasn't been aired

out for weeks, bare feet on old parquet floors, the only floorboards that move with me are the ones worn down by the tread of sole after sole, the overlapping parts giving way, emitting sound, no one has more stories to tell than a floor like this one, which has carried everyone here, including me, with a span of memory in my bare feet. Don't go around barefoot is an oft-cited phrase, not by me, but once the neighbor, Mrs. Marijana, rang the doorbell, she needed some butter and a bit of conversation, I opened the door barefoot, whereupon she forgot the butter and insulted me, calling me a Bosnian, why are you walking around the house barefoot, she asked reproachfully, implicitly condemning my violation of even the most basic, civilized ground rules, I closed the door, what do bare feet have to do with belonging, in this country some danger lurks in every single bit of one's body, in every gesture a sign that might betray it as wrong. Everyone has bare feet that, especially in the summertime, just might want to walk across some old wooden floor, good morning, gorgeous summer, good morning, darling houseboat, there's a creaking somewhere far behind me, you can walk fairly far through this family boat, each night the old sighs gather in the corners and loudly converse with the floor. There had been several others here before us, I push the curtains aside and open the old, double windows by their brass handles, air, stifling heat, even hotter air, the sun is already low, nevertheless, good morning anyway, I say, the fridge is empty, the pantry half full, wine and schnapps, Christmas decorations, empty cookie jars, blankets and in the corner old lamps, a quick thought, the skipped lunch and empty fridge could be resolved by my parents' liquor cabinet, but I leave it be, and let the water run a bit, as it must before becoming drinkable, chlorine, calcium, it's high in both, and tastes exactly the way I remember the city.

On the living room wall hangs a picture, a painting on an overly small canvas, done in an overly dark palette, showing a seated woman with a serious gaze, or maybe just a very calm look on her face, and as she sits she props herself up on her right hand, reclining ever so slightly, very calmly gazing straight ahead, at the viewer, at the painter, hello, Deda. It's one of the few paintings of yours I know, but just who is this woman, who looks startlingly similar to grandmother, or is that just because there's some turquoise in the picture, and that was her favorite color? This woman cannot be grandmother, simply isn't her, she once told me so, in passing, she said so, but I never asked you. I hadn't seen this picture, didn't even know about it, when you were still around. Grandmother told me she didn't know who the subject was. But grandmother knew everything. Always. No fairy tales, no hide-and-seek. Beauty doesn't come easy wasn't just a saying: the high heels, curlers, freshly manicured nails, stockings, tight bodice, tight skirts, the sweaters she knit herself, the jewelry. The fur coat. Every day. No exceptions, no breaks, no rest from any of it. Not a single sentence was uttered that wasn't meant.

Had she perhaps said it with a tinge of jealousy in her voice, as she stood so close to me, her eyes on the image?

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This image exists and it doesn't. This grandfather who painted the turquoise woman doesn't exist, never did. He made himself disappear, this grandfather who painted the woman, he made himself and almost every last little bit of this grandfather, almost every picture he ever drew or painted, disappear.

And my grandmother says, standing near me, much shorter than I despite her high heels and despite her tall perm, without looking at me, focusing only on the picture: I don't know.

I don't know how he destroyed the paintings, I remember his workshop, and his workbench even better: it was a small room in my grandparents' apartment, and I remember a table with piles of paper, pencils, ashtrays, cigarettes, graphite, and more paper—in an apartment that was otherwise so impeccably organized, so clean, the smallest apartment in the smallest complex of the entire city, kept clean and orderly, almost elegant, through sheer discipline. It would've been easy to set something on fire there. Or did he cut them up into shreds? Set them near a radiator? Or in a damp corner?

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The grandfather who appeared never to do anything by force, the grandfather who jumped at the sound of thunder, who considered everything too loud, who never learned to drive but could scare both himself and grandmother as she drove that they actually did get into accidents, the grandfather who never changed a lightbulb, grandmother did that, too. The grandfather who sat in the corner, smoking, and could easily disappear into the crowd, how had he made everything disappear? How had he destroyed it all? There was one word that no one in the family ever uttered. He—quit. They say. The words one grows up with when it comes to the unspeakable: quit. As if he just woke up one morning, strolled out, and simply decided for himself: I quit. Quit for—say it, softly: for grandmother, for us. So things could be more secure, our income, our lives. And I ask: Is that not the same as—gave up? Destroyed? Annihilated? Eliminated? He came to a decision that called for action. There's almost nothing left from before. That's more than just quitting. There are only three paintings left. One: The woman in turquoise. She, who had known him, the man I would never meet. The man who never said a thing, never told a story. Who did crossword puzzles in pencil. Word by word. All afternoon. That was his new pace. The only hand gesture he made was when he was holding a pencil, one thing that was still there.

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Where is this turquoise woman looking? What time period is she gazing at you from, as you paint her? As the canvases kept getting smaller, as if you were already steadily annihilating everything—your movements, your painting practice—with your very choice of dimension, ever smaller. Maybe there was no destroying. Maybe the canvases just kept getting smaller until, at a certain point, they were no longer there. And your movement faded away, came to a standstill, finally. Until the present was calm.

Maybe we see so little of this partially reclining turquoise woman because she's listening more than she's looking, maybe she's sitting here before me, turquoise, and listening in, listening away, still today. Doesn't quit. And maybe this partially reclining turquoise woman is a portrait of my young grandfather, who I'd never be able to imagine as such, as if he had already begun brushing things off here, too, as if in this very moment he had rendered all previous moments deaf, blind, and dumb. No paintings, no noise. But not entirely. Maybe he painted her in a moment of understanding. Of acceptance. Of acceptance that this moment was one of tenderness, togetherness, a moment that should last. Standing before someone, painting, in that moment: an understanding of one another.

And behind me the old man, who I knew, long white hair, always long, always combed back, pleated pants, shirt, tie. And his cane. You're smoking again? Good, now you're allowed, but tell me, please:

how long can one hold out, grandfather? How long can one listen in and how long can one hold out? Where does the path begin that's mine and mine alone, that engulfs me, that demands more and more and ever more from me, a path I can share with almost no one, how long will that work out? Even if the stories are different, my slice of time has come so long after yours, so much time has passed, so many people stand between us, and yet I always notice you first, and then the others, the ones who come after, there are already so many breaking-off points, so many endings: One no longer paints, another has given up theater, another has given up acting, too, and another has left the country, always around roughly the same time, at about this age, the age my body is now. Did anyone in my grandfather's family ever quit something so completely that the echo still reverberates today? And I'm about to.

And these quitters ask: Are you still writing?

They ask: So, where are you living?

And they ask: Is there a special someone?

And they don't ask anymore. They quit asking quite some time ago, since their questions always lingered in the air unanswered, since, compared to their paths, mine struck them as one long detour. On the phone and in the living room we talk of any and everything else, and those questions remain, continuously. From those who chose not to continue. And now I'm asking you, Deda: Just tell me, how long can one hold out?

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Quitting—you broke it to me too gently, Deda, you let the others wrap it quietly up into a word, softly, almost painlessly, and then you devoted yourself to solving crosswords. You lured us into the fairy-tale forest and whiled away the days, and when we were finally grown-ups, more grown up than you, and wanted to talk, you got tired, and before we could even begin, you had given up entirely. You told me nothing about jealousy, nor of quitting. Which is what's next. And enough. It's enough.

I walk out, down the street and into town, into the nighttime. Finally, this orange light—a little air, finally.

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### **A ROSARY**

One doesn't say much.

One is awake, until she goes to bed.

The rosary she's fallen asleep with presses into her chest.

By morning her skin is full of cross-shaped impressions, deep grooves in old skin.

One says, every now and then:  
I'm so tired. All I do is sit, and I'm tired.  
And nothing hurts. Or everything.

One suddenly says, just once:  
*Kako život može biti kratak i glup.*  
*Ne moj. Ne moj.*  
How short and stupid life can be.

*Ćiji, bako?*  
Whose life, Grandmother?

Not mine. Not mine.

And morning is just a new number, not a new day.

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## Author Bios

### **Anna Baar**

Born 1973 in Zagreb in former Yugoslavia as the daughter of a Dalmatian mother and an Austrian father, Anna Baar spent her childhood and youth in Austria – between Vienna and Klagenfurt – and on the Dalmatian island of Brač. She studied Journalism and Public Relations at the University of Vienna and the University of Klagenfurt, where she earned her PhD in 2008. As a student, she worked for radio and print media and after her graduation she worked as a free-lancer in the fields of the economy, science and arts.

Since 2012 Anna Baar published numerous short stories, essays and poems in magazines and anthologies. Her first novel “Die Farbe des Granatapfels” (Wallstein) — The Color of the Pomegranate — was published in 2015. An excerpt from the manuscript was shortlisted for the Bachmann Prize at the Festival of German-Language Literature 2015. The novel was ranked number 1 on the ORF Best List for three months and was awarded the Rotahorn Literature Prize. For her second novel “Als ob sie träumend gingen” (2017, Wallstein) – As If They Were Walking in a Dream – Baar received the Theodor Körner Prize.

### **Isabel Fargo Cole**

Isabel Fargo Cole grew up in New York City, received a BA from the University of Chicago in 1995, and has lived in Berlin ever since as a writer and translator. Her translation of Wolfgang Hilbig’s *Old Rendering Plant* received the Kurt & Helen Wolff Prize in 2018, and her other translations of work by Wolfgang Hilbig and Franz Fühmann have been nominated for several awards. Since 2005 she has published short fiction and essays in German, and her debut novel *Die grüne Grenze* (Edition Nautilus, 2017), was nominated for the Klaus Michael Kühne Prize and the Prize of the Leipzig Book Fair. Her second novel, *Das Gift der Biene*, was published by Edition Nautilus in 2019 and selected for the 2019 LiteraTour Nord. From 2006-2016, she co-edited *no man’s land*, an online magazine for new German literature in English. In 2013, she was a co-organizer of the initiative “Writers Against Mass Surveillance.”

### **Judith Keller**

Judith Keller studied German language and literature in Zurich as well as literary writing at the Swiss Literature Institute in Biel and the German Literature Institute in Leipzig. She also studied German as a foreign language in Berlin and Bogotá and was editor of the literary magazine *Edit*. In 2014 she received the New German Fiction Award for her short story *Wo ist das letzte Haus?* (The Last House) which was subsequently translated into English by Katy Derbyshire and published through Readux Books. Her book *Die Fragwürdigen* (The Questionable), published in 2017 by *Der gesunde Menschenversand*, won an award by both the City of Zurich and the Canton of Zurich. *Die Fragwürdigen* was also performed as a theater production and featured as an audio play for Swiss radio.

### **Sasha Marianna Salzmann**

Sasha Marianna Salzmann was born in Volgograd in 1985 and grew up in Moscow. In 1995 they

emigrated with their family to Germany and studied literature, theater, and media at the University of Hildesheim. They have been awarded multiple accolades for their plays, and *Beside Myself* was shortlisted for the German Book Prize in 2017. Salzmann now teaches creative writing in Germany, Turkey, Moldova, Spain, Italy, and the USA.

### **Benjamin Quaderer**

Benjamin Quaderer, geboren 1989 in Feldkirch, Österreich, und aufgewachsen in Liechtenstein, studierte Literarisches Schreiben in Hildesheim und in Wien. Er war Mitherausgeber der Literaturzeitschrift „BELLA triste“ und Teil der künstlerischen Leitung von „PROSANOVA 2014 – Festival für junge Literatur“. „Für immer die Alpen“ ist sein erster Roman. Für einen Auszug daraus erhielt er den 2. Preis beim Open Mike 2016 und ein Arbeitsstipendium des Berliner Senats.

### **Ivna Žic**

Ivna Žic was born in Zagreb in 1986 and grew up in Zurich. She studied Applied Theater Studies, Theater Directing and Dramatic Writing in Giessen, Hamburg and Graz. Since 2011 she has been working as a freelance author, lecturer and director at the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin, Schauspielhaus Vienna, Lucerne Theater, Theater Neumarkt, Schauspiel Essen, Theater St. Gallen and at uniT. Žic has received numerous scholarships and prizes for her work. Her debut novel "Die Nachkommende" was nominated for both the Austrian Book Prize and the Swiss Book Prize in 2019. Ivna Žic lives in Zurich and Vienna.