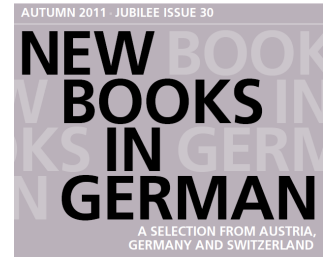


The Girl

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1

Lumps of shit are flying through the air, brushing the branches of a lime-tree, hitting the roof of a passing bus, landing on a young woman's straw hat, smacking against the pavement. Passers-by stop and look upwards. The hot sun glows with a sulphurous yellow, excrement is raining down but not from the sky. It's the postman who first realises what's happening. As he points to a third floor window in a block of rented flats, everyone turns to look with a mixture of amazement and disgust. The building is no different from others in the street, its walls marked by patches of soot, war-time bullet-holes and flaking plasterwork. At the open window a girl's head can be seen, and a skinny arm, poised to launch again. The next clump is already on its way down. People stand in doorways to watch the goings-on. The young woman holds the soiled straw hat at arm's length, there are increasingly loud calls for the sector police to come and the postman jumps sideways as a turd lands right at his feet. Then the window is slammed shut. It's a miracle it doesn't break. After a while, people move off and go about their business.

That was a real stink attack, she thinks to herself, as she stands there, shaded by the curtains. An engine roars in the distance. It's hot and muggy. Like a gas, boredom has rapidly permeated the room again, suffocating her. Head throbbing, she goes into the kitchen, washes her hands and drinks straight from the tap. The girl is twelve. She and her

five-year-old brother, Alex, have been shut in the flat for days and, because the toilets in these blocks are always on the next level down, a load of shit has piled up in a bucket.

Alex is running his toy cars down the ironing board propped up against the wall and into a shoe-box. She wants to thump him. He has been sitting there like that for hours, just staring at his cars and making droning noises. She takes one of his cars and tosses it from one hand to the other. No reaction. She raises her arm to throw it and, at last, he gives a little start and looks up at her.

Come and play, she says.

He mumbles the usual rubbish. Don't want to. Leave me alone. He sits there, motionless.

Come on then, she says. He obeys her this time. It's the tone in her voice.

He follows her into the mother's bedroom. She pulls back the curtains. There is a small toolmaking factory opposite. Soon the men will be on a break. She undresses and hunts in the mother's cupboard for underwear. She wraps a bra round herself, over her flat chest, slips into some red, lace knickers and ties the elastic waistband so that they don't fall down over her bony hips. Taking the stump of a lipstick she paints her mouth. Taking the mother's high heels, she clammers up on to the table in front of the open window and climbs into the shoes. With one hand resting on her waist, she looks over at the factory. After a while she lets her hand drop and just stands there. As soon as the factory-workers appear at the windows opposite, and with an earnest smile on her face, she starts to swivel her hips like she has seen on the television. She tells her brother to clap hard, she swivels faster but the men just gawk at her and remain silent. A couple of days before and in a similar get-up, she had stood before them at the window and been cheered on loudly and applauded. She stands still for a moment to tilt her bottom at them. 'Shame on you, kid,' one man shouts out. Dazzled by the sun, she can't see who it is and has no idea whether he is old or young, or whether he really means it. One thing she's sure of. Shame is more exciting than boredom.

She associates the word with a note of mild disgust in the mother's voice. With arms outstretched she moves her body still more and, even though the men started work again some time ago, carries on dancing as if for her own amusement. Hot and flushed, she clambers down from the table and throws the red patent shoes into a corner.

Alex is sitting on the floor, ripping up a newspaper into tiny pieces. She grins at him and says, now it's your go. Her brother doesn't want her to dress him up. She thinks about the times when her mother beats her with a grey leather belt and is completely out of breath afterwards. With her fingers she takes aim at her brother's forehead. Bang, she shouts out. And again, bang, bang, bang. Then she knocks on his forehead as you would a door. Come on, get up, she is saying, we've got to make you look nice. With the remainder of the lipstick she paints round spots on his cheeks and then smears it all over his lips. When he tries to stop her, she thumps him one. She sees the same fear in his eyes as in her own and that infuriates her. Just shut up, she snarls, even though he already has, like a clam. Meekly he lets her undress him, but when she tries to do the bra up behind his back, she can see for herself that it looks stupid. Alex is even thinner than she is. Her stomach is rumbling so she gets the last packet of rusks from the larder. She dips a rusk in mustard. Its comforting heat and sharpness seems to spread behind her forehead while she is munching on it.

She doesn't know what time it is. The hours drift by like wisps of cloud, vanishing on the horizon. She watches her brother. With his long blonde curls, Alex is mother's darling. But that doesn't mean much because even he can easily fall from favour and be called a naughty child, a wimpy little bastard who needs to be punished. He sits down again on the floor, wraps his arms round his legs and rocks back and forth. When they hear the key in the lock, they hold their breath.

Straight away she can see the flat through the mother's eyes. They have let it turn into a pigsty, each room muckier than the last. The mother walks past them slowly and does not look at them.

Her heart is pounding in her chest, she shuts her eyes. All she wants is to get out. And sometimes she does.

2

Her school report says that her intellect is good but untapped. She always has the same daydream about the post-war years, imagining that she's the black market queen and a master thief, supporting herself and her brother through the famine. In the woods she builds a house of stones, or wood, with a fireplace or a stove, the images in her mind vary. She fits it all out, the larder is full of the most wonderful things to eat and in the garden are the vegetables she has planted. In the evenings she sits at table with her brother and they eat potatoes fresh from the earth.

At school break-times she keeps in with the whispering, giggling girls and makes out that she belongs. Over the last couple of days, they've been singing 'The Day Conny Kramer Died', a song from the 'other Germany'. They know the words by heart and keep repeating the verses, moved each time as if it were the first. She imitates the gestures made by the other girls and tries to get caught up in the song's pathos, tries to pull the same contorted facial expressions.

She seems to have been designated of sociological interest by overenthusiastic teachers and one of the brighter schoolgirls becomes her patron. So now she has to show this girl her homework, put up with all sorts of well-meaning comments and be insulted by her officious posing.

One of these schoolgirl patrons once invites her back home. As Katrin's mother welcomes her, she is transfixed by the sight of her enormous nostrils, reminiscent of those of a horse. In Katrin's bedroom she hides her envy with an embarrassed smile, examining closely the girlie nicknacks that are ranged so prettily on the shelves.

She agrees to play the prince and princess wedding game but only in return for a gift. Katrin hands her a blue scarf embroidered with silver stars. That's for the prince, says Katrin and throws a golden cape around her own shoulders. Will you give it me for keeps? She runs a few steps with the starry blue scarf, letting it flutter behind her.

Why should I? asks Katrin, looking taken aback.

Just because, she replies.

My mother won't let me.

This brings a flicker of hope and she tries to sound conspiratorial. But your mother needn't know.

Katrin thinks about it for a while and then shakes her head.

She switches to begging mode. Give it me, give it me, I've got to have it. She's whirling around, jumping up on the bed, all over the carpet and shouting:

Give it me, give it me, please, please, go on, give it. She's waving the scarf like a flag. Then they chase each other around the room, screaming and shrieking with laughter. She's starting to accept that she'll be going home without the star-spangled scarf. When Katrin's mother opens the door, she finds them on the floor, looking flushed, overexcited and making animal noises. The girl is howling loudly, like a wolf. Katrin's mother gives her a disapproving look and makes it clear to her daughter that it is time for the visitor to go home. Katrin obediently does as she is told straight away and accompanies the girl to the front door.

When she picks up her brother from nursery, she still wants to squeeze more out of the day. She decides to play her favourite game, one she dreamed up herself. It tests drivers' reaction times. She stands on the curb and just as a car is drawing level with her, she darts out and dashes across the road like lightning. Alex has always refused to do it but he joins in

today and is now racing across the street with her, brakes screeching all around them, their hearts pounding.

3

Their mother expects them to go to the doctors' surgery with her. She's wearing a strapless dress, royal-blue, like her eye-shadow. She has really got herself done up, even her toenails are painted and a silver chain gleams on her left ankle. While she and Alex are sitting in the waiting-room, the mother's voice can be heard through the wall. Alex makes a violent hand movement and then just sits next to her, silent and still. When a nurse opens the door, a voice choked with tears can be heard, then pleading, ingratiating words. She is saying that the doctor should make an exception in her case, she already has two children, the fact that she is three or four months gone has nothing to do with it. Then the doctor's voice can be heard quite clearly and forcefully saying that this would be murder and not a solution. This phrase makes a great impression on her.

On the way home they can barely keep up with the mother. In spite of her high heels, she is always a few steps ahead of them.

Later, even though it's been dark for some time, she still can't get to sleep. Is the mother pregnant? She's barely able to remember their father. From mother's insinuations she had worked out for herself that he was in prison. But who has fathered the baby in the mother's belly?

For a long time, she had imagined sex to be like this. A man stands naked in a toilet cubicle. Next to him, separated by a paper-thin wall, is a naked woman. The seed is produced by the man, runs down his legs to the ground and then into the adjacent cubicle, up the woman's legs and inside her. The woman and the man neither move nor speak at all during this process. Now she thinks she knows what really happens: the man puts his thing inside the woman.

For the next few days the mother doesn't go to work. She smokes, drinks, drags her hands through her hair, launches herself forcefully down the block's main staircase and leaps back up them again. She sits for hours in the yellow plastic bath-tub, goes down to the pub herself and carts back home heavy string-bags full of beer bottles. She talks out loud to herself or to her daughter, as if the girl were her confidante. When the mother calls her 'my good little filly', the girl tries to smile but inwardly can only let out a scornful whinny. . When the mother sits weeping in the armchair, she stands next to her and whispers to her consolingly even though her heart hardened long ago. She knows how quickly the mother can suddenly change. And so she's ready for it.

That night a moaning sound wakes her. Tiptoeing across the hallway and peeking through the crack in the door, she sees the mother sitting on the kitchen floor in a pool of blood. At first she doesn't understand what the mother is doing. She's poking around between her open thighs with a knitting needle. To block out this picture of her mother, she stares up at the coloured plates on the wall above her. She breathes out and feels as if she is shrinking. She doesn't want anything to do with the scene now fixed in her mind. She wishes she had a different mother. For a long time she had wondered whether she had been swapped for another baby at birth. But thoughts like this don't help at all. At night she dreams about a monster that wants to kill her and, when she is eventually able to open the window to shout for help, a thundering storm whips up and drowns out her cries.

The following morning the kitchen floor is clean once more. When she opens the mother's bedroom door, she notices a sour smell hanging in the air. The mother waves her in and goes on at her in a tearful voice, talking about paradise and about Jesus living in a golden palace, although born in a miserable stable. She tries to look sympathetic but all she can feel is loathing. But then the mother starts to tell her what she had dreamt that night. And the dream is the same as her own, ending with cries for help which nobody can hear.

She catches her breath. Can it really be that they even inhabit the same world of dreams, too? Will she never be able to get away?

4

Elvira is new to the class and lives in another block of flats only a couple of doors away. They walk the same way after school and so she accompanies Elvira home in their free period as if it were the natural thing to do. A very fat woman opens the door, smiling and welcoming them. The tiny kitchen smells of boiled cabbage. Barely any light gets in through the window that looks out over the rear courtyard. While Elvira's mother asks the girls all about school, she runs her pudgy little hand through the silver perm that encases her head like a helmet of curls. She breathes heavily. The girl has never seen such a fat woman. Elvira explains later that her mother is unwell and rather stout because of problems with her metabolism. On her next visit she meets Elvira's father. He's wearing checked slippers, steel-rimmed glasses and a Party badge on the collar of his greasy, ironed jacket. When he asks her something, he takes off his spectacles, but mostly he doesn't say anything at all.

On Tuesdays they have three free periods which they spend at Elvira's home. At that time of day there's a repeat of 'Willi Schwabe's Treasure Chest', a popular TV programme featuring old black and white films, and they eat spaghetti with tomato ketchup while watching it. They're very keen on Heinz Rühmann and Theo Lingen, but most of all they like Johannes Heester, and are even a bit in love with him. Those Tuesdays are happy days, and she looks forward to them all week long.

She likes her new friend's parents. They're poor but their poverty has an air of respectability, so different from where she lives. Her own mother is always talking about money. Under the bed she hides a cashbox in which she keeps banknotes and cheap jewellery. Sometimes the girl goes into the bedroom and sees the mother sitting in bed, rings and bracelets spread out

before her, the banknotes divided into little piles. The mother never asks whether there is anything she likes, only whether she can guess the price of the latest acquisition. It gives her enormous pleasure when she hears her daughter give the wrong answer. It cost much more than that, the mother says, with pride in her voice.

She would like to give Elvira's mother something, something to say thank you for the kindness she shows her. It's the first time she's ever gone shoplifting with a specific purpose. She prowls through the department store, looking at blouses, dresses, coats. None of the shop assistants asks if there's anything they can do for her. She plumps for a bright red Dederon polyester overall. She thinks all the other garments are even more hideous.

When Elvira opens the door, she holds her finger up to her lips, signalling to her to be quiet. Her mother is ill. Elvira's father is sitting in the armchair in the living room. The radio is on. He offers her a cup of coffee. Normally she only ever gets coffee substitute made from barley malt and she is surprised by the bitter taste. She indicates the photo on the wall, a man with a naked, dirty torso, his face smeared with coal-dust.

Who's that? she asks.

Elvira's father takes his glasses off and begins to deliver a lecture about Adolf Hennecke, a pioneering political activist who single-handedly broke all coal-mining records in one shift. She's taken aback by how seriously he's responding to her question and, because she senses that he likes her curiosity, she asks him more. But then she can't quite shake off the feeling that he's talking as if to convince himself of what he's saying, and his voice sounds like a politician on the radio. He pauses in mid-sentence, gestures as if he wants to brush something off the table, and then puts his spectacles back on. Of course, she's heard of Adolf Hennecke He's hardly what you'd call a role model, people crack jokes about him

because he exceeded the quota limits and betrayed his comrades. When it's raining heavily, the grown-ups say that it's bucketing like Hennecke.

She takes the bright red apron back to her house and uses it to fashion clothes for her dolls.

The mother rarely lets her go out after school and she has never been allowed to bring anyone back. Her mother works shifts as a waitress at the railway station restaurant Mitropa, and is often still in bed when she comes home from school. Even though she creeps in so quietly through the hall, the shouting starts straight away, it's all aimed at her. For the last few weeks, the mother has been constantly beside herself and her belly is unmistakably bigger. The mother doesn't talk to her about it at all and she doesn't dare to ask. In the mother's eyes, everything she does is wrong and she lashes out blindly at her daughter. Her house-arrest gets extended constantly, first it's days, then weeks, then the mother completely loses track of things and says she has to stay indoors until autumn, until the first snow, until next year.

She asks Elvira to wait a while outside the door of the flat after school, until the mother has calmed down again. She feels stronger, less alone, the beatings don't hurt so much if her friend can hear her cries.

5

She hears someone laughing as she opens the flat door, the deep, sombre laugh of a male, and before she sets foot in the kitchen, she asks herself whether this is a good or a bad sign. Sitting at the table, next to the mother, is a man with black hair and dark eyebrows, narrow shoulders which slope forward slightly. The mother's feet are in his lap and one of his hands

is resting on her bare ankles. A bottle of wine and two glasses are on the table in front of them.

The man stares at her. Is that her? he asks.

That's your daughter, replies the mother in a choked voice and takes her feet out of his lap.

Come here, says the man who's supposed to be her father.

He reeks of alcohol, she thinks, and when he puts his arms round her, she notices another, unfamiliar smell.

She answers his questions. On his middle finger there are two gleaming rings, on the little finger of his left hand there's red nail varnish, on his chest there's thick, curly hair protruding from his open shirt. This is supposed to be her father? He's turned back to the mother and it looks as if she's listening to him intently and with admiration.

Later on she picks up her brother from nursery. He gets excited when she tells him about the man in the kitchen, the man who might be his father, too. But that turns out to be wrong.

The mother introduces Alex. He's not yours, but he's got lovely curls, she says.

The man barely looks at him.

Real angel's hair, says the mother. Silently, Alex stands there in front of him, blinking nervously and looking close to tears.

The man laughs out loud, showing yellow teeth. Let's celebrate, he says, I'm in party mood.

The mother gives her some money and sends her down to the local pub, 'Jahns Ruhe', Jahn's Rest. The landlord carries the string-bags full of beer as far as the door for her. It's already getting dark. She normally tries to imagine how other people live, behind those brightly lit windows, but today she can't. There are too many questions going round in her

head. This man who's supposed to be her father, will he come and live with them? Will they be a family, will they sit round the table and eat together?

The father is thirsty, very thirsty. He's soon polished off all the beer. That evening she goes time and time again to Jahn's, it being open until long after midnight. Before she can go to bed, the father puts his arms around her, doesn't ever want to let his daughter go, but she finds all this tenderness embarrassing.

Some things have changed since the father has been living with them. When the mother and he fight, something which happens every day, she doesn't usually have any energy left to shout around the place or to beat the children. There are days when they eat an evening meal together and sit around the table like a family. But she doesn't feel at ease doing this. The mother is constantly finding fault. Sit up straight, she says to the children, hands on the table, don't chomp your food, shut up.

For some reason the father calls her brother Thusnelda Aurora. He likes to see himself as a man of honour and calls himself 'mensch'. He says things like 'mensch doesn't feel like joking around today'. Or, 'Hasn't a mensch earned a bit of rest?'

Lost your tongue, have you? The mother snarls at Alex. He's crouching in front of the bed, breathing through an old snorkel while rocking his body back and forth. Take that thing out of your mouth, says the mother and slams her fist against the wall. Her brother holds his eyes tight shut. She knows that feeling. He wishes he were invisible. She observes the scene as if from a distance and although she does feel sorry for him, the relief that the raging storm of anger is not directed at her this time outweighs any sympathy.

When she wakes in the night, she sees Alex standing at the window. Though she calls out to him, there's no reaction. He's staring out of the window and doesn't notice her. When she grabs him by the elbow, he gives a shriek. She puts her hand over his mouth. Be quiet, she says, or the old bag'll wake up. Be quiet, she says again, and pulls her brother along behind

her. He follows, sits on the edge of the bed, his face pale. After some persuasion from her, he lies down. She snuggles up to him and listens to his breathing.

The mother laughs when she hears about it. I'd love to have seen that, she says. How strange. She looks at her son in surprise. A sleepwalker, a real moonstruck sleepwalker, says the mother and runs her fingers through his curly hair.

She has set the alarm clock for midnight. But this time, Alex isn't standing at the window, he's sound asleep in bed. She sits down next to him and strokes his back. She's expecting something to happen tonight, she feels restless from head to toe. She shakes her brother, trying to wake him.

Get up, she says, you've got to get up. When he eventually opens his eyes, she puts on a disguised voice and says, The moon awaits you. You should make your way there.

But Alex can't take it in. He rubs his eyes and mumbles, What d'you want? Leave me alone. She pinches his arm lightly. You're dreaming. She strokes a curl back from his forehead and whispers to him, Get up. Alex chokes as he tries to breathe in, and shakes his head.

Get up, she says, clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth.

Once he's standing in front of her, she doesn't really know what she wants of him. Go over to the window, she says.

Alex takes up his position at the window.

She looks at the sky. No moon tonight, she says. Screeching trams can be heard outside. She shivers and then her glance alights upon her brother's night-time potty. She thinks for a moment. Your vest is dirty, she says.

He refuses to wash out the vest in the half-full pot. That's piss, he says, and looks at her with disgust.

It isn't really happening, it's just a dream, she's saying, trying to sound convincing.

He averts his gaze and coughs loudly while he dips the vest in the potty. In between two deep breaths he wrings it out and spreads it on the floor.

It looks cleaner now, she says, as if praising him.

He's tired and stumbles back into bed. She waits until he has fallen asleep. Then she takes hold of his arm which is hanging over the edge of the bed and lays it across the sheet.

The following day she can hardly wait to tell the mother all about it. At first, the mother makes out that she hasn't understood. He did what?

She tells the story once more, inventing extreme details. He's been sleepwalking again, she says, he had his arms outstretched like a bird's wings. The mother flicks a crumb off her blouse. Then she calls loudly for Alex. You damned little bed-wetter, she says to him, I don't ever want to set eyes on you again.

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