

The Invention of Disobedience

Martina Clavadetscher

Novel

German



Martina Clavadetscher gives us the story of three women: Iris, Ling and Ada, all of whom are trying to escape society's constraints. In the process, and in a series of powerful images, the lines between human and machine become blurred. What is real and what is the result of a new, poetic, digital creation?

Title

Die Erfindung des Ungehorsams

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Franziska Sonderer, franziska.sonderer@unionsverlag.ch

Author

Martina Clavadetscher, born 1979, is author and playwright. After her studies of German literature, linguistics and philosophy, she was house author at the Lucerne Theatre. She received the Essener Autorenpreis and was nominated for the Heidelberg Stückemarkt. For her prose work, she received the prize of the Marie-Anne-and-Curt-Dienemann foundation and was nominated for the Swiss Book Prize. She lives in Switzerland.

Photo: Janine Schranz

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they just bolt the moulds together, with the
skeleton inside.*

*The cavity is filled with liquid silicon, the
body formed,
given substance and colour – according on
skin type:*

dark black,

dark brown,

Mediterranean brown,

medium,

Nordic white,

Celtic white,

say the labels

on the plastic tubs

on the shelves.

*Drying requires four to six hours, and then
the bodies are conveyed to workshop two.*

Where half-sister Ling works."

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Excerpt translated by Ruth Martin

The factory

Fifteen seconds' difference from yesterday,
Ling notes the next morning,
as the doors of the electric bus open with a hiss.
On Wanfu Square there are puddles, large and small;
Ling hurries across, passing them,
counting the pools of water on the paving slabs.
Three city officials in face masks and blue vests
are cleaning the fountain at the square's centre,
its light stone arching and coiling, patterned with
scales,
as if a dragon were climbing the column,
an island dweller, surrounded by the dirty water
that fell from the sky for days on end,
without washing away the city's problems.

On the contrary. The city is clean and certain,
but nature makes it uncertain and filthy,
thinks half-sister Ling as she slots her whole self
into the crowd's synchronicity,
countless feet, legs, knees,
and again
countless feet, legs, knees,
coordinated mechanisms
scaling stairs
passing down passages
standing on steps.
Arms and hands oscillate
in time, side by side,
adapt their swinging to become
an organic repetition,
one creature with many limbs –
row upon row of them.
Destinations pre-programmed,
these human resources squash themselves
into metro trains and buses,
ascend and descend escalators
and seep at last
out of train and bus stations and into the air.
People in face masks are driven onward

by loudspeakers, city employees,
this time in yellow vests,
channelling the living stream and thinning out the
crush.
Sitting is forbidden; walking an obligation.
And Ling obeys, because Ling likes to obey;
this is how she functions all day long – from dawn till
dusk.

The neon lights blanch against the morning sky,
but the clouds remain, refuse to move.
The city on the estuary woke early,
after all, there's work to do;
not by chance did it grow so large and rich.

From fisherman to millionaire
in a single generation,
as journals all around the world are saying,
and the streets now rarely smell
of dead chickens, cut flowers and broth, of burning
plastic;
more rarely still of rubbish, urine, caramelised sugar,
and never again of dead fish,
lying in the markets on mountains of splintered ice.
Those days are gone.
Now, billboards broadcast empty three-word slogans
like: Live. Work. Shop.
And the city's countenance shines with cleanliness –
or would, if not for the decay
that has lorded it over the delta for days.

Rain changes the hierarchy.
After a while, Ling leaves the walking crowd,
and only a few women leave with her;
very few women workers hail from a flat outside the
district.

The others live cheek by jowl beside the factory,
far from the respect and point score Ling enjoys.
Three women peel off with her today.

No, wait, it's four.

There is a fourth woman,
Ling notes to her surprise as her quick feet leave
Fuyong Avenue behind.
Soon she is passing a procession
of worker silos, factory yards and workshops.
There is no telling their facades apart;
so similar, the buildings in this part of town.

Ling's destination lies behind a metal fence.
Security is more than a mere formality here;
not much to interest burglars on the factory floors,
but now and then bedsheets hang from the fence,
abuse or anonymous warnings
that management says not to take seriously.

Fanatical enemies of the economy!

With no work ethic and no points!

the factory manager roars
as each banner is cut down and disposed of
before the eyes of all the women workers.
Ling enters the compound,
her magnetic card opening the spring-loaded door.

Good morning,

murmurs the guard behind the glass,
his greeting barely requiring a twitch of his moustache.

He makes the words sound casual,
Ling notes, and now she thinks:

He only does that with me and only
because thirteen days ago

I told him his name tag

was crooked.

She looks at his chest again, checking.

Beside the buttons of his uniform, the chrome badge
sits

straight and gleaming.

Jon B.

it says.

Ling nods and the guard's cheeks change colour.

They always do.

Half-sister Ling is glad of this regularity.

Her life is proceeding according to plan. At least, so
far.

In the first changing room

the women hang bags and coats in metal closets;

phones are placed in plastic bags.

At the entrance to the workshops waits a colleague.

Her name is Lia and she starts with their ankles,

slides her patting hands

up stockinged legs,

moves on to hips

to waistband,

stomach, back,

and breasts,

and back down, until Lia says:

 Alright,

and at last, Ling steps forward.

Ling feels Lia's hands,

a sliding pressure like warm water
seeping into her nylon tights.

 She wants you too, Lia,

says a woman whose name is Angi.

Every single day she says these words,

and every single day some of the women giggle.

 A recurring joke.

 A running gag.

Ling knows because she looks these things up
on the internet –

but Lia, patting, only gives the joke a sullen grin.

 A bad joke, then,

Ling concludes. She gets the gag, of course.

In theory.

And every single day she puts on a smile,

to show off her sense of humour,

but this time something stops her;

this time a shadow enters the room.

It creeps along the concrete wall and belongs to:

 The fourth woman.

 She's followed us,

thinks Ling and then she sees

the woman is just breezing through,

as if she isn't new at all.

The fourth woman is holding up a pass;

skirting the line, and disappearing into

a side room.

 A woman from the head department.

 Skin tone: Nordic white,

Ling concludes and enters a too-small room,
that smells of solvent.

Here the women don fabric aprons,

then the firm's face mask, three layers of fleece,

eyes and forehead all that's left exposed;

loops of elastic are quickly fixed behind their ears.

Workshop one is a hive of activity,

three fans spinning soundlessly on the ceiling,

while several black-aproned men go about their work.

Raw metal constructions lean against the wall,

dozens of skeletons, all rods and swivelling joints,

waiting to be lifted and brought to the workbenches,
where the moulds lie ready.

The men are placing each metal skeleton in its own
shell,

a negative with anthropomorphic curves and a coating
that helps them to remove the finished product.

 Ankles, up the legs,

 the hips, not quite so wide,

 then the back, the ribs,

 the breasts, not quite so large,

 then the shoulders, the neck,

and Ling recalls hands patting her own body.

They never touch the head. The head is taboo.

 The head is home to thoughts.

 Thoughts, all secret and free,

Grandmother Zea told her once,

but these words weren't explanation enough for Ling.

From the corners of her eyes, she studies the top end
of the metal skeleton,

fixing on the neck, the interface

where the complete body passes suddenly into empty
space:

the skull is missing.

The head lies outside the men's remit,

they just bolt the moulds together, with the skeleton
inside.

The cavity is filled with liquid silicon, the body formed,
given substance and colour – according on skin type:

 dark black,

 dark brown,

 Mediterranean brown,

 medium,

 Nordic white,

 Celtic white,

say the labels

on the plastic tubs

on the shelves.

Drying requires four to six hours, and then

the bodies are conveyed to workshop two.

Where half-sister Ling works.

Three copies lie ready on her workbench,

three fresh-poured bodies, pressed from their moulds

just this morning.

The lifeless bodies are piled rump on rump,

arms and legs protruding. Their rigidity is real.
The headless creatures wait as if frozen in shock,
as if someone had pressed pause.

They are less than one day old.
Ling thinks about the births in workshop one,
the men incessantly producing
new women
and bringing them in here.
Their nakedness lends the room a strange weight.
The flesh dominates, smooth skin everywhere,
the light from the factory ceiling doubling the effect,
reflected back
by this sea of feminine curves,
by this mass of thermoplastic elastomer.
Ling clasps an ankle,
slides a hand under the woman's spine,
pulling the first body closer.

Hello, my name is Ling.

Don't be afraid.

I'll make you flawless.