

# Picture Without Girl

Sarah Elena Müller

Novel

German



*In her debut novel Picture Without Girl, Sarah Elena Müller broaches a sensitive subject: child abuse. The story of the child, neglected and left to suffer, wins over readers with its highly concentrated, poetic language. What goes on at the neighbours' house doesn't worry the parents. The mother is too busy devoting herself to her art, the father trying to save the environment. So their child goes to watch TV at Ege's place. Ege is a media theorist who collects films. He also films the child. In one of the films, the child discovers an angel. She holds on to the angel and seeks refuge in it while enduring her helpless silence. The adults do not see the angel; they look away altogether. In their quest for self-fulfilment, they have neither the time nor patience to deal with the child's suffering, and so they enlist a questionable healer to take care of her bed-wetting. Darkly, the child suspects that she is not an angel: 'It's her own fault.'*

*"The child wants to forget that her soul has a leak through which it is dripping."*

## Title

Bild ohne Mädchen

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## Author

Sarah Elena Müller, born in 1990, is a multimedia artist who works in literature, music, virtual reality, radio play and theatre. She is a ghostwriter for the Swiss dialect pop duo *Cruise Ship Misery*, in which she also performs as a musician, and leads the virtual reality project *Meine Sprache und ich* (My language and I) – a detailed examination of Ilse Aichinger's language criticism. In 2019, her scene book *Culturestress – Endzeit ist immer scho inbegriffe* (Culture stress – the end time is always included) was published by Der gesunde Menschenversand. In 2015, her short story *Fucking God* was published by Büro für Problem. As co-founder of the RAUF collective, she is committed to the causes of feminist authors in Switzerland. Her work is occasionally awarded prizes and residencies.

Photo: Laura Stevens

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Excerpt translated by Alexandra Roesch

FORESIGHT

Grandma stares at the corner of the room. The ocean is roaring in the corner. The roaring holds the voice of a French singer; the wind is on its way and will stir everything up. And Grandpa will be taken away by an undertaker.

The carer gives Grandma a mauve pill to make the singer stop singing. But neither the surging waves nor the singing die down; Grandma lets herself be pushed closer to the corner so she can hear better. The great wind is driving into the sails or slips of paper; Grandma says the singer has a strange pronunciation. Mother pulls the handles of the wheelchair behind her back to move her out of the corner, but Grandma presses her slippers firmly into the carpet. There is no wind, Mother assures her. Not yet, but soon, Grandma replies and doesn't give in. Exhausted by her resistance, Mother lets go of the wheelchair and Grandma remains seated in front of her ocean corner.

Her chin resting on her forearms, the girl stands in the hallway, leaning forward towards the photographs on the dresser, absorbed in the faces of the still young aunts and uncles. The same ones who had ordered take-away pizza the evening before to fill their still living bodies with something. Who had then imperceptibly talked their way out of their parental home that contained their dead father and the responsibility. Mother has a sudden realisation about an aspect of life that is logical and obvious. Astonished, she pulls one of the frames closer to the edge of the dresser.

'The later they were born, the more alive they look.'

She points to the young girl in the middle of the picture, to herself. She holds the youngest of the six siblings on her lap, its happy moon face turned willingly towards the camera. Her own gaze looks far beyond the

picture and the world. The photographer had said that Mademoiselle should raise her chin a little. But the Mademoiselle didn't raise her chin; only her gaze, briefly. The photographer, startled by the sadness that hurtled towards him through the narrow lens, forgot to release the shutter; Mademoiselle was already looking away again, beyond the edge of existence, when the shutter finally clicked.

'The others are gazing to the horizon too,' Mother notes, running her finger over the glass, 'just less than me. Less and less as the years go by. This brother here, three years younger than me, he is not looking quite as far away. But at least to the next body of water.'

The girl takes the picture, holds it in front of her with outstretched arms and tries in vain to navigate her way into the brother's gaze. His gaze also leaves the picture, doesn't land on anyone and moves off into the distance.

'It's very cramped living squashed in a square. There is always another one. They just didn't stop. Always another. If you are the first, they make you responsible for everything that the ones who come after you do. You have to grow up quickly and teach the others the rules of the square. The rules, the boundaries and the price of everything. You are pushed forward, mercilessly.' Mother marks out the square with outstretched hands in front of her face. 'The only way to escape was to adopt that gaze. To fix on a point farther away than the nearest thing. Beyond what was coming your way.'

The girl nods thoughtfully and puts the frame back on the dresser. When she turns to her mother, she is still staring alternately at her palms and through them, an almost imperceptible gliding from near to far. She hasn't practised it, it just happens. Mother lowers her palms and holds them out to her daughter. Apologetically. Look. Can you see, it even happens with your own hands.

The daughter takes them, turns them over, carefully releases the fingers from their rigidity, presses her understanding into the cool flesh of her mother's hand

until it becomes softer again, more alive. Over in the other room, Grandma is sitting staring into the corner, and is beyond the world. In the picture frame, the brothers and sisters are unwilling. The girl understands that hands and walls give form. That one figure is the mould of the next. Grandmother, mother, daughter.

#### THE CHILD

#### SIGHTING

The child shakes off the rigidity of the television. Shakes the images and sounds out of itself so that the parents don't notice that it has secretly filled itself up with them at the neighbours' house. Then it pushes the living room door open with a fresh face.

The parents are sitting on chairs in the living room with other adults. They call it visits. After the visits are done, the parents slump down into a reclining position and sigh. The backs of the chairs prevent them from falling backwards earlier.

There is lots of talking during visits. The grown-ups want to look each other in the face.

The kindergarten teacher is sitting on the corner seat. The child watches the hand movements of the conversation for a long time from the doorway. The kindergarten teacher's say: Not good. The parents' say: Nonsense. The kindergarten teacher's hands say: Yes, yes! Shortly before the child's fresh face freezes again, it is noticed and called to come and sit down. It sits right on the edge of the chair and waits for a word to be dropped for it. A word that it recognises and can respond to. It is sitting up straight even without the back of the chair.

There is a perpendicular frown in the kindergarten teacher's face. She had asked the child to saw an easter egg shape from a thin piece of wood with a saw at kindergarten. But the child had not been mentally able to do this, the kindergarten teacher tells the parents. The parents look as if they want fall straight into bed.

The child is happy to have the support of the back of the chair.

It has a clear picture of the saw. The kindergarten teacher had shown the child how to use it, and the delicate saw blade had snapped with a crack. The child was very frightened, and the kindergarten teacher said this could easily happen. The child had to pay twenty centimes for every broken saw blade. Everything came with a price. She winked at the child as she said it. From then on the child refused to touch the saw. It didn't have any money and the fear of a snapped saw blade was so great that it spent the rest of the day hiding under a stool. From there it had watched the other children break countless blades, there was a constant jangling, and the children happily waved the broken saw blades in front of each other's faces. When the sawdust and the broken saw blades were swept up, the kindergarten teacher let the children leave with their eggs without asking them for money. The child thought this very strange.

The kindergarten teacher does not tell the parents about the money when she comes to visit. The child slides forward uneasily on the edge of the chair. It wants to say its word now. It wants to say that the kindergarten teacher has forgotten to say the word. The money word. That everything comes at a price. And she had winked. But the kindergarten teacher doesn't pause. She says development and psychomotor skills and sensible. The parents roll their eyes. That is a good sign. The child is sent out again. It should go and swing.

The child looks at the swing. It is fixed to the underside of the balcony. Father's reasonable voice can be heard through the open balcony door, talking sense into the kindergarten teacher. Mother's voice joins in too.

The grown-ups' different reasonings step into a clearing in the forest. They are stags. They circle one another and examine the ends of the other's antlers. The stags do this so that they don't get into a strength-sapping fight every time they meet. That's what the father told the child. The stags are noble.

The stags assess. They weigh up. The child can't count. And it can't pay. It can't pay the price. Mother's reasoning, however, perhaps senses that the kindergarten teacher is not telling the whole story. Mother said that the stags have no understanding of numbers and ends; they sense each other's power.

The child hopes that the parents' reasoning will drive the kindergarten teacher's reasoning from the clearing and thanks the backs of the chairs. The parents will be very tired after the visit.

The child clammers onto the swing, rocks back and forward a little and feels the rough hemp ropes that support the swing seat. The swing is a chair without a backrest; instead you hold onto the ropes. What would happen if it were to simply let go of the ropes? Excitement tingles through the child. Would it just rebound like a grown-up? Would it be grown-up in one fell swoop?

With the next swing, the child lets go of the ropes and slams down hard on its back. The impact takes its breath away. It stares at the glaring sun and the swing that is dangling in front of it. It is still inside its body, it wants to scream, but its chest is stiff as if it is set in concrete. The sun shines in through its open eyes. Mother calls the child and comes out onto the balcony. She leans over the railing. The child is lying on its back in the grass, gasping for air.

Wheezing through the snorkel, the child studies the blanket of foam above it. The bubbles crackle and sway gently back and forth. The shower hose rumbles against the side of the bathtub; the child's bottom squeaks on the bottom of the bath and its heart is thumping loud and strong. The child listens to its organs; they sound good. It knows that its organs will accompany it into adulthood. It closes its eyes beneath the diving goggles. This is how it must have been. Muffled hammering and murmuring outside, throbbing and swooshing inside. It sees itself as it used to be - a tiny human grain, just as it now floats in the bathwater, as it will eat potato fritters this evening and leave the house much later, with an idea, a plan or a task. Prepared for everything,

with a medium-sized bag full of tissues and other accessories for the day. And the organs in the child will be there and speak inside it. The child feels: it belongs to itself.

A second feeling lives in this feeling. It is light, sad and beautiful. Like the pictures on the neighbour's television. There and yet not there. The child cannot hold on to the feeling; it wafts out on the back of a breath through its chest. It escapes through the snorkel and can't find its way back.

The child sobs beneath the foam. The window is tilted; the feeling will escape. The parents have to catch it. Keep it. For later. The child knows that something is happening that it can't understand. Even the parents probably can't understand. But they should. They should know what to do. Because of the kindergarten teacher. And the price on everything. They said sensible. Be sensible.