



Ronya Othmann

**Vierundsiebzig**

**Seventy-four**

Literary Fiction

512 pp

Rowohlt

To be published in March 2024

**Following her outstanding debut “Die Sommer”, Ronya Othmann presents her second novel: a poignant testimony of international relevance.**

"I have seen. The self is a witness. It speaks, and yet it has no language." This is how she describes the process of storytelling. She wants to find a form for the unspeakable, the genocide of the Yezidi population, the seventy-four, perpetrated by IS fighters in Sinjar in 2014.

Seventy-four is a journey to the origins, to the crime scenes: to the camps and the front lines, into the living rooms of relatives and on to an Ezidi village in Turkey where no one lives today. It is about looking, listening, bearing witness, linking images and reports with one's own history, with a life as a journalist and author in Germany.

Ronya Othmann creates a textual fabric of immense density, necessary clarity and rigour. Her voice is one of diaspora, which also leaves deep traces in the reader.



© Dirk Skiba

**Ronya Othmann**, born in Munich in 1993 to a German mother and a Kurdish-Ezidi father, writes poetry, prose and essays and works as a journalist. She has been honoured many times for her writing, including the **Open Mike Poetry Prize**, the **MDR Literature Prize** and the **Caroline Schlegel Prize** for Essay Writing. She was awarded the **Mara Cassens Prize** in 2020 for *Die Sommer*, her first novel, and the **Orphil Debut Prize**, the **Horst Bienek Prize** and the **Horst Bingel Prize** in 2022 for her poetry collection *Die Verbrechen* (2021). *Vierundsiebzig*, her second novel, was nominated for the **German Book Prize** and honoured with the **Düsseldorf Literature Prize** in 2024 and the **Erich Loest Prize** in 2025.

Her previous novel **THE SUMMERS** was taken up enthusiastically by the **German press**, was sold into seven territories so far and sold **over 25.000 copies** in Germany.

**These are her international publishers so far:**

**US:** Wisconsin University Press

**Netherlands:** Tzara

**Spain:** Alpha Decay

**Indonesia:** ayasan Pustaka Obor

**Marathi:** Papyrus Prakashan

**Mongolia:** Monsudar

**Sri Lanka:** Dedunna Books

## What the press says on her previous book **Die Sommer**:

»Her political voice is clear and decisive. Her literary voice is controlled, without digression and simple.«

– DER SPIEGEL

»Othmann has found a convincing, clever narrative style for her novel. [...] The constantly marked distance [...] the political level of the novel gains its urgency. There is no need for emotional amplification or literary re-enactment.«

– DIE ZEIT

»Othmann's novel makes something clear that belongs much more in the general consciousness: there are many people living among us who are traumatized not only by their flight from the conflicts in the Middle East, but also by the subsequent devastation of their homeland. [...] It offers a haunting view of the fatal subjective effects it has on relatives living here. «

– Der Freitag

»Othmann convincingly interweaves cultural and ethnic themes of two cultures. [...] A very haunting book. [...] The novel is realistic, gripping and thought-provoking.«

– Die Presse

»What makes this book so extraordinary is the decisiveness of its political stance. [...] Othmann's writing about war, torture and forced self-denial makes it shockingly clear what a privilege it is to have an intact identity.«

– Neue Zürcher Zeitung am Sonntag

»A novel that comes across with such great aplomb that it doesn't even feel like a debut when you read it.«

– Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung

Othmann creates an insight into a world that we think we know at first glance. [...] The novel deals with the subject of identity without the usual kitsch that is so often used to write about origins.«

– Die Tageszeitung

»A stunning debut novel that is told in a very concrete and vivid way, with strong characters and dialogues that are so integrated into the novel's narrative that its tone is lively even when it conveys the knowledge shaped by the characters' experiences.«

– Deutschlandfunk Kultur

»With her debut, Othmann adds a new perspective to contemporary literature: a Yazidi-Kurdish-German story. [...] 'Die Sommer' is a book that sensitively tells of being torn, of sitting between two stools.«

– MDR Kultur

»Ronya Othmann succeeds in drawing not only this old woman, but all those involved so clearly with just a few strokes and creating such a closeness to them that there is never the impression of being lectured on the subject of flight and migration: The narrative's wealth of key scenes and facets of perception rather means that new insights, deeper insights, open up quite suddenly.«

– Süddeutsche Zeitung

# Seventy-Four

by Ronya Othmann

Sample translation by Alexandra Roesch

\*\*\*

**I always thought** that when the sky fell on the earth,  
it would be the end.

But on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2014, the sky didn't fall on the earth and still, it was  
the end.

I write: A woman from the Shariya camp told me that.

I write:

**In August 2014**, I found myself in front of the television screen, witnessing women dressed in the traditional attire of my grandmother, my aunt, my cousins, and men resembling my grandfather, my father, my uncles, and my cousins desperately fleeing for their lives. It's midsummer. In the Sinjar mountains, infants, the elderly, and the sick succumb to thirst. Sinjar is reportedly besieged. They kill the men and older women who cannot escape, while the younger women and children become spoils of war, sold in slave markets to ISIS fighters. Women bearing my name, my sister's name, my cousin's name.

I read that the captors first sever the bracelets of the captured women. These are the same bands given to us every year for Çarşema Sor, the Red Wednesday, and the Yazidi New Year, meant as protective symbols. They must not be removed. If they come loose, they should be tied to a tree branch while making a wish.

The events of August 2014 elude my memory. Later, I make a note: I sit in front of the television because I know I did. I know what I saw, but the specifics elude me.

I describe myself sitting on the sofa in my parents' living room, showering or eating only when I realise how long it has been since I last did so.

Every piece of writing for me is an act of fiction, whether about myself, my father, my grandmother, or a character to whom I assign a name and a story.

In 2014, I witnessed Yazidi representative Vian Dakhil delivering a speech before the Iraqi parliament. I observed her struggle to articulate the events that took place in Shingal; she ultimately collapsed mid-speech and was escorted out by two parliamentarians. I saw the host and connected reporter on the Kurdish TV channel Rudaw, instead of reporting on Shingal, break down in tears.

People's speechlessness is palpable in the face of these atrocities (and I would refrain from using that term) and these crimes (and I would refrain from using that term too, because neither adequately captures what happened). In the light of what transpired in Sinjar in 2014, later labelled genocide by the United Nations and the European Parliament, language proves inadequate. I repeatedly watched both videos - the one featuring the Yazidi parliamentarian and the one with the host and reporter. Both began with factual details, detailing what happened where, how, and when, only to abruptly cease mid-speech.

In 2018, not even four years after the genocide, I fly to my family in Kurdistan. We visit the Ashti camp, which translates as peace, near Arbat, roughly half an hour from the city of Sulaymaniyah, near the Iranian border.



I note down: I sit alongside Lara and Lava in the back seat. Lara and Lava are grumpy. Lara expresses her reluctance - they visit the camp so frequently. We approach, there is a road, then turn off onto a gravel road, amid an expansive flat landscape surrounded by mountains beneath the blue morning sky. A guardhouse. They recognise us, waving us through.

We visit friends in the camp. A family that endured ISIS captivity, or what remains of a family, lives in one of the tents. Two boys, perhaps seven or eight years old, sit in profound silence, a sight unprecedented for children their age. Their mother shows me photos of her abducted father, husband, and daughter, breaking into loud sobs. My cousin, beside me, engrosses herself in her mother's smartphone, watching cat videos intently.

"Look at this woman," says my aunt. In the corner of the tent sits an elderly woman with white hair, a white headscarf, and a dress. I have never witnessed someone sit as she does, shoulders and head bowed forward, slouched. Her face is barely discernible. Since the arrival of ISIS in her village, my aunt states, this elderly woman has not uttered a single word. Not only has she refrained from speaking, she is unresponsive.

The speechlessness has etched itself into this woman's body. She does not raise her gaze once, not as we enter the tent, not as we sit, and not as we depart. In her left hand, visible only as we bid farewell, she clutches a minuscule pebble.

\*\*\*

A few days later, we visited the Sheikh of our family. The Sheikh recounted the harrowing tale of a seven-year-old boy whose father was beheaded by ISIS fighters in front of him. This gruesome act occurred after the father refused to convert to Islam.

The militants then handed the severed head to the young boy, asking, "Now that you have seen what we did to your father, do you want to convert to Islam?"

The Sheikh, after lighting a cigarette, proceeded to share a second story. Following the second narrative, he began a third. After the third, he fell silent, stating: "I could continue indefinitely; we could sit here for twenty-four hours, and I could share stories for the entire duration."

The parliamentarian who collapsed during her speech, the reporters who shed tears, an old woman who fell into silence, and the Sheikh, recounting story after story, claiming he could continue for twenty-four hours without reaching an end - all these reactions underscore the inadequacy of language to convey the events of August 2014. Even facts and figures, the death toll, the specific date, August 3, 2014, or the 74th Ferman (as Yazidis refer to the genocide) serve as mere placeholders for an indescribable experience. The unspeakable lies beneath the language, even when there's a text. Speechlessness itself becomes part of the narrative, shaping its grammar, form and words.

I write: I visited a landscape. Within this landscape lay a camp, inside the camp, a tent, and within the tent, an old woman holding a pebble.

I write: I have witnessed. The "I" is a witness. It speaks, yet it lacks language.

**In June 2018**, I am on an aeroplane, I am chewing gum to ease the pressure in my ears and calm my nerves. The plane is descending. I gaze out of the window, I see ochre-coloured earth, houses with flat roofs, and streets. I take a photo.

Why am I travelling to Iraq, the man who sat beside me in silence for four hours asks, introducing himself with a typically American name that I immediately forget. Thomas, Michael, or perhaps Mark. Why on earth am I coming to this country, he asks me.

I tell him I am visiting family, with no inclination for further conversation. I am unsure of how to articulate my solo journey to Iraq and why I booked flights to reunite with people I last saw at the age of three.

"Don't worry, Uncle Khalef is family," my father assured. I choose not to elaborate on what family means to us, avoiding an explanation to Mark. As a non-Muslim and as a woman, aren't I afraid to travel alone in Iraq? Marc asks. This country is *insane*.

I almost regret not disclosing my profession as a journalist. Marc, allegedly working for the US military, remains tight-lipped about his assignment, citing its classified nature.

I contemplate whether his job lacks excitement, and he merely wants to impress me. Regardless, Mark expresses a desire to swiftly exit the country after completing his task. "Do the job and leave," he states, showing me photos on his phone of his dogs, weapons, and his car.

I nod and look back out of the window. The ochre-coloured fields, roads, and houses are now distinctly visible. I see the shadow of the clouds on the earth. I take pictures. The plane lands on the runway, rolling until it halts.

Later, I write: Stepping off the plane, and descending the stairs to the bus, I feel a wave of hot air. I also write: 'at home', although I don't know if that is true. This hot, dry air is the first thing I notice, even before the parched landscape, and it feels familiar. It mirrors the air of childhood summers when I visited my grandparents' Syrian village; it embraces me when I step off the plane onto the gangway, and I breathe and breathe, and breathe.

Passport control. I place my German passport on the counter. The officer smiles as he reads my Kurdish name, pronouncing it as my family does - Ronya, with a soft R and a long O. I nod.

Erbil Airport is the second safest globally after Tel Aviv, my father proudly claims as if he had built it himself.

The area is meticulously secured, and accessible only through multiple security checks. From the arrival terminal, I board a bus to the visitors' hall. I cross the visitors' hall.

Uncle Khalef awaits me in the car park. We hug. Though he is not my father's brother, I affectionately address him as Uncle. Driving out of the city on a four-lane road, the Christian quarter of Ankawa lies on the left, Muslim Erbil on the right. We pass the palace of Nechirvan Barzani. "A quaint little house," remarks Uncle Khalef with a laugh.

Soon, only suburbs surround us. Isolated houses scattered across the countryside. Then, mountains. Checkpoint follows checkpoint. Eventually, I stop counting. Along the roadside, images of the martyrs who perished in the struggle against ISIS.

I write: Larger than life. And mean: gigantic.

The green and yellow flags of the Kurdish parties. After each checkpoint a distinct state emerges, Uncle Khalef claims, cursing corruption. We journey northeast, then through Koya to the south. The Kurdish flags fluttering in the blue sky, I note down. Although I'm aware that Kurdish flags aren't prohibited here - quite the opposite, they are probably erected by the administration as this is the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan - I'm surprised to see them. I reflect on how, during our initial journey to our grandparents' village my sister and I, perhaps three and four years old, were instructed by our father not to disclose our destination. Contrary to what we assumed and were told, it wasn't to Grandma and Grandpa in Kurdistan but to the Arab Republic of Syria.

Even though I knew Kurdistan by then, I continued to search for it later in geography class - or the specific location where Kurdistan, if recognised as a state, should appear in the school atlas. My father talked about the Sykes-Picot Agreement, in which the French and British partitioned the Middle East in 1916, even before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, leaving the Kurds with nothing. In 1920, the Treaty of Sèvres pledged autonomy or even, per Article 64, a state for the Kurds. However, with the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, the promise of autonomy and a state had vanished again. My father shared his experiences of growing up in Syria, attending a school where the Arabic language was forcibly instilled in Kurdish children. *A strike with a stick on the back of the hand for every Kurdish word*, he recounted, concluding his tale with phrases like: *"No friends except the mountains."*

But here, as I gaze out of the window, there is the land, the mountains, and, if not a state, at least the Ala Rengîn, the flag of Kurdistan.

We travel east, witnessing the landscape transform into a barren and mountainous terrain. Eventually, we halt at a reservoir. We get out, drink tea and smoke. Standing by the reservoir, teenagers zoom by in motorboats. Uncle Khalef takes a photo of me against the reservoir backdrop. I send it to my family and friends.

"You look happy," a friend writes.

In the car again, I reflect on what crossed my mind during the flight: that I am not just at home but also in the country where the genocide unfolded. I write: in the country where Yezidis were killed for being Yezidis.

\*\*\*

"You must be hungry," Aunt Adar says.

There are flatbreads, meat with peppers and tomatoes in sauce, salad, and dew with mint. We eat - Uncle Khalef, Aunt Adar, my cousins Lava and Lara, and my seven-year-old cousin Lorans. Tearing bread into pieces, we reach across the table.

"I missed eating like this," I write. Again, I note down: At home.

Tea, then sweets, biscuits, fruit. Salted sunflower seeds, coffee with cardamom.

"Eat, eat," encourages Aunt Adar. She is a good cook. She shares an anecdote about having an old man as a guest who, while eating, broke into tears, claiming it tasted like his mother's cooking.

I take a picture of the watermelons and send the photo to my father. I think of his years-long complaint about the blandness of German melons compared to those back home. I eat and eat as if I could compensate for all the years in Germany in just one day.

Ascending the mountain behind the city in the car takes twenty minutes. At the summit, signs declare: *Keep Kurdistan Clean*.

Uncle Khalef says that people come and leave their rubbish here. People still picnic. Even during the war, only thirty minutes from the front to ISIS, families sat here and picnicked.

We stand and take photos. Evening approaches. The light dims, and the city below is illuminated by street lamps, neon signs and cars.

En route back, we pause at a roadside kiosk.

"What do you want to drink?" Uncle Khalef asks. "We have everything - beer, wine, whiskey, vodka and raki! This isn't Erbil, Duhok, or Baghdad. This is Sulaymaniyah. Sulaymaniyah is free and safe," declares Uncle Khalef. Tourists come from all over the country. They are shipped in in buses from Baghdad.

Later, in the living room, we smoke, savour canned beer and eat salted sunflower seeds.

"We don't say that we are Yezidis," Aunt Adar says. "No one here knows we are Yezidis."

And yet I think: it's like the summer holidays when we visited my grandparents' village. The difference now is that I am the one bringing gifts, not my parents. In the last two days before my departure, I, like my mother in the past, had made my way through department stores and shops, buying sweets, Nescafé, an inflatable football for my cousin, a battery-operated toy car, a toy gun with soft air bullets, nail varnish for my cousins, hand cream, perfume and earrings. Late at night, I packed everything into the suitcase, my father attempting to close it, my mother tugging at the zipper. Unpacking, repacking, weighing, unpacking, weighing again.

All that changed in 2011 when the people of Syria took to the streets against the Assad regime. It shifted with the shots witnessed on television, the demonstrations, the shaky mobile camera images of the dead and injured, and the phone calls with our family in the village.

They advised, "No, it's better not to come this year."

But my father simply laughed. "Not this year," he said, "but next year, we'll go to a free, democratic Syria. In such a Syria, we will return."



On another occasion, he proposed that we should join the people on the streets to witness the overthrow of the regime first-hand. However, as more shots were fired, bombs followed, accompanied by chlorine gas and sarin. Soon, the number of people arrested or disappeared became so overwhelming that we stopped counting, and my father stopped discussing it.

In north-east Syria, where our family lived, things also changed. Officials from the PYD, at some point, instructed people not to protest against Assad on the streets. Alongside images of Assad, pictures of Öcalan emerged. Then came Al-Qaeda, and Al-Qaeda had no pictures at all.

"Not a problem," reassured Uncle Hemo on the phone; they won't harm us. He was familiar, from before, with the man, who was now in charge of Al-Qaeda for the Hasaka province. He assured them that, as long as he held control, no harm would come to them. However, there were others for whom he couldn't vouch.

My father said to me: "You know him; we were with him once when you were a child." He could be seen in Uncle Hemo's wedding video, dancing in a row with others.

The men who remained in the village dug a trench. Night after night, they lay there with their Kalashnikovs, in the earth behind my grandparents' garden, behind the fence and the pomegranate and almond trees my father had planted.

Thousands of kilometres away, I lay in my bed unable to sleep. Thoughts of them coming and killing my uncle, aunt, their four children, and my grandmother haunted me - their lifeless bodies, lined up, as in one of the shaky smartphone recordings.

Images I had seen so often on YouTube or because my cousin had shared them on Facebook.

If they came while I was asleep, I thought, I wouldn't know. Whether I was asleep or awake, it made no difference. In this German night, I thought, no shot would be heard, no trembling in the air, no gust of wind.

If we heard nothing from them for a few days due to a power failure or because - I never finished this sentence. What if someone had already come long ago? In my imagination, they were Assad's camouflaged soldiers, bearded, black-clad men, or a gang of ordinary criminals taking advantage of the general chaos and marauding through the country. When I went shopping, I had to think about it, in front of the refrigerated shelf or on the way to the bus. But I became superstitious. If I stepped on the joints of the large cobblestones, then they would come, I told myself. But at night, I lay in my bed, and my uncle was in the trench. Above me was the ceiling draped with dust threads in the corners. And behind my uncle were the pomegranate and almond trees that my father had planted.

I write: After presenting the gifts, we sit in the courtyard on the terrace swing and drink coffee. Lorans has started shooting us with airsoft pellets. He sneaks up again and again, from the wall to the street, from the stairs behind the porch swing, leading to the neighbours on the first floor. He runs out of the hallway, holds the gun in front of him, attacks, retreats, ducks, lurks and shoots.

When Lorans has emptied a magazine, he collects the yellow pellets again. Lava and Lara sit on the floor and paint each other's nails.

I turn my cup upside down so that the sentence runs onto the saucer. And Uncle Khalef scans my coffee grounds with a smartphone app.

I sleep in Lara and Lava's room. Before we lie down, we sit side by side on my bed and watch videos on our phones of women creating elaborate hairstyles. Because we don't feel like sleeping for a long time, we always let the next video load and the next and the next until we eventually end up with makeup tutorials and cooking videos.

"Come," Lara says at some point, "I'll pluck your eyebrows; they're quite messy."

I rest my head on her knees, and Lava takes tweezers from the kitchen. And it stings, and tears shoot into my eyes.

The air conditioner hums. It's cool in the room. I pull the blanket up to my shoulders before falling asleep.

\*\*\*

Aunt Adar shows me photos on her phone of people she knows who were held captive by ISIS. She swipes her finger from right to left, saying, "She lost her hearing in captivity." Swiping again for the next picture, I don't focus on the image but on her hand, with fingers bearing cracked skin from household work and her wedding ring.

Aunt Adar reveals, "They beheaded her husband and sons in front of her eyes," as she continues swiping. Moving to the next picture, I glance briefly and then avert my eyes. She says: "They gouged out his eyes," and swipes on.

I write: If Aunt Adar, Uncle Khalef, Lava, Lara, and Lorans hadn't been living in Silêmanî in 2014 but rather four hundred kilometres away in Sinjar and I leave the sentence unfinished.

What I write lacks order - words, sentences, trailing off into nothingness. I sew, and piece together. That things begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop. In between, perhaps a comma, a subordinate clause referring to the preceding. Again, capital letters and subject, verb, and object until the next full stop. Paragraph by paragraph.

I have no language.

\*\*\*

The notion that we are broken is a sentence I frequently contemplate. Even though it elucidates nothing. We are broken, I write, signifying that things have shifted. Laughter is an expression of joy, typically. People laugh when they are happy. Children laugh, an observable expression of their joy. When things have shifted - and I erase this sentence. Things have not shifted. Everything remains in its place.

I observed it in myself. The laughter thing. It only dawned on me later, while writing. I met up with two friends at a café. I hadn't been back for long. We sat under a parasol, sipping lemonade. I smoked long, thin cigarettes. My friends wanted to know about my journey.

The cigarettes were very cheap, I said. I smoked a lot. And because the cigarettes were so cheap, I brought twelve packs back to Germany. I laughed and inquired about my friend's daughter.

The daughter is fine, my friend said and talked, but I was no longer listening. After she stopped talking, I asked about the other friend's boyfriend. He's fine, she went on talking, and here too, I was not listening.

When friends ask me about the situation for Yazidis right now - only if you want to talk about it, of course, they say - I say: bad, very bad, and I laugh.

\*\*\*

**At the end of October**, I am back in Silêmanî, in the living room, with the laptop open in front of me. It's quiet, Lara, Lava, and Lorans are at school. My aunt sits in the kitchen in front of the sewing machine. The sewing machine rattles. I go through everything, the conversations I've recorded, my notes, audio files, photos, and videos.

I write: I go to see Xatê as a journalist: armed with a recording device and camera. Due to my limited Kurdish, Akram accompanies me. We are on our way back from her unit near Mosul, where we didn't find her, when she calls and says she is home now and just needs to change quickly.

Xatê receives us in uniform. She has the day off, but as a general, she can only speak to us in uniform, says Akram. We go to the living room. It's a bare living room.

Like most Yazidi living rooms, I think, it's the living room of refugees.

I sit next to her parents and turn on the recording device.

I sit with Aunt Adar and Uncle Khalef on the sofa. With the laptop on my lap, I start recording. I take notes.

Akram says: Xatê says, welcome to the Yazidis.

I write: Xatê says, I too am a daughter of Shingal. I was born in the mountains of Shingal, says Xatê. You know what happened on August 3, 2014, when ISIS came, and we fled. We were trapped in the mountains for twelve days, says Xatê, I saw terrible things.

I barely ask questions. Xatê speaks.

Xatê says: I heard terrible things.

I sit and write: Xatê talks about a woman from Kodscho. She was abducted with her child, says Xatê. For three days and three nights, they held her at Tell Afar airport. The child was small, still drinking milk, not even a year old. The child was hungry and screamed for three days.

Xatê says the child screamed so loudly that the ISIS Amir couldn't sleep. The Amir said to the woman: Give me the child. The woman, says Xatê, gave him the child, thinking he would give it food and drink. The Amir took the child and went to the kitchen. In the kitchen, he took a large knife and cut off the child's head. He cooked the child's flesh and served it to the mother.

The mother didn't immediately understand, says Xatê, but when she saw the child's hand, she knew. She lost her mind. I sit on the sofa with Aunt Adar and Uncle Khalef. I write that it was the last thing the mother understood before losing her mind.

I pause the audio recording. I start recording again. While Xatê speaks, she starts crying. Tears run down her face. I write: Xatê sits in uniform and cries. And as Xatê sits in uniform and cries, I also start crying.

\*\*\*