



SON LEWANDOWSKI

Routinen

**THE ROUTINES**

Novel, 272 pp, January 2026, ISBN: 978-3-608-96716-6

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gegr. 1659, Stuttgart

**Eating a gummy bear — today the arm, tomorrow a leg. What sounds like a joke is everyday reality for gymnast Amik. For her, every gram counts, every competition, every repetition. And every crossed line is just part of the deal. “The Routines” dissects a world everyone suspects is tough, yet no one wants to see—how exploitative a system can be when it’s covered in so much glitter and shine spray.**

Munich. Montreal. Tokyo. When the Olympic Games come around, the whole world turns its gaze to one city, one team, one gymnast. The girls and women train their entire lives for this moment. Out of the collective we of the gymnasts—who in Olympic years live and breathe training, weigh-ins, and competitions—emerges an I: the gymnast Amik. She submits herself to the ruthless logic of her sport, and with every step closer to the winners’ podium, she moves further away from the girls who once comforted her.

With powerful precision, Son Lewandowski tells a story of sport and politics, of fragile relationships and the limits of one’s own aging body. The stories of famous gymnasts and the largest abuse scandal in sports history are woven into Amik’s narrative, making *The Routines* an utterly breathless reading experience.



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**Son Lewandowski** lives in Cologne, where she works as an author and curator. In 2023, she was invited to the Klagenfurt Literature Course and the LCB's Writers' Workshop. That same year, her work *The Short Careers* was shortlisted for the Edit Essay Prize. In 2024, she received a grant from the Jürgen Ponto Foundation, followed by a working scholarship from the Arts Foundation of North Rhine-Westphalia in 2025.

## THE ROUTINES

### SON LEWANDOWSKI

Translated by Alexandra Roesch

#### WHICH ONE OF YOU CAN DO A CARTWHEEL?

*Antalya, European Gymnastics Championships 2023*

Only when you fall do I look over and get up, wanting to lean over the stands towards you and pull you out of the awkward stretch you have slipped into. I want to lean over the flags that hang limp under my gaze, lift your head out of the angle it is stuck in, and turn your face forwards again. Gently.

Your chest rests against the edge of the springboard. Your arms reach out in front and your legs trail behind, hands clenched as if you are still gripping the uneven bars. You lie there, suspended mid-flight, your body unable to decide whether it is on the ground or still up there in the air, your first home.

You did not even brace yourself. You just dropped onto the floor as if it went on forever beneath you. That is how we were taught. Any direction is possible as long as you repeat the movement often enough.

When I see someone fall, I try to imagine the pain, to plant it like a simulation in my own body and let it travel. I have seen every accident and watched every fall, forwards and backwards. I have seen the clip of the gymnast who broke both legs on her landing, watched her knees jump from their sockets, her shins bend the wrong way. Perhaps the nausea started then, with that accident that didn't happen to me, didn't happen to you, did nothing to me, nothing to you, none of us, no one in the team, a distant fall.

The bars below me, the bars above you. I watch your upper body lift rhythmically from the springboard as if you want to try again, as if your legs have grown up into your chest and your whole body has been built only for running and jumping, for a movement that can carry you out of any misfortune. Because that is what we were taught, after all.

From up here I cannot tell if your eyes are closed or wide open, staring from the fall, both accident and witness. All I can see are our coach's hands, your coach's hands, resting on your lower back. I know the power they hold. No plaster, no bandage, no cast carries this kind of stillness. Those hands can hold any injury still.

The last time the coach laid his hand on my back he told me he could not take me to Antalya. His palm pressed between my shoulder blades and I could not tell whether he meant to steady me in my forced goodbye or push me out of the gym.

I glance behind me at the steep rows of seats, although before every competition we reminded each other not to look up here. Not to the flags that catch every eye as they flutter. Not to the applause that forces its rhythm onto every movement. Not to the shouts of strangers

who call out to their children but never call them over. Parents who follow their daughters all the way to Antalya and beyond, hoping they will go just a little further than the girl beside them. Maybe to the Olympics. Higher, safer landings. Higher still, home safely again. Higher, maybe.

To cheer on a child.

The crowd turns your fall into a single groan and only up here in the stands do I feel the roughness of that shared approval, the clapping, the shouting, the flags, left, right, every sound sharp enough to cut through the whole arena. Once the excitement has run through them, once everyone has whispered their worries to those on both sides, they turn back again to their own child, their own flag. The competition must go on, a game that is never allowed to end. The crowd, well entertained, roars and sighs and feeds on each dramatic fall, waving its flags, because every nation has learned how far a wave can reach.

I move down the steep rows to the front and lean over the metal rail to see you better, wanting to cover you, to cover your fall. I bend further over into the hall and rise onto my toes, as if I could just jump down and be part of the team again. My upper body leans towards you and the others, as if I were performing one last routine from the barrier itself. I lose my balance on my toes and have to pull myself back so I do not fall into the judges below. The hall is too deep to simply jump.

The judges sit, silent in front of your accident. The women at their tables have not yet reached for their pens. They only start scoring after the warm-up. I have never seen any of them jump up when a gymnast falls in front of them. Each injury stays where it is while they wait, motionless, until the bent woman, the crying woman, the gasping, dislocated, torn, broken woman has been carried away. As if they had not

seen even her – only the straight, successful gymnasts before and after her. The panel stays seated until the next one steps up. Then the pens return to their hands and they keep scoring. They do not judge the danger of the apparatus itself, only the skill with which the gymnasts approach it. Technique, tension, strength, creativity, all compressed into numbers that are meant to measure elegance in overcoming risk.

I never questioned the stillness of the judges. Every task in this hall is clearly assigned. Mine was the greatest possible effort. Theirs will always be silent observation, after this fall and the next and the next. The scoring will continue.

The rail presses so hard into my stomach now that the nausea rises back into my throat. My hips ache. I straighten up and steady my breath, one hand on my chest, the other holding your lucky charm. Neither of my hands will keep still.

I have learned to command every muscle, to move my thighs, shoulders, lower back so I can rise high enough, land right, twist properly, arrive right. Now I cannot control even the simplest muscles. I can only watch as my hands and my breathing refuse to submit.

I press my tongue to the roof of my mouth and clench my fists to master the trembling, as if I could hold my own muscles still and teach them the control they have already abandoned, as if the shaking were a thing, a bar maybe, that I could grip tightly enough to finish the movement.

The second gong cuts through the shouts of the crowd, through the last jumps and landings of the women below, repeating one final time before the scoring starts. The competition begins. *Warm-up is over*, calls the announcer, and by then they have already carried you out.

I feel wetness in my left hand and notice the drops that have forced their way through my clenched fist. I hold my hand out and open it.

The plastic pendant has split at the edges. The little water left sits in the grooves of my palm and slips through the cracks of calloused skin, my grip has still not forgotten the uneven bars.

Before the competitions we shared, you would place the charm in my hand, then go and introduce yourself to the judges. How often I wanted to crush the plastic casing right there and let your attached luck spill into my palm.

When I gave the turtle back to you after your routine, you would always look at me, tense, and say, *Lucky again, Amik.*

You always looked at me so intently that it took me a moment each time to remember this was not luck.

I look down at the turtle in my hand. The split plastic casing still clings to the tiny shell, like a sealed-up time capsule, torn open at the edges. I wonder if it feels that it is lying there now without protection, or finally free to go. The creature trembles.

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We are eight, we are twelve, we are sixteen years old, still light, still small, with nothing yet to give up. It is 1976, 1980, 2016. Time always moves in fours, our ages Olympic years. From school to the gym, to the scales, to weekend competitions. We are a girl who stands in the gym in kit, who runs through training from station to station, who, retrained, springs into competition.

Soon we will be seventeen, nineteen, thirty, a career already nearing its end. Our names are Nadia Comăneci, Olga Korbut, Věra Čáslavská. We are Kerri Strug, Dominique Moceanu, Simone Biles. We are the women who could repeat ourselves often enough to stay. Our stories are easy to tell; they have been well rehearsed. We could begin with a cartwheel, a handstand, a somersault, the splits. Opened out, we stand there, and you can trace the insides of our thighs, first with your eyes, then with your fingers.

If we get to grow up and find the leotard again, childhood seems kitsch, a memory with no legs, a feeling crumpled in a drawer.

But we clearly remember the first question, a neatly disguised task that still smiles at us. *Which one of you can do a cartwheel?*

*Onești, Romania, 1968*

*I remember a tall man with a drooping moustache walking into my classroom and asking, Which one of you can do a cartwheel? – Nadia Comăneci*

*Boom, boom, they did perfect cartwheels,* recalls Nadia Comăneci's coach Béla Károlyi when he talks about discovering her. He went from school to school, testing girls for speed, coordination, and balance, and with every interview he remembered more clearly how he had recognised Nadia's talent at once. He and his wife Marta, he said, tested four thousand children before finding her in a schoolyard. He spent hours watching children play during their breaks.

Standing in a playground, scouting the game out of children's bodies.

Recounting a discovery as if the girl were a country you were the first to set foot in. Planting your flag straight into every memory. *Boom, boom.*

They said that Nadia Comănesci immediately traded her doll for her first leotard and took training with her into her sleep: *I dreamed about the little competitions Béla organised in the gym, and the silly trophies he handed out when we did well... I dreamed of running, of turning, of doing double somersaults...*

To dream of a new ability. To reinvent the wheel and build it into your own body, a beaten path.

To relinquish a cuddly toy and take a uniform to bed. How easily wishes change shape! They all stay soft until ambition hardens them.

*I always wanted to do more than Béla and Marta asked of me. If they told me to do twenty-five push-ups, I would do fifty. I liked the feeling of getting better; I longed to achieve something. – Nadia Comănesci*

In 1968, Béla Károlyi was still a handball coach with no experience in artistic gymnastics. He did not start working with Nadia Comănesci until three years later, by which time she was already training at the camp he would later claim to have founded himself. An internal investigation showed that Károlyi erased his predecessors and forced his athletes to credit him as the father of their careers, yet the Romanian propaganda machine was only too happy to adopt his version of events for its official history.

This story is his gym. He moves us back and forth, stretches our talent into his own, shapes us, leads us, polishes us as if we were stones, the precious kind. Dug up, we lie there. We are to say that he alone discovered us, he alone chose us. Under all circumstances, we must give the same answer, and it is this: only him. And when we start to dream, we dream of him. A child lured by chalk, as if this sport were a fairy tale.

Repeat a story until it sets firm, elegant and assured. A self-fulfilling memory that runs itself into fulfilment, that keeps jogging its laps, satisfied. As long as it is well trained, it can stay.

It was not until 2017 that Nadia Comăneci distanced herself from Béla Károlyi's version. *I should probably read Béla's book, because his memories differ a little from mine, but they are near enough.* By then she had long since written her own autobiography, *Letters to a Young Gymnast*. His was called *Feel No Fear*.

To tell a success story, we place all memories on a podium, where they can be decorated. And as long as we keep saying *we* or *one* instead of *I*, we are nothing, and this story can be recited easily, forwards and backwards.

Do we laugh? Of course. Did we have a good childhood? Of course.

There is always a bright side. Later, we can fall into it; we can keep retelling it. We call it the “chocolate” side and never ask what the other side is made of.

To be a mascot, to speak with a body that is only an idea, a fantasy, an exaggeration that never stops smiling.

*The freedom of movement was intoxicating, and I could never stand still. My father was always full of joy for life, and I think I inherited that love of movement from him, just as I know I got my mother's intense, catlike brown eyes. — Nadia Comăneci*

A child who does a cartwheel is a child who rejoices in every direction. A moving child is a healthy child, say the parents with a laugh in our direction, leaning back into their Sundays, saving their energy for their Mondays.

From the mother the eyes, a twisted compliment.

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Barefoot, I warmed up. Every movement was a circle. I ran my laps and turned my head, a dizziness dressed up as progress. My feet, rough as they were, could be forced into a running smile, cheerful the moment they left the ground. My running never trusted the floor. The floor doubled itself, mats and, beneath them, the linoleum, still marked by forgotten playing pitches, criss-crossed lines, a goal always somewhere else, the opponent always on the other side.

My days bent into training. My body was lifted upwards, my arms pressed into the floor, and I grew into a space that tried to stay soft, that longed for distance. A hall fitted out for combat that called itself competition, packed with movement eager to be measured.

My first handstands never made it all the way up to her. Again and again I threw my heels towards her torso, and could almost feel the thin nylon of her tracksuit where my feet would sink in.

Every day I fell into the hands of this first coach, her arms ready to catch and lift me. Each new swing brought a sharp *Up* from her, a strict *Pull*, a firm *Again*. But my legs still did not dare rise to meet her. They gave up just short of her and dropped back down. I hardly knew this woman, only her short commands and helping hands that moved me through the gym. *Again*.

With every attempt my arms grew weaker, a first flicker she could not see. And because hands are the second home of lost patience, she suddenly grabbed my falling legs, yanked them up towards her and said, *There*.

In that twisted embrace we met, briefly, before she moved on, *Again*, to the next girl, to the next pair of legs flying shyly through the air, not yet knowing where to go.

Recognition is a distant embrace.

My second handstands I threw against everything solid, and even in the changing room I could not wait. I bent my torso towards the cold tile floor and hurled myself, heels, back, shoulders, against the door.

The blood rushed to my head and my neck began to learn what would be required of it. I balanced my hands, forwards and back, weight to fingertips, weight to wrists. A strength began to build in my shoulder blades, getting ready to carry this gift forever.

The day was ten, the day was twenty, the day lasted as long as an endless attempt, and inside my repetitions the game still lived, slow enough to give me time. I bent into myself; here lay happiness, an impossible state.

I straightened up and rocked my torso back and forth, absorbed in this next task with a quiet sort of rapture. When an exercise worked for the first time, a shiver ran down my back like a hand stroking me, something I could lean into for a second. I rocked, maybe for a day, maybe two, maybe every day, time not yet attached to my joints. Until the handstand from kneeling finally worked. And each time a new movement succeeded, my coach's voice ran through my body and said, *There*.

To train a back that will never ask for support, back and forth. To stand on your hands, a twisted day. Everything in this gym was partly play, and the other girls and I chased the familiar out, first from the equipment, then from ourselves. In our play, we could always find new ground, stand it up, and build a space from it, like these blue mats we lifted off the floor, propped them on edge, let them tumble into one another, turned them into a blue tunnel we crawled through, rocked, then held steady again. One after the other, we crawled through our makeshift quake, screaming and bracing ourselves from the inside against the walls when they came too close. Then we let them topple outward and flung ourselves into the mats as if into a lake, thrashing around. But don't worry, we could stand anywhere.

My side splits were not going well. Every day I bounced and pressed my hips towards the mat, sinking deeper into that widest stretch. My coach stood behind me and knelt on my back until my muscles began to vibrate.

To become a rule, to resist with a tremor.

Where my hands did not turn the hall into a tremor, it stayed firm, and there was no reason left to leave it. Every movement gathered weight, a playful fight. *Boom, boom.*

In that short one-to-one time, my coach and I crammed every task in at once. She measured everything precisely and always kept enough distance between her and me, between the apparatus and me, between the tasks and her, between the other girls and herself.

Only sometimes did she come close. Then we became a shared game and my handstands became light. I would stand on her feet, gripping them with my fingers. With her left arm she pressed my feet against her chest and we ran together through the gym, slowly at first, then faster. The other girls ran beside us, cheering, eager to be next, to run along with her too. A race for affection, and we had to learn to hold on, at first from laughter, then from fear of falling into her stride.

And because we never had enough, because we always had to fit more into our brief time, she sometimes quizzed us, a bit of arithmetic, some grammar, adding new exercises onto the running one. I worked through the sums in my blood-filled head until I found the answer and shouted it up to her. If I got it right, she gave me another problem, as a reward. If I got it wrong, she freed her right hand for a second and tickled the soles of my feet. And every so often the tickling turned into a fleeting stroke, one I wanted to carry straight to the other girls.

*Again*, my coach said, and even then I could feel, beneath every touch, how her mind was already moving ahead, sorting through our next tasks, arranging them in her head as movements.

*What is a hundred and forty million divided by two hundred and sixty-five?*

Her knees buckled slightly with laughter at her own impossible question. I slumped down with her, my arms soft against her shaking legs. Gently, she let go of my feet and I sank onto hers. My body still laughing, my head suddenly afraid she might just keep running, trample me underfoot. But she had already caught me under the arms and pulled me up again.

*From now on, everything you do counts,* she said, and before I could work out what she meant, she repeated her impossible sum.

*One hundred and forty million divided by...*

She gasped. She had not seen my legs coming, and even as I fell into her, my heels hitting her stomach, she pushed me away. I collapsed in front of her, but she did not see me, did not look down. She was searching for air, standing small, folding in on herself. And for the first time I realised that pain always draws us inward. We never stretch ourselves out through it.

She kept gasping, gathering her breath, slowly straightening, but her eyes stayed bent, strained. I wanted to grab her feet, to bring back the tickling, but she stepped back.

*Well done,* she said, taking another step. She left me lying on the mat, walked to the wood-panelled wall by the entrance and sat briefly on the bench. When her breathing calmed, she left the gym without a glance at the girls gathering around her. We just stood there, wanting to comfort her, not knowing how.

I do not know when I stopped playing, maybe that day, maybe the next. I do not know when craft crept into my movements, when the repetitions grew so exact that they remembered themselves better than I did. I began sorting the turns, limiting the jumps, taming the flailing and the paddling. And as play retreated, I became serious about the new tasks my coach

brought each day. With every training week I sank deeper into this perfect playground, and beneath it lay a new goal, no longer inside me, no longer me at all.

After warming up, I always went straight to the rope that hung down from the ceiling almost to the floor. Though I knew it used up my strength too early in the training, I pulled myself up. Halfway, my palms were already burning, the tremor in my upper arms eating deeper with each metre. I climbed in steady pulls, making it look easy, making me look easy. I climbed until I reached the ceiling, then sat back on my heels to rest my arms and hands. Feet locked into the rope, perched high and hollow, I looked down into the gym. The mats lay below me like bruises around the bars, the beam, the vault. After every routine the girls would spring back onto them, and I imagined the mats had once been the same colour as our skin, turning bluer with every day.

Were we still children? I watched the girls below, their bodies taut with strength but their arms still flung out playfully in every direction. I watched them press each other into the next fold, and how easily they sank into each stretch. I imagined them staying that way for ever, forgetting to come up again, stuck in that bend.

Were we friends? I followed their heads with my eyes but could not see their glances from up here. None of them looked up at me. I watched their pale hair follow their jumps and turns like an echo, and I started to feel dizzy. I lifted my gaze straight ahead, to the narrow row of windows hidden up here, and when I looked back, the girls' heads glowed sharply against the blue mats, small suns rising from the floor. For a moment it felt as if their shining heads were pressing me even closer to the ceiling.

I waited until my arms had steadied, then shook them one after the other to throw off the tension, but the restlessness had already spread,

from my arms into my shoulders and up through my neck into my face. It tugged at my thick eyebrows, which crept further across my forehead with each day. And as I climbed back down into the blonde childhood below, a dark split stretched across my face, deepening in my eyes with every metre I drew closer to the others.

The eyes were from my mother, an inherited mistake.

*Which one of you can do a cartwheel?*

The girls pushed the two blue walls a little closer together. In their small hands the mats swayed, almost as tall as they were, as I was. They rocked back and forth but did not fall.

I stood at the entrance to the blue corridor they had built. The girls held the mats on both sides. At the far end stood our coach, motioning for me to come, to turn through the gap. I tilted my upper body sideways into the narrow strip of floor, planted my hands, and flipped through the tunnel.

Even as I threw my legs up, the walls began to wobble, tilting outwards, but the girls pushed them back, narrowing the passage further. When I landed on the other side, the walls trembled so hard that the dizziness blurred my vision.

*Again*, said the coach. She had stepped back, and before I could think, before the thought that always waits at the end of a space came, I turned again into the narrow corridor and threw myself into another cartwheel. *Again*.

I kept cartwheeling through the tunnel until I no longer touched the sides, until the walls stood firm. I learned to hold my legs, my feet, my hips, my head straight so I could pass anywhere without brushing against anything.

I was a child who did cartwheels until she could do no more. The dizziness, the arms, the flicker on my lips ... after each turn I paused a little longer and looked up at my coach. She smiled again and again, and each time I reached her, she took one more step back.

The laughter of the girls behind the blue walls looped endlessly. Then, suddenly, the moment twisted into seriousness, so quickly I did not notice the change. On the other side, I stopped.

*Again*, said the coach, but tears burst out of me, tears younger than I was, and older. The blue walls froze. No sound, no tremor. The girls fell silent, sealing me and my crying inside that narrow, windowless space. I wept, wept between the dark mats, a muffled feeling.

On the other side my coach waited, holding the mats with both hands, her gaze soft and level, her smile a distant comfort. And when my stomach muscles calmed, when my breath remembered its rhythm, she let the mats fall and said, *There. Now carry on.*

A girl, and a girl, and a girl standing behind the wall of mats, crawling through it, falling into it. Blue-eyed, she lies there, her mother's eyes.