

GERECHT?

Geschichten
über soziale Ungleichheiten



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GERECHT? Geschichten über soziale Ungleichheiten

Creative Writing Project

foreword

The ordinary is never obvious. The everyday and the seemingly normal always carry traces of the extraordinary and of exclusion. While some forms of social injustice are blatantly visible, the seemingly ordinary, the *Alltägliche*, often makes us forget who or what has been left out in order to construct this very idea of “normalcy” in the first place.

Both, curation and creative writing, can defamiliarize and unsettle the everyday. In this sense, the creative writing by the students of the University of Innsbruck, is similar to what the curators of the exhibition *GERECHT? Geschichten über soziale Ungleichheiten* at the Tiroler Volkskunstmuseum have done. The exhibition gathers objects shared by several museums across Tyrol, South Tyrol and Trentino. These range from the historical to the artistic and from the religious to the commercial. What unites them is their ability to communicate – sometimes overtly, sometimes subtly – their entanglement with histories of social class, gender, religion, and the broader questions of social justice in Tyrol and beyond.

At first glance, and without context, many of these objects may appear innocuous. A dress inspired by Klimt’s artwork. Toilets and scales. Old cassette players alongside religious imagery. Paintings next to burnt wood. All of these form seemingly random juxtapositions. Yet, when seen together, they open up striking, surprising, and unsettling insights into how communities have created and sustained their social orders.

These objects shaped subjects: they marked who belongs and who does not. They suggest who fits into the ‘norm’ and on whose exclusion this norm is predicated in the first place. Often, the objects normalize certain ideas of *Gerechtigkeit* so deeply that they cease to be questioned. And in the most extreme cases, they essentialize difference by turning individual traits first into supposedly unalterable truths, secondly, into the unquestioned reign of “common sense.”

The Tiroler Volkskunstmuseum disrupts these illusions of obviousness by juxtaposing these objects in ways that invite visitors to question them. Viewers are encouraged to reflect on their provenance, history, and meaning before being given further context. The exhibition thus creates new relationships: first, among the objects themselves; second, between the visitors and the exhibits; and third, between the visitors and their own perspectives.

Creative writing works, as shown by the students of the University of Innsbruck, in similar ways. Writing re-contextualizes and re-creates relationships. The students of the University of Innsbruck’s Creative Writing Club, themselves coming from diverse backgrounds, translate the exhibited objects into stories, poems, and vignettes. In doing so, their texts uncover the extraordinary within the ordinary. Some students use the objects as lenses through which to reflect on questions of social justice today. All of them, like the exhibition itself, form new relationships with the past by defamiliarizing and making it strange again.

For this reason, both creative writing and careful curation matter, especially in times shaped by artificial intelligence. What is AI, after all, if not a palimpsest of data and texts, recycled as raw material for seemingly new texts and for new ways of normalizing ideas?

Only where curators and writers unsettle the ordinary and call the unquestioned into question, culture continues to grow and evolve, even if only by reflecting and expressing what we currently think and believe.

Univ.-Prof. Christoph Singer
October 2025

Into Words

Words – the raw material we have at our disposal. Pens, pencils, keyboards and fingertips are the tools we used to weave some of these words into strings, to make something out of single units as random as life itself, to create some meaning. We stitched these strings of words into texts and poems in an attempt to communicate, to share our thoughts, to establish some common ground, or, at least, to trigger some sort of reaction – any reaction.

In literary texts the intended meaning may remain elusive – often lost between the lines, the undulations of the fabric. But we choose our words with care, we keep looking for the right ones, and if by doing so we chance upon a morsel of common ground, a bridge or a bypass here and there, we might feel that something has come through, something has happened between the writer and the reader or the listener – a fleeting moment of recognition, familiarity, perhaps an epiphany of sorts – even if just once in a while.

Worlds are built, characters come to life, thoughts are laid out to be heard loud and clear, and then a message might be communicated, something might emerge and lie out there to be read and heard and discussed. As authors we can't help but keep asking: is there enough common ground for this to happen? With the selection of texts included in this booklet we have tried to share our thoughts, to give voice to named or nameless individuals who may have experienced the same worries and heartaches as many others have time and again over the ebbs and flows of history. We have tried to give voice to all those who may have faced the same challenges, the same cruelties, the same forms of injustice.

There are quite a few pertinent questions that the curators of the exhibition *GERECHT? Geschichten über soziale Ungleichheiten* have raised. We have merely attempted to engage with some of these questions and the exhibits by creating ad hoc short fiction and poetry. Don't expect to find any answers. We can hardly give you any. But, we would be really glad if, in an attempt to reflect on the questions and the significance of the objects displayed, we have managed to meet each other someplace – amidst a smile or a nod – and, at the same time, raised more questions!

Violet Stathopoulou-Vais
October 2025

The following texts and poems were written by students and participants of the Writing Club, a Creative Writing Project led by Violet Stathopoulou-Vais, Senior Lecturer at the Department of English, University of Innsbruck. Univ.-Prof. Christoph Singer, is the Chair of British and Anglophone Cultural Studies, and Deputy Head of the Department of English, University of Innsbruck.

Disclaimer:

Unless there is a clear reference to facts or historical figures, all texts and poems are works of fiction. Names, characters, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

DARFST DU SEIN, WER DU BIST?

Can you be who you are?

Echoes of Freedom *by Reka Pihes*

They call me Golden Adele. Not because I was born of silk and sequins stitched in stardust and vision. Not because of the impression I give of Vienna's twilight, or because the light clings to me the way the world once clung to silence. No – it is because I became an echo of a painting, and then a proclamation. I was not made in haste. I was dreamt into being. They stitched me for art, for protest, for beauty.

But what is this weight on one's spine? Straight with pride, trembling with power. I clung to her shoulders like armour. She was not Adele Bloch-Bauer, nor was she merely Tom Neuirth. She was myth and message. Like a hug of welcoming sunlight filtering through the leaves of trees, we became one – one painting representing the Life Ball. Cameras flashed. Some saw elegance. Some saw provocation. But I knew what they were really seeing: freedom.

Do you understand what it means to be seen? Not stared at. Not mocked. Not gawked at in alleyways or whispered about at dinner tables. But *seen*. As whole. As radiant. As worthy.

When Conchita looks out into the world from the poster, her eyes smoldering beneath gold dust and lashes, I understand what I have become: a question. Can you be who you are?

The museum air is still now. I hang quietly behind glass, my folds preserved like memory. People pass and stare. Some read the artefact label. Some linger longer. I hear them whisper.

"That's the dress from the poster of the Life Ball, right?"

"She looks just like the Klimt painting."

A teenager stops, phone in hand, pretending to scroll, but their eyes keep flicking back to me. It's not gold they see... It's a door they did not know could ever open.

A man in a dark suit stands with his arms crossed, gaze cool, but his jaw clenches. He was taught beauty belonged in certain frames, and this one does not obey.

An older woman leans closer to the glass, lips parted. She doesn't know why her eyes sting. Maybe because once, in another life, she left a version of herself behind on a train platform and never dared to call her back.

Two friends rush past – one laughs, "It's a bit too much, isn't it?" – her voice flickering halfway through. The other one glances back over her shoulder, long after they've moved on.

"Imagine wearing that."

But some, the quiet ones, the ones who linger and look a little too long, don't need to imagine. They've worn disguises every day. Their closets have held not just clothes, but whole skeletons – complete sets of secrets. Their reflections might still be the threatening light of their own perception.

But I am not hiding. I am here under my own permission, my own decision, following my own tinkling voices of stardust, whispering: *You are welcomed to be glittering. To be soft. To be defiant. To be loud. To be yourself.*

Sometimes I wish I could speak. I would tell them that golden is not a color – it is a state of being. That rules, when broken with beauty, gift freedom. That I have held rebellion between my seams and love in every glint of crystal. But I cannot speak. I can only shimmer. And sometimes that is enough. Because once, I was presented to the public on a body the world tried to label – and failed.

And now, behind this glass, I ask every passerby the question that still echoes louder than any anthem: Can you be who you are?

WER BESTIMMT ÜBER DEINEN KÖRPER?

Who takes the decisions regarding your body?

The Syringe *by Amelie Trippolt*

Arno pulled the money out of his pocket and gave it to the man. The windows of the abandoned barn didn't let a lot of light in. He could barely make out the guy's face. Arno pulled his thin coat closer to him, watching this stranger count his money. Finally, he pulled out a vial and handed it over with a syringe. "You didn't get this from me, you hear me?" Arno nodded his head, stumbling to get out of the barn, needing a breath of fresh air to calm his pulse.

Night was falling quickly, earlier every day as winter was burying their village. He struggled through the deep snow, but Maria was all that mattered. Only a bit longer.

Arno went into the kitchen. "Just on time, as usual," his mother commented, stirring the soup. His little sisters were already squeezed around the table, his father smoking a pipe. No one missed the one warm meal a day.

"Have you heard about the wedding?" his mother asked. His father tipped his head, but Arno's throat was blocked.

"Young Maria got engaged to Michael, the heir of the glass factory. She is a pretty one, so I shouldn't be surprised he wanted to marry her, and it's a good match, her family will do well," his mother babbled on. Arno thought of Maria's deep brown eyes, her delicate body. His Maria. The mother of his – "The wedding is supposed to be this spring." He swallowed a spoonful of soup, trying not to choke. "And once they're married, they will move to the city, where Michael is to study law at the university. They will make a wonderful family."

Arno clenched his teeth and grunted under his breath. The thought of her being gone from his life, her building a family with someone else and choking that first sign of life of their love, pierced him like a dagger. As his mother prattled on, he finished his bowl and left the house again. He would be early after all.

Back at the barn, he carefully opened the door. Even with his lantern it was hard to see. No Maria. It wasn't an especially nice place, but it was the only place in their mountain village slightly out of sight, where nobody went. It was their secret hideaway. Had been since the start of their relationship. Arno knew he had admired Maria since he was a little boy. Her elegance, her presence, her intelligent eyes, her beauty. He felt the cold glass of the vial in his pocket and shivered slightly. What was he doing here? Their plan seemed like madness. He could not possibly kill... A creak made him look up. Maria appeared like an angel, wrapped in her dark blue overcoat. Warmth flooded him, as she took his hand. "I was afraid you wouldn't be here," she said.

Arno cringed, "I will not leave you in this alone." She smiled at him, and he touched her waist, her belly. Her beauty dazzled him, just as the sadness tried to crush him.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

Her smile cracked, her mouth tightening. "There is no other way, Arno."

"But we could... do something. Run away. Confess our love to the village elders. To your father."

"You know that he will not accept you as family. I love you, but..." she touched his cheek, "my father would rather see me dead than married off to a farmer's son." A tear made its way down her cheek. "Michael will take care of me. But not of this," she touched her belly.

Arno suppressed a sob and slung his arms around her. She was everything to him. He wanted a future with her, a family. But he could not force her to do anything. Maria was strong-willed, just like her father, and Arno had to accept her decision. He held her close, breathed in her lavender soap smell. Maria patted his back quickly, and he understood. "Let's get on with it."

Her composure was betrayed by her faint trembling voice, asking how it would be done, the shaking in her hands, as she pulled up her dress and lay down on the hay. She gave him a little nod. Arno carefully opened the vial, checking the content, pulling the liquid up into the syringe. Sitting up, he hesitated. "But your father, he could do something. Maybe he knows another doctor who..."

"No." Sitting up quickly, Maria's face was set, serious. "He is never to know about this."

They looked at each other for a long second. Arno's resolve and doubt kept fighting each other. "I trust you," Maria said and lay back down.

She closed her eyes and waited. Her determination settled it for him. He couldn't fight her on this, deny her anything, not even killing... He admired her cool. Arno's trembling fingers grabbed the syringe. In his head, he played the man's instructions on repeat. "Pull the liquid into the syringe. Squirt some liquid out to check. Insert the syringe into the woman. Deep, deeper than you think. Slowly push the plunger down. Take your time. Draw out the syringe. Wait. It will take some time. It should all be over within one night." Step by step, he followed everything, praying it would be right.

Maria hissed, the liquid spreading within her. Her rosy cheeks went pale. "It's burning me," she whispered. Arno squeezed her hand, "Shh, everything will be okay. I'm here, I will not leave you." Her face contorted in pain, and she clutched Arno's hand, crushing his fingers. He could take it. He tried to soothe her, whispering "I'm here. You've got this. You're strong," over and over again, but every time he said something, he felt he was lying to her more. Her face was white as a sheet, sweat streaming down her face, she was clutching her belly, writhing from the pain within. A groan escaped her mouth.

"That man said, this is all normal," Arno tried to reassure himself more than her, wishing he had a pocket watch. He had lost all feeling of time. They continued like this, was it minutes or hours? He kept stroking Maria's cheek, holding her hand, supporting her back when she was cramping around her stomach. It was physically painful to see her like this, but he couldn't do anything else apart from being there with her.

Suddenly Maria's breathing got shallower, and her eyes rolled up. Arno shook her. "Maria," he called, shaking her, "Maria, love, say something!" Maria didn't move. Her chest was barely rising. Panic spread through Arno. The man had never said anything about passing out. She was supposed to start bleeding, possibly a lot, but what was happening now? Arno frantically tried to think. He could hope she would wake up again soon, finally pushing their dead baby out of her belly and she would be fine. But was this liquid not just killing the baby? Was it killing Maria? He kept shaking her, murmuring to her, her breathing fainter by the minute.

He grabbed her hand again and noticed the little wooden heart on her bracelet. He had made it for her, his way of showing his feelings. He would never want to live in a world without her, even if she wasn't his.

Carefully he covered Maria's legs, put the vial and the syringe into his pocket and scooped her up. Pressing her to his chest, he went out into the snow. Maybe it was already midnight, he didn't care. Determined he kept a brisk pace, Maria light as a feather in his arms, until he arrived at her front door. He used the doctor's door knocker. Three heavy knocks, his mind blank. Just as he was about to knock again, Maria's father himself opened the door. He took a brief look at Arno, "Boy, it's..." then saw his daughter in Arno's arms, and changed to a business tone, "What has happened? Come in, explain." Arno followed him through the door into the practice, laying Maria down on the cot. The doctor's piercing stare made him shrink. Arno mumbled, "Maria knew she was with child and she asked me to help her," pulling out the vial, which the doctor grabbed, reading the tiny label quickly, hissing his disapproval. "I followed the instructions, but she passed out and..." Arno swallowed heavily. The doctor started examining Maria, then he turned around. "Out. You cannot see this."

Arno sat on a bench outside the practice door. He heard the doctor moving around inside, cursing under his breath. He must have dozed off, when he suddenly felt movement next to him. The doctor sat down, head in his hands.

"Is she okay?" Arno was barely able to say the words.

The doctor breathed heavily and looked away from Arno.

"Sir, is she... Maria, is she okay?"

The doctor looked at him reluctantly, "She is not. Yet. She might be. We will have to wait and see." Maria's father sighed, tears glistening in his eyes. "I have done everything I can. She will have to pull through on her own now."

A tear ran down Arno's cheek. He tried to quickly wipe away that weakness.

"Boy, I know my daughter's stubbornness. I'm disappointed it had to come to this." Arno looked away, shame coloring his face. "But you made the right decision in bringing her here. She would not have lasted a lot longer." A sob escaped Arno's throat. The doctor briefly patted his arm. Through the window, the faint silver morning light was starting to appear.

WER BESTIMMT ÜBER DEINEN KÖRPER?

Who takes the decisions regarding your body?

A Syringe Made of Wood *by Frida Haardt*

Brutal, harsh it seems, the sound of these words. And their meaning? Even more brutal. But what else could I do? It is 1900 – I find myself pregnant, young, and unmarried. They will despise me when they discover the truth. I condemn myself for it. So I'd rather find a way out. Destroying all the plans that were made for me long before I was even born. So if I don't bear you, is that what I was born for? A boring life – but a safe one? I am supposed to bear, but under different circumstances, they say. The wooden syringe lies still in his hand, presenting this man-made cruelty proudly. Everything here is crafted from immovable elements: the wooden floor, the wooden chairs, his motionless, glaring face, the wooden table... the wooden syringe.

Nothing moves – besides *your* heart and mine. Therefore, we have to get out of here. *We*. Already perceiving us as a team. Associates, relatives, depending on each other. This tranquillity is unbearable. Bouncing up, running to the door (wooden, of course), I'm not looking at him. Will I ever again? Trees emerge from the distance, encircling the timber house. We move forward.

Achensee is unfolding in front of my eyes in the distance. Artificial colours reflected in tired eyes. Running through woods so lively it hurts to think of their dead relatives in the living room. Up a green hill covered in soft moss, over the edge and down again. Then suddenly an eruption. Darkness, then we can see again. A sizzling pain. We must have stumbled over something. Staring at the left leg, a well of red unfolds on pale skin. Painful, yes, but it won't stop us. We get up and keep on moving through the forest.

At last, the unnaturally blue lake comes into view. No one is at the shore. It's late, the sun has already set. A damp summer night. We could soon be gone if we were courageous enough. *We* could try to drown ourselves. It would be tragic for a few weeks, then we'd be forgotten. For a while, we stand in front of the waves. Then most of the clothes are stripped off, followed by a plunge into the cold. *We* are fish now. More asleep than alive. Diving through blurry shades of green – the deeper, the colder we become. Tiny flashes of light sparkling around us. Seaweed brushing over my cheek so gently I could cry. But tears will be lost forever in a stream so large. The gentleness makes one think of the brutal syringe. A tool the *Engelmacherinnen* use. Filled with poison – another deadly fluid – potent in the smallest doses, designed to end someone like *you*. And *he* built it.

We keep on moving. Unknown depths of this very well-known body of water unfold beneath us. Tenacious is the evening sky above us. The lack of air starts to wound our lungs. Decisions have to be made. Should we stay down here and become the creatures that watch boats floating on the clear surface, observe people gliding in and out of our world? We could settle rather nicely down here. We could build a house, tend a garden with sea moss and delicate water lilies, floating in a dream until the end of time.

From above, a woman's body was seen diving desperately into the cool water. Eventually, beneath the glistening surface, *she* drifted weightlessly, wondering what might happen if *she* chose never to return. In time, the pain would fade, and all the coolness around would sink into *her*, leaving *her* – painless.

Then, eventually, she arose, gasping desperately for air. She swam back to the shore and lay on the rocks, staring at the night sky.

MUSS IMMER JEMAND BESTRAFT WERDEN?

Does someone always have to be punished?

They Marched into Town *by Jonas André Oberparleiter*

They marched into town long before dusk, plodding along the main gravel road. The sun was still burning down on them; their coats, once colourful, smeared with layers of mud and dust. Only their faces, young and old, wiped clean by sweat, seemed fresh. For all their uniformity, their neat ranks as they marched in orderly squares down the town roads, they each carried their own grimace. From tiredness to exasperation, some with put-on smiles, others hardly hiding their consternation.

Their orderly lines were interrupted by mules laden with large saddlebags, wagons carrying loads draped over by leagues of canvas, and the occasional stragglers, tired but nonetheless trying to stride back to their units. As their train passed by, the gaps grew wider, and the semblance of discipline disappeared, replaced by disarray. Some moustached men, their shoulders shining with silver strands, tried to return the lot to shape, others stalled with the stragglers.

Hardly anyone was on horseback, most animals tentatively pulled along on their headstalls, making one man – a figure of stature saddled on a sizeable steed – stick out all the more. He rode behind the first column, head high and face composed – gently smiling. His dark eyes darted for those few that dared line the streets, his hands holding onto the hem of his pristine coat, golden strands dangling from his shoulders.

He led no glorious procession, no parade that drew out crowds and lured onlookers into chiming cries. Apart from solitary shouts along the column, there were no cries at all – yet it was hardly a silent march. Heavy boots on gravel scraped rhythmically, the sound of closing shutters preceded them. There was an oppressive air around them, a foreboding fear emanating from their tired faces, and their leader's irk-filled smirk.

These strangers were not the first to come into town in these last few days. A group had beaten them by a few nights and left this same morning. They had moved silently before dawn, afraid to march openly in daylight. Hiding in the shadows, not following the gravel path, instead fleeing through the meadows to the town's North. They had no colourful uniforms but were equally matched with the current crowd for dirt and grime – harrowing looks on their faces.

When they first appeared a few nights past, they had come in small groups, as disorderly as disorganized. They carried all they had on their backs, and while that was awfully little, they watched it with great care – never trusting of each other nor of the townsmen. Their leader was a short stout man, no shimmering stripes on his cloak, not on horseback – yet his face had been no less filled with hate, the gun he carried on a sling worn and loaded.

They had brought their very own silence to the town, and their very own threats. Shutters had been closed hurriedly, as only a few odd townsmen offered them shelter. They had been no more welcome for most, but they had claimed to be part of the townsmen – part of their cause. They had claimed to be on their side. And they had boasted to all that listened of what they had done to uniformed men on their journey. They expected young men to join their ranks. Few did. It still felt like a robbery.

Their theft was not the only one to befall the town. By now the newcomers went about their orders, having ended their march. They repossessed some grain, they took a mule

for their wagons, they pried open a door closed to them, and they dragged away two men. They pushed them through the alleys, drove them down the streets. They then dragged them out into the meadows. They marched them single file – wrists bound and under close watch – had them kneel in the dirt on a field, blindfolded so they need not see. The man on horseback had ordered them taken. Retaliation for an ambush, he had said. Retaliation for resistance, justice.

Tired downtrodden men, weary from a long march lengthened by ambush, missing their homes far away, faced the duo kneeling on the ground. Muskets held in unsteady arms. They knew nothing of the two men's guilt and cared little for justice. Some knew how easily protest would bring them to a similar place – none would dare raise their voice. Others were content with the punishment, seeking revenge for what had been done to their peers, the ambush that had slowed their march. Were they not but returning a favour? Many just hoped that they held the muskets without munition – but every single gun felt heavy. They waited for the fateful command, a single shout. It came. Smoke cleared. Two bodies lay still.

The man then had locals dig a ditch, watching as they worked. The soldiers moved back into town, not knowing what their deed had accomplished, what victory they were supposed to have wrought. But the rider called it necessary, complimented them on the execution of the task at hand – called it justice. The townspeople were left awry, shaken – in disbelief. None would dare raise their voice. They knew how easily protest would bring them to a similar place. Yet, some were left silently thinking. If the ragged lot of nights before returned, how many more would join them?

MUSS IMMER JEMAND BESTRAFT WERDEN?

Does someone always have to be punished?

The Object is Oppression *by Christopher R. Standley*

Can you smell the cracking gunpowder? Can you hear the bullets suspended in midair?
And the bruised hearts – grieving somewhere beyond those fields?

Looking at this picture, I wonder if the men closed their eyes behind their blindfolds. I wonder where their bones now rest.

I imagine the trees have long since been felled, and a thousand harvests have stripped the land of any pain.

Yet, here, in this room, they still hang in silent testimony, with nothing else to listen to but our hushed feet filing past. But I wonder if over the years they did hear something more – passers-by talking idly to each other. What might they have said?

I can imagine a little girl, no more than ten, with her hand pressed into her grandmother's, talking about her school day just three days before:

"I still think it's unfair," she'd say. "I don't think I should've been kept behind when it was someone else talking."

How would the grandmother answer? *"We have all been there", "it's a fact of life", "I remember that happening to me..."* I've made her a little too dismissive, don't you think? Do the ends justify the means? Am I *that* Machiavellian?

I turn back to the picture. If I were to name the painting, I'd call it *Dangers of a Noun*.

It's not my idea. It's an idea that countless writers have had and which I have read again and again. Countless writers, who in their own artistic way, have already warned us silently on their pages about the harm of neatly categorising the world into nouns.

It is easy enough to demonstrate if you're not sure what I mean:

Imagine, for instance, a migrant, a woman, an Austrian, or picture a primary school class, a group of Jews, or Gays; consider the old now, the blind, or the disabled – at what point did any individuals with a lifetime of experiences emerge from a swarming shadow of bodies that all resided somewhere in your peripheral vision?

All those men in the painting are blind to me. All have been reduced to a noun. Nouns that we can all too easily attribute adjectives to: the *barbaric* Frenchmen, the *innocent* Austrians. Seems bitter to think that if this scene was painted just a hundred years later in France, we would have reversed those adjectives – it's so easy to judge.

Looking at this painting, we will never see the hurt in these men's eyes. The artist decided to blind them. Yet, I do see the pain in people's eyes when I walk through this city.

I work with words and therefore I see the dangers in a noun.

Do you?

DARFST DU ALLES ANZIEHEN?

Can you wear what you want?

The Process of Creation by Hanne Berendse

The process of creation is male.

Yes, you heard that right. The process of creation is male – from the creation of art to the creation of life.

But wait, you ask: doesn't the woman bear the child, doesn't the woman give birth, doesn't the woman breastfeed?

Yes.

And did not a woman paint the first self-portrait, did not a woman write the first work of science fiction, did not a woman discover that the earth has a solid inner core?

Yes. Yes. Yes. And yet –

For centuries, Western philosophy, beginning with Aristotle, described woman as only the vessel, the passive container for man's creation. Even the paintbrush – because of its elongated shape – was imagined as male. Painting itself was *l'arte di gentiluomini*, the art of gentlemen, since women were thought to lack the intellect for true creation.

How does that make you feel?

Painting is male. Creation is male. *Power* is male.

So how does one act in the face of that? When your identity and your capabilities are decided by others – how do you look at yourself in the mirror? How do you dare to meet someone's eyes?

I think of Artemisia Gentileschi. One of the great painters of the Italian Baroque. After being raped by her art teacher, burdened with the shame society laid upon her, she painted herself as Saint Catherine of Alexandria, clutching a martyr's palm.

She used the male paintbrush to imagine herself anew – bold, pure, intelligent, in full possession of herself. And when you meet her brown eyes, looking out from the canvas, caught between defiance and grief, she seems to ask: *will you see me as the person I know to be?*

I think of Hilde Goldschmidt. A Jewish woman, now strolling the streets of London, for her home in Kitzbühel was no longer hers, nor was her identity. As a Jewish woman, she was forbidden to wear her national dress; the Nazis had claimed the dirndl as German folk culture, and barred her, and millions of others with her, from belonging to it.

But here she appears to us, in her blue dirndl. At first glance, the image seems ordinary. But it is not; it marks a woman immortalising herself in the clothes that were forbidden to her.

Was it defiance? Was it longing? Or was it both, stitched together in blue?

"Our national costumes belong to true, authentic people, people whose posture and gestures naturally fit the costume," wrote Alois Menuhin in 1886. True people, authentic people – who decides what that means?

Hilde's eyes meet ours with the same stubbornness as Artemisia's: *see me as I choose to be, not as you forbid me to.*

How does that make you feel? Uneasy?

Or does it give you comfort to know that across centuries, across borders, women have taken the paintbrush and made themselves visible, as they wished to be?

I think of women today. I think of women in headscarves, in uniforms, in short skirts, or wearing nothing at all. I think of women who post heavily edited pictures on social media; I think of women who never want their picture taken, of women who, for whatever reason, were taught to hide from the public eye.

How many eyes decide for a woman who she really is?

By pausing before this portrait – by seeing Hilde in her dirndl – you allow her to appear as the woman she was in her *own* eyes. You become her witness.

You acknowledge a woman refusing to give up her identity, in spite of all that was forbidden to her.

If you held the paintbrush today, who would you allow yourself to be? Would you dare to meet your own gaze?

WER RICHTET ÜBER DICH?

Who is your judge?

Untitled by Jonas André Oberparleite

There it lies, the judge's staff. A prop unbecoming of your role, a symbol confined to the other side of the bench, and yet you feel as if it belonged in your hands. You can feel your self-judgment grow. Curtains, lights, a scene tailored to your taste, and yet you stumble with another fumble? Another wrong line at the wrong time, carelessly projected into the room yet carefully dissected by yourself immediately after. Most days you feel like you do not even know what you are saying at any given time! When you look for words, your prompter is hardly trying. Why should they even bother feeding you those perfect passages when you cannot passably deliver them?

Pause, a deep breath. You are starting to despise this role you play – but do not act like you have not picked this part yourself! You moulded the character, wrote the lines, stepped out into the spotlight – onto this stage. Maybe you long for the staff, the power to judge yourself for your inability to perform as expected – but do not forget why you play this part, what is at stake. Yes, lacking a director you have no sense of direction going into this, but that holds true for everyone around you and look how well they manage to play their part! Now that is art! If you break character, if you allow yourself to become your own judge, how long before that staff is broken? And what happens then?

Yes, you fudged your part; you went off-script. You may wish to be on the other side of the bench, you may wish you had the power of judgement, but, no, do not try to rewrite the play at this stage, do not question its nature! Is this a tragedy, is this a comedy? Time will tell, why even ponder the genre now if you cannot get your lines right? Get your own act straight first, then you can wonder about the whole of it. And later, when it is all behind you, then you can wonder about your own faults, your mistakes, and you can do so without appearing false before them all. Maybe then you can grasp the staff.

Silence? Really! It is exactly as I have feared, as your little drama unfolds before us all. The audience is meant to accept all your woes and worries. Your mistakes, your excuses. And you are not sure if anyone even grants them a sliver of attention – buys even a part of your innocence. And who are you to even demand their attention? What makes you so special, do you even deserve the soliloquy you wish to force onto us all? You cannot hide in the mask forever; you cannot trust the heavy makeup to hide your shame.

Maybe you should learn the ropes first, find support in the supporting cast, and try not to fall into monologues that leave you alone on the spot. Try your best to find your footing before you step into the foreground. You evidently cannot handle the pressure, and you clearly cannot accept your poor performance any longer. Take a part that has fewer lines but know them better – or find a different vantage point altogether. Looking at you now, I hardly know what to make of you. It seems to me that you clearly need to find a way to cope better with your slip-ups, your blemishes, and the preconceived notion of your role.

I mean, look at yourself! Just now, while you wait for the curtain call, you spend your time idly berating yourself in the mirror of the mask when you could spend the time so much more efficiently than by putting yourself on an internal trial, being both the accuser and the judge. How is that ever supposed to help boost your act? If you are so stacked against yourself that you do not mind punishing yourself for pushing yourself, even

before the play is over, what do you expect to come off that? You can only play so many roles at once! Maybe being innocently accused is enough for now, you can be the judge of your poor act later. Take another breather, because maybe, just maybe, when the curtain falls there won't be a final sentence waiting. Or maybe they will drag you off stage and break the staff. You cannot control the crowd. No matter how it goes, all this noise will be replaced by silence – and you will have to choose whether you can let the echo of your failure linger. Even if you are right in not deserving a second chance, you may get one anyway.

WAS VERSTEHST DU UNTER GUTER ERZIEHUNG?

What is a good upbringing?

Privilege or Punishment by Reka Pihes

An old, heavy key lies in a glass display case at the Heimat- und Krippenmuseum of Zirl. The keyring carries a faded label: *Closette*. Next to it are other keys – once opening attic doors, anterooms, and trunks – silent witnesses to an era when education took place behind locked doors.

Martinsbühel, Zirl, autumn 1971

The autumn sun winks through the bright foliage in the garden.

Behind the stone façade of Martinsbühel, girls play with hand-knit dolls. Sister Isabella stands in the doorway, a ring of keys hanging from her belt. In her eyes, there is both comfort and sternness – a contradictory gift of the times.

Little Emma fidgets with the hem of her skirt. She knows her midday run up the stairwell is forbidden. But imagination is tempting – what if behind the trunk in the anteroom is a letter from her mother? Or perhaps some hidden sweets?

“Emma!” calls Sister Isabella. Her voice floating somewhere between patience and warning. “You know where you may go – and where you may not!”

Emma freezes. She stares at the polished keys gleaming in the light. Every room and cupboard comes with rules. Doors mean privilege or punishment; entry is granted only to those who obey.

Late at night, the whispers start. Some of the older girls tell the younger ones to be patient. Others say nothing, keeping their reasons to themselves – especially about those ever-visible yet inaccessible keys. A key isn’t just a piece of metal. It means power. The one who holds it decides who can speak, who can imagine, and who can weep.

Wherever the sisters walk, their keys jingle – a small sound that feels like a whisper lost in those corridors, a warning: *stand still or run*. For many generations, keys have been instruments of imposing rules and control, but they have also represented a kind of caring – one that doesn’t always fit with modern teaching ideas.

Despite the progressive ideas about education starting to appear around 1900, everyday life in this place is still ruled by strict guidelines. If someone breaks a rule, they are punished – often with physical discipline.

Emma vaguely recalls something she heard at school: “Justice is when you find the key to freedom.” But in the girls’ home, the key stays on the sister’s chain.

Sometimes, lying under her blanket at night, she counts the keyholes in the building. She wonders whether each one hides a secret. What would happen if she could open them all? Would ‘understanding’ in education then mean comfort, rather than punishment? Or will the key always be an adult’s instrument – a boundary stone between empathy and abuse of power?

Even today, the past still lingers. The key in the glass case hints to a time when parents and teachers were warned against ‘too much understanding’ and discipline ruled as the most important quality.

It wasn’t until 1974 that corporal punishment was banned in Austrian schools, and well into the 1980s before psychological violence became a topic of public concern.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 – signed by all UN member states except the USA – finally declared children to be holders of rights in their own name. Today, violence in child-rearing is banned in almost all EU countries. And yet, this key reminds us there is still work to be done.

Martinsbühel, Zirl, winter 1972

The attic key is missing. The sisters are unsettled – not because a room is inaccessible, but because control has slipped away. For a few days, the girls experience something unfamiliar: sudden freedom. No access, no punishment, no authority.

“Maybe,” Emma thinks to herself lying in bed, “sometimes education means losing a key.”

Today, Emma – wherever she is – probably knows with peculiar clarity that behind each key, each door there had been more than just a room – there had been the stories of all the children who had been searching for understanding.

Today, the key is an artefact – a small, cold relic of iron and history.

How many doors in our own memories remain locked? Who holds the key to empathy?

What does education mean, when stripped of control and fear?

In its quiet presence, the key holds a whole history – of harm and hope, of change and duty, and of the enduring effort to bridge understanding between generations.

KANNST DU DIR JEDE MEDIZIN LEISTEN?

Can you afford your medicines and treatments?

Gilded Hopes by Violet Vais

Tiny bits of miracle coated in silver and gold, sold at a price far too high for their weight. He stood transfixed in front of the ornate counter of the Apothecary. He had to get hold of these. As many as possible. As fast as possible. A whole two dozen of the golden ones and another two dozen of the silver-coated ones. That was their last hope: the best possible therapy the physician could prescribe, and the Apothecary would provide as long as they could afford it.

I first set eyes on you on an autumn afternoon outside Herrengarten, merely a year ago. I wonder, had I been aware of what was in store, would I have let myself fall for you? Would we have started a new life in the city, would I have allowed myself to dream of and make plans for a bustling family house, a sprawling garden? Such were his thoughts as he hurried down Silbergasse to the Apothecary. *I would. A hundred times I would.* He pressed on under a leaden sky, and the constant drizzle – *how fitting*, the thought transforming into a bittersweet smile.

Six months into their new life was when he first touched the lump on her neck. She soon stopped eating. She became weak. It was a matter of weeks until she stopped getting dressed in the morning and would spend the days in bed – no strength to climb the stairs down to the parlour and their much loved garden.

Physicians were in and out, ointments were applied, compresses were prepared to relieve inflammation, but nothing seemed to work. The gilded pills had to be ordered. There was no question about it. No choice.

Supplies came in regularly for a month. Whatever funds were available from his work as a notary and his father's apple orchards, were quickly depleted. In his desperation he started selling furniture. She couldn't have seen what had gone missing anyway: the oak dining table with six carved chairs went first, their favourite damask-upholstered bergères by the fireplace followed. Then the bone china tea set, the silver cutlery, the candlesticks. The cherrywood secretaire. Anything of value would go in exchange for tiny gold and silver spheres of hope. She had to continue the therapy though the effect of the miraculous pills was anything but evident.

Today he had to take a hard decision. Desperate, he turned to the Apothecary once again to negotiate, to beg. He had heard his wife would trade valuables in exchange for medicine. Mother's grand piano had to go. The arrangement done, a sufficient amount of the prized gilded pills would be secured for another month.

Yes I agree, he said in a heartbeat, *you can send for it tomorrow*. He didn't spare a second thought. More pills would be prepared and promptly delivered.

That very night she couldn't sleep well. She could feel a presence in the room. Something welcome, serene. A good spirit to keep watch, to sit by her bedside. When she opened her eyes in the morning, she saw her husband smiling – his face bright with relief. No trace of the usual deep furrows of concern in his brow. She took her pills, one golden and two silver-coated, sipped at her tea and smiled. It seemed as if a miracle was unfolding. She was not back to her usual self, but somehow a hint of colour tinted her cheeks. A glimmer of hope!

That went on for a couple of days. “Her condition appears to have stabilised,” the physician announced confidently, but on the third night after the grand piano had been gone, she woke up in blind panic in the early morning hours to the sound of music. It was her favourite solo piano piece – so familiar – but so eerie, from so far away. *How odd*, she thought. Her husband would never play in the middle of the night – of course, she had no idea that the grand piano was no longer there. She waited for the grey morning light to give shape to everything in her room. Her husband was asleep in his bedroom, right next to hers, but she couldn’t hear him stir. Too early. She had to wait.

It was at half past seven in the morning when he entered her room and laid a tiny china dish with one golden and two silver-coated pills on her bedside table. Little did he know that no more pills would be needed. The physician summoned could only confirm her death. Perhaps the music had taken her away from him, perhaps the pills did work but she was not strong enough to keep the fight. Who could tell for certain? Nobody.

No one could tell whether such pills had been indeed effective – the very precious coating, would most probably have not allowed much of the medicine that was wrapped tightly in their core to be released. Still, such exclusive pills would continue to be sold for another hundred years. And in some places, near and far, people would still use the expression *to golden the pill*, to make anything bitter or hard to swallow more *palatable*, easier to *digest*, *acceptable*.

Apothecaries would become richer and richer. The truly wealthy would buy the gilded pills in a heartbeat if prescribed. The well-to-do would do anything to obtain the precious morsels of hope if needed for their loved ones. For sons and daughters, for mothers and fathers, for kith and kin. Most of the rest, wouldn’t even dream of buying any kind of medicine at all.

ENTSPRICHTST DU DER „NORM“?

Do you fit the 'norm'?

The Weight of Words *by Clara Benedikter*

I weigh my words and watch if the world can carry me.

Tell me how I have to be.

Abnormal tastes bitter on my tongue.

So I just go along.

I want to be like others but also unique.

I want to be myself but how can I be?

I weigh my words, what does *normal* even mean?

Normal feels like relief. Like the world can carry me.

Am I *normal*?

I live in shame. It feels like everyone wants to be the same.

The same means belonging.

And who doesn't want that?

But as I weigh my words, I feel how much it hurts.

What does that mean for how I treat other people?

I think everyone is equal.

So I treat people with kindness, regardless.

Because I want the same for me.

To belong as myself

Neither *normal* nor *abnormal* – just myself.

How hard can that be?

ENTSPRICHTST DU DER „NORM“?

Do you fit the 'norm'?

The Day I Tried on The Norm by *Tanja Niederkofler*

I was lying on my back in the garden, gazing into the sky and wondering whether clouds prefer to be round, square or dragon-shaped. Do they enjoy the shapelessness of their body and how it shifts into different shapes according to their mood and desire? A peculiar marmot dared to interrupt my solitude before I could come up with a plausible answer.

“You’re late, late, so late for the fitting!” he cried, tossing a measuring tape over his shoulder. He wore a perfectly tailored suit and his ears seemed uncannily straight. They didn’t even move an inch when a wind blessed us with a breeze. There was a label stitched onto his black suit, “The Norm: Fit into the Perfect Size”.

Curiosity killed the cat, but I am no cat, so I stumble after him and tumble down a marmot hole, passing labels that read: NORMAL SHOES, NORMAL THOUGHTS, NORMAL LAUGHS.

I harshly land on my back with a thud and a groan.

“Welcome to the Factory of Standard Sizes, where even *you* can fit into the norm,” the marmot fixes me with a calculating look as if he were already planning the alterations he’d do to my physical form.

As I take a step back, mannequins, all shaped like identical people, crowd my space.

“Step on the scales, my dear, and look in the mirror,” the marmot says and swirls a tall mirror towards me.

“Please adjust yourself until you match the reflection. Thank you,” the mirror said with a voice that eerily sounded like me, just a tad more robotic, but the reflection that gazed back upon me didn’t look like me. She looked polished, combed, and ready to be presented. Her skin was smoother and her ears rounder, smaller. They had slipped to a lower position on each side of her face. Her nose was smaller, her eyes bigger, and her eyebrows sharper. I gawked at her, but she had the audacity to frown at me.

“Please move your ears two inches lower and smile in a more symmetrical way.” She smiled at me with uncannily straight teeth. “See, just like this.”

“I rather like my ears where they are,” I ventured and covered them with the palms of my hands protectively.

“That’s not the point,” the marmot sniffed and pointed to the mirror. “That’s the Norm and you’ll find it is very comfortable. Everyone says so.”

The mannequins drew closer and pulled out flattening irons.

“With this we will straighten your wrinkles in no time,” they said as the heat crawled over me, scorching my skin.

Another one tried to squeeze my thoughts and dreams into a neat rectangle. Yet another tried to cut away at my curiosity to make it fit into an approved length.

I squirmed, wiggling out of their cold, sterile hands. “I don’t think this fits,” I exclaimed. “It’s so tight on the imagination.”

“That’s only because you’re not used to it yet, dear,” the marmot said and patted my arm, which now felt all wrong. “Wear it long enough, and you’ll forget it’s even there.”

In the corner of the room among all the beauty boxes a snake revealed itself. “Careful my dear,” she hissed. “The Norm might make you feel relief for a while but soon enough you’ll find that all the parts you had to trim away to fit it, are gone forever and you are left hollow. So the question is do you want to fit the Norm, or would you rather *it* fit *you*?”

Her words echoed within me and I could picture stretching the Norm until it made space for my growing curiosity, my insatiable dreams and imagination, my physical form just as it was right now and the way it would change over time, my mismatched socks, and my endless questions.

“I’ll take my own size!” I hear myself telling the marmot with a big unguarded smile.

The Factory of Standard Sizes began to blur, and the mannequins danced themselves back into formlessness, returning to their own sizes, which differed from each other beautifully. When I crawled back into my garden, I felt a sense of accomplishment. I wasn’t sure whether I had escaped the norm or aided in dismantling it, but I felt good either way. I felt a little taller, a little freer, and a little warmer, and all this without having to move my ears even an inch.

Wouldn’t it be boring if we all looked the same?

WAS, WENN DU DEINE ARBEIT VERLIERST?

What if you lose your job?

The Lay of the Mine *by Laurin Klocker*

The clinking and clanking, the yells of heave ho!
The squealing of minecarts, far down below.
Shadows dance in acetylene lights,
The heavy-laden steps of grimy wights.

Amongst the closed ranks of this company
sat a canary, right happily.
Its yellow plume's splendor dimmed by the dust,
Yet chirping and cheering behind bars of rust.

A song held dear by miners all day,
For so long it resounds, danger's at bay.
Even unto night it carried the tune,
Out of the tunnel, to stars and the moon.

Through the huff and puff of fortitude spent
From long labor's toil, prayers are sent
On high to thank the Lord for sparing
The lives of these workers, bold and daring.

Of faith unburdened and unawares,
Our feathered friend sang free of such cares.
Its cage dangled gently from left to right,
Hung from a pickaxe, a joyous sight.

Thus each dawn the bird followed its fellows
Into the shafts, past forges and bellows,
Perched in its cage, of the iron wrought,
Which the miners in the darkness sought.

They blasted their powder and shook the walls,
A rumbling through the ridges, dales, and falls,
Like the beating of the mountain's heart
Letting ferrous blood into the miners' cart.

They hewed and shoveled and hammered away,
And our bard warbling with them, as ever as gay.
They toiled until the petrous pulse was spent,
The mountain all gutted, its veins all rent.

And so the last whistle finally blew,
The mine was dry, no more work to do.
"Hand in your helmet, hand in your lamp,
Find employ elsewhere, we're closing this camp!"

In rank and file the workers marched home,
Loaded with worry as heavy as stone.
The bird looked on as they passed it by,
Left in its prison, it yearned for the sky.

It cheeped and chirped, but none did it hear,
hopped left and right, excited in fear.
The last few stragglers abandoned the mine,
And the bird's sweet song shrunk into a whine.

Just as its notes would cease to resound,
A voice pierced the veil of silence around:
"What sit you here, my comrade, all alone?
Fly far, fly fast, find yourself a new home."

The latch sprung open, the bird thus unfettered,
Spread its wings and soared, dusty-feathered,
Round its savior, his kindness to requite
With a hymn laid down with all its might.

The man tipped his cap and bade it adieu,
"You've been a good chap, you've done your due,
Shoulder to shoulder with us mining men,
As all of us, say goodbye to this glen."

And so had the canary its freedom won,
And off it rushed to the setting sun,
Shedding its cover of soot behind,
Like the smoky trail of phoenix-kind.

For many a day, it flew here and there,
With a gleeful song its joy laid bare.
But soon it learned that the world it found,
Did with bitter tears and trials abound.

To rest its weary wings, it once touched down
On a strange kingly figure with a tattered gown.
His crown made of straw, he surveyed the land,
Where his subjects labored on his demand.

A farmer bent, the furrows on his brow
Could rival the ones he drew with his plow.
Two little ones attended his toil,
The girl spread the seed, the boy sealed the soil.

Trilling a verse, the bird soon caught their eye,
sat on their king's shoulder, a little spy.
Unshod and dirty they ran to their master,
The boy screamed aloud, the bird feared disaster.

It bowed to its host and fluttered away,
Didn't hear the girl who begged it to stay.

As it left the king's realm, the bird looked behind,
Unto the man and his earth, both of one kind.

Sprawled 'cross a plane, a village it saw,
Of humble abodes, rustic and raw.
A tall steeple stood, on a hill it was raised.
Bright bells a-ringing, the heavens they praised.

The faithful streamed in to receive their grace,
While a man hunched alone at the tower's base.
He silently sought the pilgrims' alms,
Covered in sores, he had opened his palms.

A few copper coins were his meagre reward,
He rose to his feet, sent his cross to the Lord.
A wanderer, like our yellow friend,
He hobbled on to an uncertain end.

The bird drew circles in the air above,
And followed the man along his path,
Giving him courage with a cheerful number,
'Til the man sat to rest and fell into slumber.

Ahead in the distance, two pillars of smoke
Did the bird's curiosity now evoke.
Beyond the horizon they rose from the ground,
So it sailed on the wind, to stranger lands bound.

The black plumes grew as it approached on nigh,
And the bird soon dove under the haze in the sky.
Instead it breathed in the city's bustle,
A pushing and pulling, a constant hustle.

The chimneys chugged on, a tireless machine
In the factory halls, by the bird unseen.
It flew past the fences and over a crowd,
That stood by the gates, yelling aloud.

A young woman there held her ground with zeal,
Brandishing signs with her honest appeal.
Even as men in blue broke their lines in twain
And carried her off, did her spirit remain.

The bird from this sea of cries departed
Which drowned out its song and its ears bombarded.
Finally, on a weathercock's arrow,
It rested its wings beside a sparrow.

But as it chatted with its avian kin,
A familiar voice did suddenly ring.
Reciting a poem below on the street,
The man who once saved it, verses so sweet.

Singing his ballad, the man couldn't believe
That his old comrade just perched on his sleeve,
Mingling its own air with the miner's tune,
Once loud, then falling to a gentle croon.

It didn't grasp much, a bird after all,
But it could feel the sorrow in the miner's call.
A poem of loss, of fortune undone,
A passionate plea by this hapless son.

He closed his last stanza and spoke to the bird,
"We've both come far after all that's occurred.
My golden friend, why don't you sing with me
Of shafts, of toil, and our old company?"

How we drudged in the darkness and carved the stone,
Went abed tired, woke sore to the bone.
The comrades we've lost, the brothers who fell,
Nitrite and sulfur, the foul stench of hell.

Of heroes and heathens, ballads are written,
Yet our plight in silence lies hidden.
Lend me your tongue and perhaps we just may,
Awaken compassion with this miner's lay."

Thus he embarked on his verses anew,
Attended by one sounding bright and true,
By a bird, of voice and feather pretty,
A curious sight for the folks of the city.

WIRD DEINE ARBEIT GESCHÄTZT?

Does your work get appreciated?

Unseen *by Hanne Berendse*

Cloaked in all black,
kept from the light,
her name is never spoken,
yet she works in plain sight.

Shoes at the threshold;
a towel lies in plea.
The guest commands in silence,
she obeys invisibly.

Without her black uniform,
would she earn back her name?
Or does your silence bind her,
unseen all the same?

WIRD DEINE ARBEIT GESCHÄTZT?

Does your work get appreciated?

Unspoken *by Violet Vais*

Back in the day
all chequered and proud
red on white
blending into Alpine decor
work unseen
while fortunes were spent
on ski slopes of lore

Planks and poles
enough to build fences
custom-made boots
to please the senses

Chairlifts whizzing uphill
ran forever fixed
now as background still
of snapshots in time
of merry a day
of more rooms with a view

But –
nothing new

The bigger the better
they say

Still –
the chambermaids
remain anonymous
their smiles fixed like braids
in folds and valleys
their lives mountainous

HAST DU WIRKLICH FEIERABEND?

Can you really call it a day?

Laying down the Sickie *by Christopher R. Standley*

I left work today – racing down the stairs two at a time, and posed, invictus
with arms raised high, addressing a stadium of polished surfaces.

Cheers bursting from a thousand lips:

“Go get ‘em!” “Nice one mate!” “Fan-bloody-tastic.”

Naturally, to oblige the crowd, I clicked my heels and swaggered out the
company cowboy.

Today, I am a new man.

Today, I finally questioned what I saw in adulthood.

Today, I swept aside the avalanching sticky notes and became the wage-slave
superhero,

the break-time bandit,

the fun-employed, yet still employed, defender.

Today, I’ll take the long way home

to splat the puddles and pluck the leaves.

With some unwanted newspaper, I’ll trail the commuters via two liberated eyeholes
and imagine the most saucy secrets and terrific tales.

As my belly grumbles, I’ll head home to make pizza with too much garlic and extra
cheese,

and like an overexcited steam train, I’ll puff my breath into the air,

proclaiming proudly: *“People, behold! The finest fragrance from gay Paree!”*

Then patting my belly like a proud bass drum,

I’ll parade through the apartment on the heels of a band,

whistling the piccolo – so wonderfully out of tune.

And when the well-meaning mistake the sunset for bed,

I’ll set off for a twilight feast with the local ducks

and scatter the crumbs across a darkening pond – my own Milky Way.

And below that dreaming sickled moon,

I’ll dance upon the merry ripples,

and in that moment

I might finally stop my constant planning

and live un beholden in this happy, happy scene.

WAS HINTERLÄSST DU?

What do you leave behind?

Detritus by Violet Vais

You have never taken a moment to think about it. Have you? You think you've seen it all, that this is none of your concern, and then, you realise that all you have seen is but a fraction of what is out there.

I've seen the barbed wire fences at the borders. I've seen what is left behind in nameless parking lots along the motorways of Europe after a quick break till the next stop. I've seen what other people leave behind. I've seen families sitting on the kerb. I've seen cars hurtling down alpine passes, constantly, incessantly. From Gamvik to Cape Tenaro, from the Strait of Gibraltar to the Black Sea. I've seen Scottish mosquitoes and dolphins in the Mediterranean. I've eaten the most delicious fruit on the islands. I've tasted, I've lived, but what did I leave behind? What do I leave behind? What will I leave behind before my particles blend with the winds, the water and the soil? Other than a couple of scattered thoughts written on a napkin, a few tin cans, fragments of glass, some tangled, broken wires from a car that was abandoned because nobody managed to resuscitate the battery and tossed the lot by an orchard, not much else.

I've seen the detritus of human experience. I've seen nature spoilt and unspoilt. I'm part of the problem. Did I do anything? Do I try? Is it enough? Of course! They'll tell you every little thing counts, but it takes years and patience and diligence until you notice anything. Until you go to the tip of an ancient glacier – its remnants still there to greet you – and witness nature unspoilt, raw, alive.

And as the ice and the tides wash out the remnants of human negligence, I keep washing down everything I can: feelings, hopes, aspirations, along with what's laid out for breakfast and a fancy meal with friends on a particular anniversary – because you have to celebrate.

In the past people would celebrate every day, every sunrise, every sunset, every time the moon was riding high in the sky. Now we need to set dates in the calendar. We need to book – months in advance. We need to travel far and wide. We need to see the world as the worst kind of tourist. Leave a stamp on beaches that used to be pristine, on mountain slopes transformed into playgrounds for winter sports. For the sake of business, for underpaid jobs and suppressed dreams. Serial visitors, performing a series of carefully calculated moves.

Across parking lots from Vienna to Athens you can see what is left behind – not just the material detritus of what has been consumed, used and discarded, but also what is not there and has been left behind locked in drawers, cupboards, rooms far away, rental cars, tiny paper boats.

But there is no time to spare a thought. Ready for the next trip back home and then back to another new home, back and forth, like the ebb and flow hitting shores barely remembered. On repeat, every year back to ancestral villages that just survive the winters, toiling away for the rest of the year to buy fancy cars, waiting next to ancient souls in timeless garb driving Maseratis, opening and re-opening doors to reveal domestic chaos at the borders: *"Passport control, open the boot, anything to declare? Driving license. Go. Next one."*

Under a blazing heat you make it to the next border and then another quick stop, another parking lot. Under storm and thunder you brave the traffic, riding on till the rain subsides, till you feel as if you have seen it all, till you think you are in flow between yards of tarmac and landscapes out of picture books, red stop lights, cars skidding, a torrent of thoughts rambling on. You need to stop. What did you leave behind? Besides a couple of recyclable water bottles, crumbs of bread, crumpled sheets of paper and unrelenting storytellers, not much else. Hopes and aspirations still in the suitcase.

One day, imagine, a teacher brings their class to one of these parking lots. Oh, how much lies there to be found, to be discovered, retrieved, collected and moulded into works of art.

WIE BENUTZT DU SPRACHE?

How do you use language?

The Black Baby Doll by Lara Wilhelm

In my grandmother's flat there sits a black baby doll.
It sits right next to the salt and pepper, one of its legs a wooden toothpick.
"What's with the doll?" I ask my grandma,
"What's with its foot?"
My grandma smiles and takes it in her hand.
She holds it gently, like a treasure of immeasurable worth.
"That's my *Negerpopperle*," she says while caressing its cheek.
My breath hitches – how could she say such a word?
But she continues on:
tells me how she found it in the attic of her old family house,
tells me how it was missing arms and legs,
tells me how she looked through the box until she found them.
She tells me how she sat down for an afternoon to fix its limbs,
How she got rubber bands to hold together the little arms.
And a toothpick to substitute the left leg.
"So that it may sit on its own, you know?"
She gently puts it back, right next to the salt and pepper.
I am at a loss for words.
"Why do you call it that?" – it bursts out of me.
"*Negerpopperle*?" she asks, not a crease of sorrow on her face.
I can feel that she loves it,
the way she says its name like talking about one of her own children.
Am I stupid for not wanting to tell her of her wrong?
Not wanting to tell her of how the word was used by cruel people,
people who sought to dehumanize.
Not black people, not people of a different colour, but something alien.
Something that you had to use a Latin word for.
I ask her: "Does it not have a name?"
She hesitates, her eyes on the baby next to the salt and pepper.
"I never thought of that." Her voice is full of sadness, maybe regret.
"There I sat with it for many an afternoon, and I never asked its name.
What do you think its name is? What is a name for a *Neger*?"
I flinch.
"You are like its mother," I say,
"Why don't you name it? It lives here with you, or does it not?"
She smiles and holds it in her hand for quite a while.
My grandma in her kitchen, holding a black baby doll.
"His name is Joseph," she says and sets him back in his little spot,
next to the salt and pepper.
"He looks like a little Joseph."

WIE BENUTZT DU SPRACHE?

How do you use language?

Between Silence and Slivers – Black *by Albona Berani*

I've been loved. Loved so much. Loved to the point of exhaustion, irritation, and madness.

Madness – because the love I received did not make sense. But I, I did not know that.

In the beginning of my existence, I was loved only by White. White loved me, dragged me, hugged me, ripped me, bit me and eventually threw me away.

I was happy to be loved by White. White gave me warmth, love, a caring touch, a home – even though I did not belong to White, I did. I did because White wanted me. They chose me. They kept me. They treated me as they knew how to treat me, as they had been taught how to treat me, as they had been shown how to treat me.

Little did I know about White.

White was confident, curious. A colonizer. White loved to inhabit what wasn't theirs.

White loved to take what wasn't theirs. White loved me even though I wasn't theirs.

I watched White for many years seize ground that wasn't theirs. I watched White reach for things that weren't theirs. I watched White put chains on people that weren't White – on people that were Black – on people like me.

Black.

Black as the color overshadowing White's past. Black as the color nobody wanted to see. Black as the color we are still hiding away, hiding away behind milky glass.

Black as a history, a past, a present, and a future.

Black.

So many names were given to us. So many names were taken from us. So many names lie empty, forgotten, forsaken.

Why us?

Black – the darkness that we are trying to lock away.

Black – deserving of a voice. A voice that was as empty and soundless in all the years of my prior existence.

Black – forgotten, unspoken, hidden away behind milky glass. Here I am, part of this very history. Sitting inside a wooden box, realizing I have been tossed aside by White who loved me, hated me, treated me as they knew how to treat me. My life, gone by, unspoken – yet again – boxed away.

Black – what you see, through a small sliver, letting you peek into what they now call history.

Black – a path of the past, the present, and at some point, it becomes history that stares back at you from a narrow clean opening. Barely visible. Barely noticeable. Barely a window to a silenced existence – still watching you through the milky glass.

Black.

WAS TUN WIR JETZT DAMIT?

What to do with it now?

The Warrior Cape *by Amelie Trippolt*

Ajani looked onto the purple warrior cape, its gold and silver adornments sparkling in the afternoon sun. The memory of his father first wearing it, after he had killed a lion that had almost annihilated their village was still sharp in his mind. The pride and honor it had brought even to him as a little boy. Ajani was now of age, and he had become a strong and skillful hunter himself, and he knew he would be able to earn the cape, he deserved it. Not just one day. It would be today. The cape would be the final trick to convince Tizita to marry him. He would be worthy of her, a protector of her and the entire village.

Ajani walked away from his parents' hut, grabbing his spear, pretending not to hear his mother calling out to him. They couldn't know of his plan, because if they did, they would try to dissuade him, trying to organize a whole hunting party that would take away the glory of his single-handed achievement. There had been sightings of a cat around the village, and instead of everyone living in fear, he would be the one to take care of it.

He followed the tracks, only faint rings in the sand, but he knew what he was looking for. Ajani stealthily walked through the bush, keeping his eyes peeled for movement in the high grass. A sudden flutter sent panic through him, but it was just a bird. He tried to focus again, ever alert, closing his fist around the handle of the spear even tighter. He was creeping towards the rocky hill, when a blurry streak moved toward him, and pain exploded in his left leg. The leopard didn't give him any time to think. Ajani saw the filthy animal's teeth sunk into his own blood-streaked thigh and thrust his spear into its body.

WAS TUN WIR JETZT DAMIT?

What to do with it now?

My Name Is Konjo *by Ezekiel Rockson*

Adwa, 1930

There is a saying among the people that gave me life that every thread is a memory, every knot a prayer. I was spun at the edge of morning, where Adwa's mountains cradle the first gold of the sun. Amina, with fingertips stained indigo and dreams soft as the cotton she spun, summoned me from cloud and earth. Her laughter was the rhythm of the shuttle, her breath the breeze that carried the loom's ancient music.

She sang to me – an old song, part lullaby, part prophecy: “You will be a shield,” she whispered, “a keeper of warmth, a shelter for joy and grief.”

She named me Konjo – which means Beautiful among our people. She pressed her hopes into my fibers, stitched stars and crosses at my hem: for guidance, for guardianship, for the memory of all who might wear me. Around me, life unfolded. I cradled newborns, cloaked brides, absorbed the salt of sorrow at the edge of graves. My cloth soaked up laughter, frankincense, the taste of honeyed bread.

I was not a robe. I was belonging. I was part of a community.

The Day the Sky Fell, 1935

History arrived in boots and thunder, clothed with gunpowder and chaos.

“Schnell! Nimm alles, was wertvoll ist!” The soldier's words were sharp, strange – splinters against the lullabies of my loom-mother. What is happening? Amina's hands, trembling, pressed me to her heart. “Ayzosh, ayzosh,” she murmured, voice breaking. “Be strong – my beautiful, my Konjo.”

The cedar chest split open. I was wrenched from memory, stuffed into foreign darkness alongside silver, icons and the scent of home. The sky outside was the color of bruises. I heard and saw the flames of destruction devour my village. I felt the weaver's grief unravel in my seams.

Meran, 1940

I beseech you my friends, listen to me, exile is not always distance; sometimes it is a silence colder than snow.

The soldier's wife, pale and perfumed, draped me over a piano beneath the Alps. Her circle – women in velvet, lips red as blood – gathered to marvel. “So primitiv,” one said, disdain curling just around the corners of her lips. “Exotisch,” another laughed, gulping down Schnapps and Krautingers excitedly.

They played at ownership, but never touched the prayers in my stitches. At night, the piano wept, and so did I – longing for the music of rain on Adwa's roofs, for Amina's hands, for the taste of sunlight.

I became a trophy, a mute witness to foreign winters and even colder hearts.

The Long Sleep, 1980

Years passed – a procession of silent seasons. I was folded, forgotten, pressed between mothballs and the silence of attics. Children sometimes found me, draping me across their shoulders, spinning in circles – “I am a queen!” one happily exclaimed to her little army of siblings or friends, I don’t know. But their mothers, wary, snatched me away:

“Not for play. This is nothing – just old cloth.”

But I remembered. I remembered every name, every story, every birth and burial, every joy and ache that had passed through my threads.

Villa Freischütz, Meran, 2019

Now, I am suspended – between worlds, between meanings – behind glass.

Visitors move past, faces flickering in the reflection. A placard just beneath my prison reads: “Ethiopian ceremonial robe, c. 1930s. Acquired during the Italian Campaign.”

A little girl presses her hand to the case. “Why does this look so lonely, Mama?”

If only I could answer –

I am not conquest. I am not spoil.

I am prayer, woven into form, longing for home.

But my voice, for now, is a silence that hums just beneath the surface.

Tiroler Volkskunstmuseum, Innsbruck, autumn 2025

On a day of falling leaves, an old man comes. He moves slowly, as if the weight of years has gathered in his bones. He stops – he sees me, truly sees me.

His gaze, dark and bright, traces the stars at my hem. His hand trembles as he touches the glass, and a shiver runs through my fibers. He murmurs in Amharic, his voice barely audible:

“Ya Abai Shiferaw... Ante tenesah, ye’ədmə ṭəbāqī, abatāchən bəmərətāchən əndä miyāstawəsih yit’abābək’ālu, ənātāchənəm əndä āṭfīnh tīwädəqaləch. Lijoččāchən māmṭātih yit’abāqəmālu. Märetačən bado nā bəšəṭā tämolāč.” (*You survived, old guardian, our fathers long for you in our land, our mothers grieve your loss. Our children yearn for your return. Our land lies desolate and in ruins.*)

He finds the secret – a tiny, careful repair, a child’s trembling stitches on my inner seam. Tears streak his face. “They said you burned with our village but great-grandmother Amina had always known. She said she felt you breathing, even in her dreams.”

He stands, silent, hand pressed to the glass, as if he could draw me through by memory alone.

Winter 2025

The museum director is summoned. She says there are rules to be followed, protocols to be observed, policies to be adhered to, but the old man brings a photograph: Amina, young, luminous, draped in me, stars bright on her shoulders.

He tells the story – the journeys, the loss, the hope that never quite died.

A scholar from the local university deciphers the ancient Ge’ez initials woven just underneath my seams, hidden like a secret prayer. “Mäl’āk yiṭäggen,” which means *the*

Angel that protects. A hush falls like something sacred and undeniable, passing between the witnesses.

The director, moved by the weight of the tale, relents. I am released – not as artefact, but as heirloom. Folded gently, I am carried out – not as property, but as promise, a prophecy fulfilled.

Adwa, spring 2026

The journey home is long, crossing borders, mountains, oceans, even deserts but at last I am unwrapped beneath a sky alive with birdsong and remembrance.

The old man's family gathers – children, elders, those who remember and those who only know stories. He lifts me high. "This is Konjo, the guardian. She has come home."

Hands, young and old, trace my stars. Amina's great-great-granddaughter wraps me around her, eyes shining with the memory of all she's been told.

Songs rise, fragrant with frankincense, honey and the dust of old roads. I am passed from hand to hand – not as spoil, not as relic, but as living memory, a part of a community. My own people.

Epilogue, winter 2026

History will record me as a robe – a ceremonial fragment, a museum piece. But let this be remembered:

I am the echo of a mother's lullaby, woven through time's unraveling.

I am the testament of the horrors of exile, the hush of museums, the fire of reunion.

I am the laughter of children, the prayers of the elders, the hope stitched into every seam, I am Mother Earth who provides and protects.

I am not what was taken – I am what endured, what returned, what survived, just like my people who created, endured and survived till I came back home.

My name is Konjo. I am Beautiful. I am home. And in every fibre, I am alive among my own people. I am home. Forever.