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Berlin Babel

Edited by Katy Derbyshire

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BOOKS**

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Introduction

Berlin may have a gruff exterior but the city still manages to attract new arrivals. Two iconic Berliners of the early twentieth century, the artist Heinrich Zille and the singer Claire Waldoff, are considered so much part of the city that there are streets named after them. What many don't know: Zille was born in Saxony, and Waldoff in the Ruhr region. Rosa Luxemburg, Käthe Kollwitz, Vladimir Nabokov, David Bowie, Iggy Pop, Nick Cave and Peaches all became insiders; Ai Weiwei hated the place. I've been here for thirty years now, and I call myself a Berliner with all the confidence of JFK.

A city like this is prime literary material. There have been several excellent anthologies of contemporary Berlin writing so far this century; I even co-edited one myself. But they generally focus on either German or Anglophone writers, overlooking a whole swathe of other perspectives. That's why we put out a call to Berlin-based writers from all over the world, and to translators with an ear to the ground. Imagine the delight of reading through all the stories we received, in fourteen languages – with a little help from our friends. And imagine the dilemma of picking only a dozen (and then adding two more because they were so good).

Besides excellent writing, what I focused on was a strong sense of place, looking beyond the clichés to find some sort of essence of being in the city post-Covid. But of course there is no *one* Berlin experience. I'm interested in how different people see the city – on arrival, while getting used to the place or once they've been here for decades, immune to the raw excitement of the new. And I'm fascinated by what the city tells us about ourselves.

Meral Şimşek's narrator has eyes full of tears on landing in Berlin, but her vision clears to a key realisation. Leon Craig brings us another new arrival, with a strange link to the past. While Natasha Podlyzhnyak tells us of settling in, exploring the summer city and learning the language.

Lin Hierse shows us a city that could be Berlin, but could be elsewhere; definitely an interesting place to grow up, though. LJ Kessels gives us the lowdown on a call-centre job in a town where people go to party. And Nainy Sahani's narrator is one of those party people, until things go wrong.

Carla Berges takes us cat-sitting, one way of getting around the housing shortage. Jane Yager's character has a flat and finds fragile community in opposing the landlord. Ulrike Draesner remembers the neighbours of the past as she walks familiar streets, while Odai Al Zoubi can't quite escape his own history, even amongst ancient artefacts.

David Wagner explains what Berliners get up to in their allotment gardens, always a mystery for anyone looking in from outside. FENG Yurui has a story of death in Dahlem viewed by an enigmatic narrator, and Linda Farata's character comes to the conclusion it might be time to leave. Then along comes Jake Schneider, whose narrator is queuing to get into a club in a graveyard. Talk about peak Berlin.

But how could you read the bulk of these stories without their translators? Many, many thanks to all my wonderful colleagues whose work you can read here: Elisabeth Jaquette, Isabel Adey, Lyn Marven, Han Smith, WU Xiujie, Jon Cho-Polizzi, Will Firth, Umut Simsek, Imogen Taylor and Jake Schneider – who had the tall task of translating himself.

I hope you enjoy this anthology of Berlin stories. May they open your eyes to a side of the city you didn't yet know – whether you're a Berliner born and bred or a would-be visitor. Or, like so many of us, somewhere in between. May they make you too declaim: *Ich bin ein Berliner!*

Katy Derbyshire

Meral Şimşek

The Shadow

Translated from Turkish by Umut Simsek

As the plane's wings tore through the clouds and pressed on to the point of no return, she found herself engulfed in a fire that spread from the roots of her hair through every inch of her body. It felt as though everything and everyone were falling from an endless void, as if her entire life were streaming past like clouds. And suddenly, all the clouds were turning into photographs.

These were photographs that had turned into executioners, each one shrouded white in pain.

As every house, seen from the sky, struggled in the grasp of destruction, she began to twist in agony in her seat, secured by a safety belt and surrounded by dozens of men and women. A bitter groan, as though thousands of bullets were tearing through her body, filled her ears, carried there by her own voice. She closed her eyes and the curtains of every home ever taken from her slipped down from her eyelids across her face. The curtains struck her with the scent of parched summer heat. Then, a downpour crashed against the windows as though the heavens had opened. She opened her eyes and, all of a sudden, the curtains had disappeared and a salty river was streaming down her face into the hollow of her chest. This was the salt of the beginning of the end. Every grain of salt on

earth felt caught in her throat, and she was parched to the brink of death. She lifted her head and met the eyes of one of the flight attendants. The attendant was looking at her in horror.

Geht es Ihnen gut? she asked.

At first, she couldn't understand what the flight attendant was saying.

Then she repeated once more, Geht es Ihnen gut? Brauchen Sie Hilfe?

She managed to speak a word or two in her strained voice and broken accent: Danke, es gibt kein Problem.

The flight attendant nodded as if to say, very well, and walked away. As she moved off, her heels made a sharp noise that felt as though they were scraping across her own teeth, and she had the urge to shout after her.

Stop the plane now, I want to stay in my homeland! The curtains of my house are crying!

Yet, she couldn't. Her homeland was already far away... And all of her dreams were slipping off the plane's wings.

Am I a coward, is that why I ran away? she thought afterwards. Why had she abandoned the land where she had stood face to face with death so many times before? Yes, she was afraid, but this fear reached far beyond anything personal. There were things she yearned to cry out to the world through the language of literature, and she had never truly been given the chance. That's why she had to survive and keep living, at least for a little while longer...

It was July.

The thin blouse she wore had been soaked by her own tears again and again, then dried by the fire burning inside

her. But as the plane began its descent, she felt the air turn bitterly cold. Every part of her body had gone numb from the chill. She couldn't tell whether the weather was truly this cold or the cold was only inside her. She had no idea what would happen once she stepped off the plane. A year earlier, she had set out to leave her homeland but hadn't succeeded. This time, though, everything had happened so abruptly that she had no sense of what awaited her. When the plane's wheels touched the runway, the numbness turned into a deep panic. A deathly cold wandered across her skin.

She found herself wishing the plane could stay in the air forever. Maybe losing yourself in the sky was better than losing yourself on the ground, she told herself. She was wishing for the impossible. The plane's wheels had already touched the asphalt and were slowing for the stop.

By now she knew that her homeland was very far away. Everyone she had left behind echoed through her whole being, her sons, her family, her friends, the children playing in the streets, the smiles of the dead, even the cat she had abandoned. All of them were calling out to her in a single chorus: Farewell!

She hadn't been able to say goodbye to anyone, and so every voice carried a quiet hurt.

While the passengers around her reached for their cabin bags, her silent tears finally turned into sobs.

Somehow, she managed to grab her cabin bag and make her way towards the customs checkpoints. Her feet felt as if they had aged a million years, resisting her with every step, each movement sending a crackling ache through all

her bones. As she moved through customs, she found herself sinking deeper into an unbearable sense of alienation.

Finally, she passed through the customs gate and ended up in an airport corridor. She began to circle around. Everything around her was spinning so fast that for a moment she thought she might pass out. There were people with skin tones she had never seen, scents she couldn't name, sounds and noises that were entirely unfamiliar to her...

Everything, absolutely everything was invading her whole being. She had forgotten where she was and who she was.

As her eyes tried to make sense of her surroundings, she caught sight of a large sign.

BERLIN AIRPORT

Yes, she was in Berlin now, thousands of kilometres from her homeland. She looked from the sign before her to the customs gates a short distance away. She was caught in a vast, swirling confusion. She stood there, frozen, with no idea which direction she was supposed to take.

Just as she felt the urge to drop to her knees and sob at the top of her lungs, her phone started ringing. Seeing the caller on the screen jolted her back to herself. Yes, she had to hurry. There were people waiting for her outside. She answered and began to move, guided by the instructions of a young woman speaking Turkish in a broken accent. She focused entirely on the voice because she knew that if she let her mind wander for even a moment, she wouldn't be able to take another step.

At last, she managed to reach the final exit door. The moment she stepped through, she murmured to herself: *AND NOW YOU'VE REACHED THE BEGINNING OF THE END.*

She had just begun to look around when her eyes met the women standing directly in front of her, waiting with flowers in their hands. While each of them wore a warm and welcoming smile, the million-year burden of helplessness still weighed down her own face. The women hurried towards her, greeting her one by one and embracing her. She tried to smile...

They got into a car and started moving. She had no idea where they were heading. That sense of not knowing exhausted her more than anything. Stepping out of a house and setting off on a journey whose length you cannot guess, an uncertainty that stretches on and on was terrifying in its own right. Night had already fallen, and this city, which she barely knew, only made her feel even more estranged.

While she was caught in the swirl of all this confusion the women around her kept chatting and laughing. She hadn't even noticed the car had stopped. They were standing in front of a restaurant. All she understood from their conversation was that this was a famous pizzeria. She ordered a fish pizza, something she had never tasted before. She loved fish, maybe something she liked would ease her pain for a bit. But with the very first bite, she realised that everything she loved had been left far behind. With each mouthful, the flavour of every fish she'd ever known grew foreign. Perhaps being far from home meant nothing