

WHY THE CHILD IS COOKING IN THE POLENTA

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WHY THE CHILD IS COOKING IN THE POLENTA
AGLAJA VETERANYI

TRANSLATED AND WITH AN AFTERWORD BY
VINCENT KLING



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For Hannes Becher

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I'm picturing what heaven is like.

It's so big I fall asleep right away to calm down.

When I wake up I know God's smaller than heaven. If he weren't, we'd constantly be falling asleep from fright whenever we pray.

Does God speak other languages?

Can he understand foreigners too?

Or are there angels sitting in little glass booths and translating?

AND IS THERE REALLY A CIRCUS IN HEAVEN?

Mother says there is.

Father laughs; he's had some bad experiences with God.

If God were really God, He'd come down and help us out, he says.

But why should he come down when we're going to take a trip up there later on to see him anyway?

Men don't believe in God as much as women and children do; they don't like the competition. My father doesn't want God to be my father too.

Here every country is in a foreign country.

The circus is always in a foreign country. But the trailer is home.

I open the trailer door as little as possible so that home won't evaporate.

My mother's roasted eggplants smell like home everywhere, no matter what country we're in. My mother says we get a lot more out of our own country when we're in a foreign country because all the food from our country is for sale in foreign places as well.

IF WE WERE AT HOME, WOULD EVERYTHING SMELL THE
WAY IT DOES IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES?

I know my own country only by smell. It smells like my mother's cooking.

My father says you remember the smell of your country no matter where you are but only recognize it when you're far away.

WHAT DOES GOD SMELL LIKE?

My mother's cooking smells the same everywhere in the world, but it tastes different in foreign countries because of the melody.

Besides, we live like rich people here; when we're finished eating we can throw the soup bones away with a clear conscience, whereas at home we have to save them for the next pot of soup. My cousin Anika has to stand in line in front of the bakery all night long; the people stand so close together they can sleep while they're waiting.

AT HOME, STANDING IN LINE IS A WHOLE JOB IN ITSELF.

Uncle Neagu and his sons take turns waiting day and night, and near the front of the line they sell their spots to people who can afford not to have the patience to wait. Then they start waiting again at the back of the line.

In foreign countries you're spared all that waiting. You don't need time if you want to buy something here; all you need is money.

At the market you hardly ever have to wait in line; in fact, the opposite is true. They treat you like an important person and even say thank you when you buy something.

The people here have good teeth because they can buy fresh meat any time they want.

At home even children have rotten teeth, because their bodies suck out all the vitamins.

In every new city the first thing my mother and I do is go to the market and buy a lot of fresh meat and eggs.

At the fish stand I look at the live fish, but my mother almost never buys fish, because it turns my stomach. Only once in a great while will she buy one for herself and use it to make fish soup. When we're eating, I always dread the moment when she'll pick up the fish head with her fingers and suck it. I have to watch every time, even though it makes me sick.

MY FAVORITE THINGS TO EAT ARE:

polenta with salt and butter;
chicken soup;
cotton candy;
roast chicken with garlic;
butter;
dark bread with tomatoes, onions, and sunflower oil;
meatballs;
crêpes with jam;
pork in garlic-flavored aspic;
chicken cooked with tomatoes and with mashed potatoes and

roasted onions;
white chocolate without nuts;
rice pudding with raisins and cinnamon;
eggplant salad with mayonnaise;
lard with cubes of bacon;
stuffed peppers, sour cream, and polenta;
Hungarian salami;
apples baked in a crust;
roast pork with sauerkraut;
blood sausage;
funeral farina cake decorated with those colorful candies called
Smarties;
grapes with white bread;
cucumbers with salt;
garlic sausage;
warm polenta with cold milk;
grape leaves stuffed with meat;
candy bars;
goulash with red onions;
polenta with goat cheese;
white bread with butter and sugar;
roasted almonds;
chewing gum with a surprise inside.
To me, a raw onion tastes best after I whack it with my fist. Then
the heart pops out.
I don't like oranges, even though they're only available in my
country at Christmas.

My father's favorite food is eggs scrambled with tomatoes.

BEING IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES DOESN'T CHANGE US.
WE EAT WITH OUR MOUTHS NO MATTER WHAT COUN-
TRY WE'RE IN.

My mother gets up at dawn and starts cooking by plucking a chicken and holding it over an open gas flame. My mother prefers to buy live chickens, because they're the freshest.

In a hotel she slaughters the chicken in the bathtub.

CHICKENS HAVE AN INTERNATIONAL SQUAWK WHEN
THEY'RE BEING SLAUGHTERED; WE UNDERSTAND
THEM WHEREVER WE ARE.

Slaughtering in a hotel is prohibited, so we turn the radio up, open the window, and make noise. I don't want to see the chicken beforehand, otherwise I'll want to let it live and keep it. What-ever doesn't go into the soup goes down the toilet. I'm afraid of the toilet, so at night I pee in the sink, where the dead chickens won't climb back out.

We're always living in different places.
Sometimes our trailer is so small we can hardly squeeze past one another.

Then the circus gives us a larger trailer with a bathroom.
Or there are hotel rooms like moist holes full of bugs.
But then sometimes we stay in luxury hotels with a refrigerator in the room, and TV too.

Once we were staying in a house where lizards went scampering up and down the walls. We moved all the beds into the middle of the living room so those little scurrying things wouldn't be able to crawl under the blankets.

And when my mother was standing by the garden gate, a snake slithered across her feet.

WE MUST NEVER GROW FOND OF ANYTHING.

I'm used to arranging things wherever I am so that I feel all right.
All I have to do is spread my blue scarf over a chair.

That's the sea.

Next to my bed I have the sea.

All I have to do to go swimming is get up out of bed.

In my sea you don't have to be able to swim to go swimming.
At night I cover my sea with my mother's robe, the one with flow-ers on it, so the sharks can't grab me when I have to pee.

Some day we'll have a big house with all kinds of luxuries like a swimming pool in the living room and Sophia Loren always stopping by for a visit.

I'd like a room filled with wardrobes to keep all my clothes and other things in.

My father collects genuine oil paintings of horses and my mother collects expensive porcelain dishes we never use, because they get chipped and smashed when they're packed and unpacked. Everything we own is packed up in a large suitcase with lots of newspaper.

IN EVERY COUNTRY WE'RE IN WE COLLECT SOME
PRETTY THING FOR OUR BIG HOUSE.

My aunt collects the stuffed animals that her lovers win for her by shooting targets down at the fair.

MY MOTHER IS THE WOMAN WITH STEEL HAIR.

She hangs by her hair from the big top and juggles balls, rings, and flaming torches.

When I get bigger and thinner, I'll have to hang by my hair too. I have to be very careful when I'm combing my hair; my mother says a woman's hair is the most important thing about her.

MY FATHER SAYS THE HIPS ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT
THING.

I'm imagining a woman with hips as wide as a circus tent. But that wouldn't help with hanging.

I'll never hang by my hair; I don't want to.

I pull hair out of my head in bunches, like the feathers from the stewing chicken.

A woman with no hair will never find a husband, my mother says.

I don't want a husband; I'd rather be like my sister, who's brave and is always causing problems.

My sister is only my father's daughter.

She eats everything, because my mother saved her life when she had rickets and was covered with lice.

Even though she's not one of us, I love her like my sister. Her mother is my father's stepdaughter. She and her mother, my sister's grandmother and once my father's wife, live in a hospital because they went crazy.

My sister's crazy too, my mother says, because my father loves her like a woman.

I have to be careful not to go crazy too; that's why my mother takes me everywhere with her.

MY FATHER ONLY WANTS MY SISTER ANYWAY.

My sister can do everything better than I can. Even though she's only a couple of years older, she has a crushed knee. My father ran over her leg with a tractor so she wouldn't find a husband and would always stay with him.

I won't really and truly belong to the circus until I have a real injury too. But I haven't managed yet, because my mother's always getting in the way. I can't even start climbing up the rope before she nearly passes out.

My mother often acts as if something terrible is going to happen soon, even when somebody near her just suddenly laughs.

Women especially.

Women are jealous and devious, always thinking up dirty tricks, she says.

I WAS ONLY SOMEBODY BEFORE I WAS BORN.

For eight months before my birth I did tightrope walking on my head. I lay inside my mother, she did the split up on the high wire, and I looked down or pressed myself against the rope. One time she couldn't get up out of the split and I almost fell out. Not long after that I came into the world. I was very beautiful when I was born; my mother was afraid somebody would steal me and put a strange child into my cradle. I came into the world completely bald. After she bathed me, my mother took her black eyebrow pencil and made me thick eyebrows. My aunt counted to see if I had all my fingers, and the midwife tied my bow legs together with a bandage.

My father wasn't around.

My mother christened me with the name of the midwife, who came from a different country. And for my second name my aunt named me after a movie star so I too would become famous. But I'm not named after Sophia Loren.

ALL DAY LONG I WAIT FOR NIGHT. IF MY MOTHER DOESN'T KILL HERSELF FALLING DOWN FROM THE BIG TOP, WE'LL ALL HAVE CHICKEN SOUP TOGETHER AFTER THE SHOW.

My mother has long, slender legs; in the picture she looks Japanese, with straight black hair and bangs. We don't look alike.

I look like my father.

That crook—he's not your father, my mother says in a rage sometimes, we don't need him!

HOW COME MY FATHER ISN'T MY FATHER?

Sometimes my mother makes out to men that she's my sister. She rolls her eyes when she tells them that and draws out her words, as if she suddenly had honey in her mouth. And she doesn't even like honey; she'd rather eat a piece of dark bread with butter and salt. And drink white wine. She drinks as much white wine as I eat cotton candy. If we saved the money instead we'd be able to use it to buy our big house—with chickens too.

When my mother makes herself out to be my sister, she suddenly smells a whole lot like a stranger. Then she's not allowed to touch me. In a hotel she has to sleep on the floor; I don't want to share the bed with her.

MY MOTHER IS DIFFERENT FROM OTHER WOMEN, BECAUSE SHE HANGS BY HER HAIR, AND THAT STRETCHES YOUR HEAD OUT AND PULLS YOUR BRAIN LENGTHWISE.

At home people aren't allowed to think freely even in their dreams.
If they say something out loud and are overheard by the spies,
they'll be sent to Siberia.
The spies have secret passages behind the walls.

But foreigners want to hurt us too.
I'm not allowed to leave the trailer alone.
I'm not allowed to play with other children.
My mother doesn't trust anybody.
I have to learn to be the same way.

Before a woman gets pregnant, she gets very thirsty and keeps
drinking water until it turns into a child.

When the child gives a signal, everything closes up down there in
the mother so the child doesn't fall out of her belly.

In her belly it's like in a house that has a bed or a bathtub with
warm water.

The child eats whatever the mother sends down to it.

Everything the mother can do the child can do too, except get
pregnant.

HAVING CHILDREN WITHOUT A MAN AND BEFORE
YOU'RE BORN IS PROHIBITED.

But in the mother's belly there's no man for you to marry. Or if
there is, he's a relative. You don't marry relatives, because if
you do your children come into the world with their legs stuck
together. Then people can tell the parents are related to one
another.

Maybe it's different here in a foreign country, though.

When the mother cries, there's a flood in her belly, because the
child cries too.

THE CHILD BELONGS MORE TO THE MOTHER THAN THE
FATHER, BECAUSE SHE'S THE MOTHER.

My sister is good-looking like a man; she gets into fights with all
the other children. She's a Gypsy.

I WANT TO BE A GYPSY TOO.

While my mother's hanging by her hair in the big top, my sister
tells me THE STORY OF THE CHILD WHO'S COOKING IN
THE POLENTA to calm me down.

Because when I picture the child cooking in the polenta and how
much that must hurt, I don't always have to be thinking about
how my mother might go plunging down from up there, she
says.

But it's no use. I have to keep on thinking about my mother's death
so I won't be surprised. I see her setting her hair on fire with the
flaming torches and plunging to the ground while she's burn-
ing. And then when I bend over her, her face crumbles to ash.

I don't scream.

I've thrown my mouth away.

IF YOU DREAM OF TEETH FALLING OUT, SOMEONE
WILL DIE.

Striking the circus tent is the same everywhere, like a big burial ceremony, always at night after the last show in whatever city. When the circus fence is removed, strangers come to our trailer sometimes and press their faces against the windowpane.

I feel like the fish at the market.

The trailer and the cages are driven to the station with flashing lights and loaded onto the train.

Everything dissolves inside me, and a wind passes right through me.

What I'd like best is to be like the people out there.

There they can all read and they know things; their souls are made of white flour.

What I'd like best is to be dead. Then everybody would cry at my funeral and blame themselves.

Sadness makes you old.
I'm older than the children in foreign countries.
Children are born old in Romania, because they're already poor in
their mothers' bellies and have to listen to their parents' problems.
It's like heaven living here. I'm not getting younger, though.

At home my parents performed in the state-sponsored circus.
They were very famous.

THE DICTATOR SURROUNDED ROMANIA WITH BARBED WIRE.

My father, my mother, my aunt, my sister, and myself fled by plane
to a foreign country after my father stole all the money from the
circus cash register.

My mother went into the HOTEL INTERNATIONAL with the
stolen money, batted her eyelashes, and bought dollars.

The dead live better than the living: in heaven you don't need a
passport to travel, my mother says.

My aunt left her husband behind. She almost never talks about him.

So my mother talks all the more about her many brothers and
sisters, crying and beating herself on the head when she does.

It looks like a ballet.

My aunt doesn't cry; she's older than my mother.

MY AUNT IS LIKE MY MOTHER'S SHADOW.

But she looks different in every picture, as if she were part of the landscape. She's always making people take her picture with flowers, bottles, plates, teddy bears, radios, or whatever happens to be close by.

When she performs with my father she dresses like a man with a mustache. She's often very gaudy with her make-up; she'll glue on false eyelashes that reach up to her eyebrows and stuff cotton into her bra to lift up her breasts.

She's always got a different man, and she accepts presents from them all.

Whenever we share a hotel room, she'll sometimes pass the night in the bathroom with somebody.

But with my aunt that doesn't bother me.

We're good people, my mother says, because we're Orthodox. What's Orthodox?

That's when you believe in God, she says.

The Orthodox are always singing, eating, and praying. But I've never been with them.

My aunt always makes funeral farina cake decorated with Smarties. But we eat it ourselves, because there's no Orthodox church nearby to donate it to.

When we eat the cake my mother cries and goes down the list of all the dead in our family.

My aunt winks at me behind her back: Your mother should have been an opera singer.

THE DICTATOR PROHIBITED GOD.

But in foreign countries we're allowed to have religion even though there are almost no Orthodox churches.

Every night I pray the prayer I learned from my mother.

At home children aren't allowed to pray or draw pictures of God.

The pictures always have to be of the dictator and his family.

His picture hangs in every room so all the children will know what he looks like.

Half a city is filled with his wife's shoes, and she uses whole houses as wardrobes.

The dictator is a shoemaker by trade; he bought his school diploma.
He can't read or write, my mother says; he's stupider than a wall.
But walls don't kill people, my father says.

People seek happiness the way blood seeks the heart. When blood
no longer flows to the heart, people dry out, my father says.
Foreign countries are the heart. And we're the blood.

But what are we at home?

3

I'm very clean.

Every day my mother has to warm up water for me on the gas stove so I can get washed.

I get that from my aunt.

Romanian women are very temperamental and clean, my mother says.

But she doesn't like to get washed as much as my aunt and I do. She'd rather take a bath. Most of the time we don't have a bathtub.

If you get wet every day you get caught in drafts and go crazy, my mother says.

She has to be careful, because she has to wet her hair down before her performance.

Hair is stronger when it's wet; dry hair pulls out. But nobody's allowed to know about that.

I always have to be quiet before the show.

An hour before the performance we have to start with the preparations:

1. Boil water. My mother washes her hair with rainwater only. We always have a lot of rainwater stored.
2. My mother bends over a basin, and my aunt pours warm water over her head.

3. My mother combs her hair with her head bent down until it's spread out all even. Any clumping or bunching tears hair out in bunches. That must not happen under any circumstances!
4. Her hair is then wrapped in a damp leather cloth by my father and then tied together with a round rubber band by my aunt.
5. My mother sits up straight.

All the remaining steps are taken by my father and my aunt in turn. I can't reveal anything more, though.

My sister is on guard outside so nobody comes near the trailer and watches us.

And I have to stay close to my mother so she doesn't worry about me.

WORRYING WEAKENS YOUR HAIR.

After the show her hair is slowly unwrapped again and her scalp massaged with liquid vitamins. I do that. It ends with my mother lowering her head and combing her hair. She always uses a special comb from Switzerland.

Afterward I count how many hairs have fallen out. That's very important. These tell us how smoothly the act went, whether my mother has enough vitamins, and whether or not she's too heavy.

WE CAN ESTIMATE THE DANGER BY THE HAIRS THAT
HAVE FALLEN OUT.

Nobody's allowed to know how long my mother's hair is, otherwise they'll copy her act from us and then we won't have work anymore and we'll have to go back to our country. That's why my mother always wears a kerchief or a wig.

We practice in the woods instead of at the circus.

My mother hangs from a tree by her hair, my aunt tosses clubs to her and does a pirouette. Sometimes my sister stands on one leg on my father's head and juggles with my mother while I practice doing splits on the ground. I'm so flexible I could perform as the snake woman. Later I want to have my own act, a solo act. But my mother doesn't want that. We all have to perform together so the circus director will pay for all of us to travel and stay in a hotel.

He has to pay travel costs for our dog Boxi too. Boxi performs with my father, wears a little sparkly dress, smokes, and pees into a top hat.

My father is going to teach Boxi how to sing.

The closing parade with fanfare music is almost as awful as when I had my appendix out. It's the same in every country. All the artistes stand in a row or a circle and wave. That's so embarrassing!

When the circus director doesn't insist that I show up for the closing, I sneak off to the trailer and turn the radio on so I won't hear the pounding of the drum.

MY FATHER IS SHORT LIKE A CHAIR.

My father is as famous as the president of America; he's a clown and an acrobat and a crook.

Before the show he's always standing at the circus bar, talking with important people and doing business.

He pastes pictures of us onto the TV screen.

Then he takes a picture of the TV.

That's us, he says to the important people, we've been on TV lots of times!

Sometimes he and other men beat up on each other.

Or he beats my mother and slits her costumes with his razor and says: Today I'm going to drop you from the big top.

MY FATHER'S AS OLD AS MY GRANDFATHER BUT I DON'T

THINK HE NOTICES.

Since we've been away from home my father has become a movie director too. He's always going around with a camera and filming whatever's around. He spends almost all our money doing that.

He's made movies of us and of my dolls too.

In one movie, my mother had to fire a gun at my father in a fit of jealousy, then throw her hands up to her face and yell HELP!
NO! HELP!

That looked really good but my father got mad anyway, because my mother laughed right in the middle of it.

In Africa my father hired some naked people from the jungle, and they had to kidnap me. In another movie he put a rubber snake on my chest, and then I had to scream; he came out from the undergrowth, killed the snake and rescued me.

One time he wanted to hang out a train window by a bedsheet he had tied to the luggage rack. When my mother refused to film him doing that, he really wanted to let her have it. My father went after my mother. She screamed.

I lashed out and hit my father. He turned around. Boom!

My face swelled up like rising dough and my mother had to take me to the doctor in the next town.

My father often hits people. In the country he comes from that's common.

In my father's movies he sometimes speaks his native language; my mother and I usually have silent parts. Or we have to yell HELP!

In Africa we lived in a train for a whole year.

I shared a compartment with my aunt and my sister.

My aunt hung pictures of Sophia Loren and other beautiful women
and handsome men everywhere.

All of them very famous.

I'm going to be famous too.

IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES YOU CAN BECOME FAMOUS WITHOUT BELONGING TO THE DICTATOR'S PARTY.

Day and night we listened to songs by Elvis Presley.

He was hanging everywhere in our compartment.

My aunt is in love with Elvis Presley. Her cheeks turn red when
he's singing.

Even though Africa's a foreign country, there are poor people
there too, just like Romania.

They're black.

In Africa the poor people have to sit separately in the circus, but
they still have to pay full admission.

Poor people had to clean the train and the toilet for us, refill con-
tainers of water, and set up and take down the circus tent.
The circus director forbade us to give them any money or presents
for doing that work.

Talking to them was also prohibited.

When somebody did it anyway, a few people were beaten bloody.

They didn't defend themselves.

Nobody stepped in.

The circus director said it once more: Presents not good!

We didn't get hit.

That's how I noticed we were better off there than at home.

Shortly after that, though, my mother was taken to the hospital.

She had stones in her gallbladder.

My father has a different native language from us; even in our own country he was a foreigner.

He's one of THOSE, my mother says.

In foreign countries we're not foreigners to one another, though, even if my father does speak almost every sentence in a different language; sometimes he himself doesn't understand what he's saying.

His native language sounds like bacon with peppers and sour cream. I like it, but he's not allowed to teach it to me.

If he wants to talk to us, he should speak our language, my mother says.

My father comes from some some suburb in Romania; I think he's so angry because the rest of us come from the capital.

My aunt calls him THE OLD MAN.

NO, MY FATHER IS NOT SAD. AFTER ALL, HE'S A CLOWN.

If somebody asks me my name, I have to say: Ask my mother.

If people know who we are we'll be abducted and sent back, my parents and my aunt will be killed, my sister and I will starve, and then everybody will laugh at us.

In Romania my parents were condemned to death after we fled.

In the hotel, my father pushes the wardrobe in front of the door, the stuffed chair in front of the wardrobe, the bed in front of the stuffed chair. Sometimes we all sleep in the same bed. Thank God not every hotel room has a balcony with a door that needs to be bolted!

My dolls aren't allowed to go out on the street by themselves.

When we have to hide this way here, I don't know why we even left home. We'll never be allowed to go back—that's prohibited.

AT HOME, MY GRANDMOTHER DIED FROM GRIEF AND LONGING.

My mother says everything is much better here, and then she cries. All I can think about is how I want to go back. The others, the ones we left behind, are all going to want us to send for them and bring them here when we're rich. They all love us.

Whenever we meet somebody from where we're from, my mother starts whispering.

They're all spies, she says; the only ones who aren't spies are the ones who ran away on their own.

She talks about Uncle Petru with them.

My brother is a great artist, like Picasso, he's homosexual, clean, a genius!

The first thing she wants to do is buy Uncle Petru out of prison.

You can buy anything here, my father says; soon we'll be so rich everybody will be afraid of us.

They've been torturing Uncle Petru in prison since we ran away.

And Uncle Nicu was beaten to death in front of his apartment door.

When my mother found out she wailed like a Romanian dirge and screamed.

She wouldn't stop until my father smashed all the windows in the hotel hallway and the police came.

My mother is going to find somebody to write a book about our life story.

IRON DOOR AND DOOR TO FREEDOM will be the title.

MY DOLLS HAVE GOTTEN VERY THIN. THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND THESE FOREIGN LANGUAGES.

My father talks to his tuxedo as if it were a person.

Nobody knows me as well as my tuxedo, he says. It's his good-luck outfit; he was performing in it in circuses before he knew my mother, and he'll never part with it. Dictators and important people have seen him in this tuxedo. After he dies he wants to give it to a circus museum so that later on people will be able to remember the great TANDARICA.

This tuxedo has seen the world, he says; it's got lots of tales to tell.

Like what, I ask.

My father burns newspaper and uses the ashes to apply thick eyebrows and a mustache, puts on his tuxedo, and scowls:

A man born in a foreign country lost his shoes. He left them in his house and threw the house into a river.

Or did the house throw itself in?

The foreign man went from river to river.

Once he found an old man under water with a sign around his neck: HEAVEN HERE.

The foreigner asked: What do you mean, heaven?

The old man shrugged his shoulders and pointed to the sign.

The house then resurfaced, but in a totally different place.

It was probably a different house, because it couldn't remember anything about the foreigner's shoes.

Later the house lost its door.

Did your tuxedo make this story up? I ask.
No, my father says, this is our story.

OUR STORY SOUNDS DIFFERENT EVERY TIME MY MOTHER TELLS IT.

We're Orthodox, we're Jewish, we're international!

My grandfather owned a circus arena, he was a salesman, a captain, traveled from country to country, never left his own village and was a locomotive engineer. He was a Greek, a Romanian, a farmer, a Turk, a Jew, an aristocrat, a Gypsy, an Orthodox believer.

My mother was appearing in circuses even as a child so she could feed her whole family.

Another time she runs away to the circus with my father against her parents' wishes.

This cost my grandmother her life, even though in a different story she dies because we fled the country.

My grandfather's dead in all the stories.

The doctors opened his stomach and he died from the air that got into his lung.

He died of cancer, my father says.

My mother bursts into tears: Who asked you? Was he your father, since you know all about it? He was a good man! How could he have died of cancer!

In all the stories my grandmother is AN ANGEL.
And my mother is always her favorite child.

WHEN MY MOTHER IS HANGING BY HER HAIR, SHE RUNS
IN MID-AIR.

Every day my aunt tells my future from the coffee grounds.

I'm going to be famous and happy, she says.

Very rich and with lots of men for me to choose from. And with lots and lots of children.

My aunt speaks with the dead.

In foreign cities we go to the cemetery with her lover and look at the dead.

I go to the meat market with my mother and the cemetery with my aunt.

In the mortuary she asks the relatives of the deceased what the cause of death was, shakes their hands and expresses her sympathy.

She knows many different causes of death by now.

Every person has his or her individual cause of death or reason to die.

It brings the dead good luck for strangers to visit them before they're buried, my aunt says.

WE'RE DEAD A LOT LONGER THAN WE'RE ALIVE; THAT'S
WHY WE NEED A WHOLE LOT MORE GOOD LUCK
WHEN WE'RE DEAD PEOPLE.

Being dead is like sleeping.

You don't lay your body down in bed, though, but in the ground.

Then you have to justify to God why you'd rather be dead than alive.

If you don't convince him, he wipes your brain totally clean and you have to start life all over again from the beginning.

Etc.

Etc.

Etc.

Etc.

Etc.

And so on.

It's true that I don't go to school, but I can speak foreign languages and I know lots of stories; that's much better than school. My mother says I don't have to go to school; I know all the important stuff already.

THE MOST IMPORTANT STUFF:

Be on guard around others.

Don't tell them the truth so nobody can make fun of us.

People don't notice I'm different; I keep making up new stories about us so they don't think we're just nobody and haven't been around.

When I'm of age I'm going to buy my mother our beautiful house and a few restaurants, and when the borders of our country are opened and our countrymen can get out, we'll serve them good Romanian food.

My mother would like to be a restaurant owner some day. I have a godmother who's a restaurant owner in Germany, but she doesn't have any children because she's married to a rich man. The richer people are the fewer children they want, my mother says.

LATER ON I'M GOING TO MARRY A RICH MAN TOO.

Or two men, then I'll never be alone. At the wedding I'll grab them under the table where it's not permitted. People will eat cake and be jealous. My husbands will love me and lick me clean.

Besides the dictator and his sons there aren't any rich men in Romania. My parents did the right thing by fleeing, because I would never marry a dictator.

We have refugee passports.

At every border we get treated differently from real people. The police make us get out and then disappear with our papers.

My mother always gives them presents—chocolate, cigarettes, or cognac.

And makes eyes at them.

Even so, we're never sure they won't put a call in to the SECURITYATE.

OURKINGFLEDABROADTOO,BECAUSETHEYWOULDN'T
LET HIM BE RICH IN ROMANIA ANYMORE.

What does rich mean? My family in Romania can't even boil water, because they don't have water or gas.

But all my cousins have lots of children.

Romanian women have to have lots of children.

We send them coffee and silk stockings regularly. But they always want dollars.

Everybody thinks we're very rich. If they only knew! As if it were so simple! Even here you have to earn your money and be very careful where you put it. My father hides it in a different place each day so no one will find it.

My mother carries her money in one of her boots. Someday I want to spend a lot of money to buy a Chinese servant who will always stay awake so I don't have any more bad dreams. He'll be named Chin-Chan and look out for me, and I won't be afraid anymore. And everybody will be surprised.

I'm very lucky; at least we're rich enough that I don't have to eat Boxi.

Anybody with a dog in Romania either lets it starve or makes soup out of it so they won't starve themselves.

I don't want to know all the things my family has to eat there.

I get the names of my relatives all mixed up, though.

5

Circus people smile when they die.
I won't smile.

Lidia Giga, the animal tamer, was torn to pieces by her lion, the one she fed from a baby bottle.

The burning rope snapped and the man who breaks chains fell and landed on his head.

DO YOU DIE FROM FRIGHT EVEN WHILE YOU'RE FALL-
ING?

My sister and my father have both fallen too, she off the pole my father was balancing on his forehead and he from the high wire.

They didn't die, though, so they just kept on going.

And how can my mother be afraid of flying when her job is hanging by her hair?

She gets drunk before the plane takes off, makes the sign of the cross, asks forgiveness, and says we're going to crash because the weight of an airplane won't let it fly.

My father gets drunk too; he won't even go up on the wire without drinking or else he wouldn't be able to keep his balance.

THERE IS A GOD, NO DOUBT ABOUT IT, BECAUSE AL-
MOST ALL ARTISTES, WHETHER FROM OUR COUNTRY
OR FOREIGNERS, MAKE THE SIGN OF THE CROSS BE-
FORE THEY GO ON, AND WHAT SENSE WOULD THAT
MAKE WITHOUT A GOD?

I'm only going to die in a movie. Then when I've died the light will
go out and I'll be alive again. I'm never going to die completely!
I'm going to hang on to life for longer than a hundred years.
My mother gets a dark look when I talk about these things.
Talking about dying brings bad luck! she says.

BUT WHAT DOESN'T BRING BAD LUCK!

Almost everything you talk about brings bad luck.
My mother often cries and says be glad you still have me. Later on
you'll see how bad it is to be alone in the world.

But I don't have to wait till later on.

I mustn't get my mother upset, because then she'll fall. I don't want to be alive when she's dead.

It could happen any day.

I sleep late in the morning to shorten my fear, because if I get up early the fear lasts until her performance begins.

As long as she's hanging up there, she's not my mother anymore, and I stuff bread into my ears and mouth. If she falls, I don't want to hear it.

I've learned not to cry anymore, because then my mother grows anxious and starts crying too. Then I have to comfort her. But there's no comforting her. She keeps on crying till I assure her I'm all right now.

THE NICEST THINGS:

When we eat together after the show.

When my mother's lying in bed and sleeping deeply.

When she gets up quietly at dawn, covers me up, and starts cooking.

The smell of burnt chicken feathers is home to me.

Then I fall asleep.

THE NICEST THING OF ALL WOULD BE IF MY MOTHER
WOULD SLEEP ALL THE TIME.

I ask my sister why God lets the child cook in the polenta.
She shrugs her shoulders.
If I keep on asking her, she softens up and says: I'll tell you later.

But I know on my own why the child is cooking in the polenta and why my sister won't tell me.

The child hides in the sack of cornmeal because it's afraid. Then it falls asleep. The grandmother comes along and pours the meal into some hot water to make polenta for the child. And when the child wakes up, it's cooked.

OR

The grandmother is cooking and says to the child: Keep an eye on the polenta and keep stirring with this spoon while I go and get wood.

When the grandmother's outside, the polenta says to the child: I'm so alone, wouldn't you like to play with me?

And the child climbs into the pot.

OR

When the child died, the grandmother cooked it in the polenta. God's a cook. He lives in the earth and eats the dead. He can chew open any coffin with his big teeth.

THE STORIES I LIKE BEST ARE ABOUT PEOPLE EATING OR BEING COOKED.

In every new city I dig a hole in the ground in front of our trailer, stick my hand inside it, then my head, and listen to God breathing and chewing underground. Sometimes I want to dig all the way down to him—never mind the fear—and get bitten by him.

GOD IS ALWAYS VERY HUNGRY.

He likes to drink some of my soda too. I stick a straw into the ground and let him drink some so he'll protect my mother. And I put a little of my mother's good cooking into the hole too.

People are afraid of God; that's why they go up high and into heaven. Up there is a special department for artistes who can fly.

JESUS CHRIST IS AN ARTISTE TOO.

1

My sister and I were suddenly taken to a house in the mountains. While packing, my mother hugged and kissed us like a wind-up doll. Before she put our clothes into the suitcase she kissed them too.

I'll be coming very soon to bring you back, she kept saying over and over.

My father didn't want to say good-bye to us. He cursed and punched himself in the face. I'll kill anybody who lays a hand on my daughters!

Then he silently turned to our little black-and-white TV set he'd pasted a piece of colored plastic onto.

The face of the talk-show host looked like a slice of cassata, that Sicilian ice-cream cake.

We girls and my mother were picked up by Frau Schnyder, who's been taking care of us and our papers ever since we fled.

Is there a doctor in the house, my mother constantly asked. Are you sure my children won't be kidnapped or poisoned there?

MAYBE OUR PARENTS SOLD US. THAT HAPPENS IN ROMANIA.

And where was my aunt?

The car trip lasted several years.

I wanted to pay attention to the way there so I'd be able to come back. But the harder I tried, the more everything looked alike, as though someone had smoothed out the landscape.

The trees had had their leaves all packed up, like my mother and our clothes.

Snow was falling.

The car wound its way higher and higher.

Now the car was about to plunge down a ravine.

A big house, surrounded by mountains.

No sooner had we gotten out of the car than I no longer knew from which direction we'd come. The road we'd driven along had vanished.

We were greeted by a woman who looked as though she had several people under her dress.

This is the manager, Frau Schnyder said.

I'm Frau Hitz, the manager said.

She took us to a room with four wooden beds.

The pillows and sheets on the beds looked like snow.

I didn't want to set my suitcase down.

The manager opened the window and showed us the garden.

In summer you can pick strawberries, she said.

She smelled like bacon and spoke a language that was like singing.

My sister understood more words than I did.

But it was winter now.

We're going to stay here forever, I thought, and began crying.

My mother was looking very beautiful and very sad, and we'll never see one another again.

I WANT TO PACK MY MOTHER INTO MY SUITCASE.

Frau Hitz showed us the dining room, the lounge and the kitchen.

Everything was neat and tidy and smelled like disinfectant.

Hard to believe anybody lived here.

The lounge is where homework is done, and when it's finished the children may play, said Frau Hitz.

My mother unpacked the plastic bag full of pictures and told Frau Hitz about our great achievements and all our travels. With a dark look she said, My children are very intelligent and they know the world. We're international artistes! You need to feed them well, only the best, you understand! I'm going to call every day and see if they've had good food!

My mother kissed holes in our cheeks.

She and Frau Schnyder got back into the car. Waving.

My mother should die on the spot, I thought, then we can bury her in the garden under our window. In summer the strawberries will taste like my mother.

My sister and I stood by the entrance holding hands. Next to us, Frau Hitz.

She has rubber arms for sure; if we run away now, she'll stretch them out and snag us.

An animal was gnawing at my stomach; it had already eaten my legs away.

This house is a home, my sister says.
Here you have to put on a lot of weight, or else you'll be crushed
by the mountains. And you need lots of skin to get warm.

I LET MY SKIN FALL TO THE GROUND.

The girls live on the top floor, the boys below. There are little babies here too.

We have to go to bed before the sun sets.

And get up in the middle of the night.

Air out our room, lay the blanket and pillow over the windowsill.

Then we all get in line for the big sinks in the corridor. When it's

our turn we get washed with a cloth that has our name on it.

Every child has:

2 washcloths

2 towels

2 napkins.

Our bedclothes don't have names.

Once a week we have to take a bath and wash our hair.

Our clothes have our name on them, too, even our socks. In our

sewing lesson we have to stitch every article of clothing with

little pieces of tape with the first letter of our names on it.

After we get washed we make our bed and tidy up the room.

Then we have breakfast and go to school. A mountain road leads

to the school. Across from the school is a farm.

My sister's learning how to read, write, and do arithmetic.
I tear up when we sing.

I can't deal with cheerfulness.

After we sing we get a piece of paper with an animal on it, and we're supposed to color it in. Then we learn what the animal is called in their foreign language.

IN EVERY LANGUAGE THE SAME THING IS CALLED SOMETHING DIFFERENT.

In the afternoon we have to do our homework and then we can play inside the house or out in the garden.

The little boys hang around with the girls. The older ones only come around when my sister and I do tricks.

We juggle stones.

Or we wiggle like rubber women.

My sister does a handstand and I do the bridge with backflips or the split.

I stuff cotton under my sweater and make breasts, like my aunt.

That's another time the boys come around.

My sister already has real breasts.

She also has a few hairs down below.

After supper we have to dry the dishes, wipe down the dining room, and set the tables for breakfast.

In the evening we lay out our clothes for the next day.

Before supper two children have to get the milk from the farm. My sister and I aren't allowed to go together.

After all, you're not crippled, says Frau Hitz; people have to learn to be alone.

I don't want to leave the house without my sister. Maybe somebody will take her away while I'm going to get the milk, or I'll lose my way and get eaten by wolves.

At night we hear wolves howling.

I sit behind the locked door and cry.

Frau Hitz talks to me through the keyhole.

She'll open the door if I go to get the milk; the other child is already on the way, so I should hurry.

I turn around after every step I take toward the farm; after the first bend I can't see the house anymore. The road under my feet lengthens out and pushes the houses farther away. I won't find my way back or ever reach the farm.

Don't you ever go anywhere without your sister, my mother says. She screams into the phone when I tell her about what the trip to the farm is like.

After that Frau Hitz says it would be better if my mother stopped calling so often, because it gets me all upset.
Now Frau Hitz is always there when my mother calls.

TIME IS FREEZING.

The week is divided into work days and the weekend.

On Wednesday I hear: The weekend will be here soon.

On weekends the parents come and pick up their children. Then the house is almost silent, it's just the babies and us.

Our parents don't come.

They're away in some foreign country, says Frau Hitz.

But this is a foreign country too, we say.

HOW MANY PLACES ARE FOREIGN COUNTRIES?

On weekends we go hiking.

Frau Hitz leads the way with us behind her.

In the woods we make a fire and roast sausages.

We climb up tall towers to see the countryside.

Or we go swimming. I have to jump into the water even though I can't swim.

If my mother ever found out!

On weekends I sleep in the same bed with my sister; that's prohibited. At night we sneak into one of the babies' rooms and pinch him till he cries. We can't stand the silence in the house. By the time somebody comes up the stairs, we're back in our beds. It takes a pretty long time for the babies to get calmed down. That's good.

Sometimes we go out into the hall and say something scared us. Then we're allowed to be in the kitchen for a little while and get an extra cup of milk.

In the grown-ups' room the TV is on most of the time. But we're not allowed to stay there.

In bed I'm constantly thinking about how my mother is now hanging by her hair. My sister has to make up more and more horrible things when she tells about THE CHILD IN THE POLENTA.

I help her out:

DOES THE CHILD TASTE LIKE CHICKEN?

WILL THE CHILD BE CUT INTO SLICES?

WHAT'S IT LIKE WHEN THE EYES POP OUT?

Then I cry.

And my sister holds me tight and comforts me.

I DREAM THAT MY MOTHER DIES. SHE LEAVES ME A BOX
WITH HER HEARTBEAT INSIDE.

The child is cooking in the polenta because it's tortured other children. It catches hold of orphans, ties them to a tree, and sucks the flesh off their bones.

The child is so fat that it's always hungry.

It lives in a forest filled with bones, and people from everywhere can hear it gnawing on them.

At night it covers itself with earth and sleeps so restlessly that the whole forest shakes.

On Sunday we go to church. It's near the farm. It's not Orthodox or Jewish, though. There's no dancing, and the singing isn't especially good.

In every language they tell different stories about God; that's normal, my sister says.

The devil plays an important part in this church.

The devil is God's helper and lives in hell, which is as hot as the polenta.

Hell is behind heaven.

PEOPLE ARE GOOD BECAUSE THEY'RE AFRAID OF THE DEVIL.

I lay my washcloth over the nightstand.

That's hell.

If I get used to hell quickly, then maybe we can leave here pretty soon.

On Monday everybody's tired from the weekend.
The other children talk about how they went hiking on the weekend with their parents.

They bring back candy, and they have to give it to Frau Hitz. Any candy our parents send gets locked up in the candy cabinet. Frau Hitz decides what we're allowed to have. Whoever has more candy has to share it with the other children. That's got something to do with church.

Frau Hitz once caught a boy trying to break into the candy cabinet. His punishment was that he had to eat chocolate at every meal until he almost collapsed.

Whoever steals will be punished, Frau Hitz says.

THE FOOD HERE TASTES LIKE BREAKING DOWN THE CIRCUS TENT.

Every day we have to eat oatmeal. It looks like sawdust but we mix it with fruit and milk and it turns to mush.

At first I refused to eat it.

The same bowl was set in front of me morning, noon, and night. When I finally ate a little bit and threw up, I had to eat what came up in order to break me of the habit of refusing food.

If somebody doesn't like something, Frau Hitz will always talk about the poor children in Africa who are starving to death.

That's how I can tell she was never in Romania, because otherwise she wouldn't keep using that same example.
I just don't think she was ever in Africa.

My sister fits in better than I do here; she's less afraid than I am.
MY SISTER HAS BECOME MY MOTHER.

The other children tell me being in school goes on for many years.
I pictured school as something different.

Anyway, my teacher's name is Fräulein Nägeli.

Fräulein Nägeli says the sea went away from Switzerland.

The sea went and the mountains came.

The whole earth is a constant coming and going.

In school the whole world is in books.

When my mother writes our life story, the children will learn it
from Fräulein Nägeli too.

I want to go back to the circus.

The other children aren't afraid; they all speak the same language.

We speak their language too, but they don't speak ours.

I can already write lots of words in this foreign language. Writing
is different from speaking, though. Even Frau Hitz speaks in a
different way from what we learn in school. So I'm wondering
if she can even write the way they do in school.

My sister and I speak our own language to one another.

In my language I can only write KISS.

Every day I write my mother a letter, and I'll give them to her
when she picks us up. I write KISS and make a drawing, then
with colored pencils I write my name and my second name
for my aunt. Sometimes I also write her a few words I learned
in school and my sister writes the translation into our lan-
guage underneath.

What good does it do me learning this foreign language when my
mother doesn't even really understand it?

When I tell her about Fräulein Nägeli on the phone, she has no
idea what I'm talking about.

She always says, yes, that's very nice!

But it's not nice at all.

My aunt's fortune-telling never said anything about this home.

Here you can never become famous or rich, and just forget about choosing a man you like.

When we told about how wed already been to discotheques, they laughed at us.

We also told them about the movie LOVE STORY. Then along came Frau Hitz, stop right now, she screamed, how can you know anything about that movie, it's prohibited for children!

Here they have no idea what we already know!

We're also not allowed to wear all the clothes we brought.

That's not how children dress, Frau Hitz said.

We have to wear flat shoes like the boys.

High heels are prohibited.

Painting our nails and wearing lipstick too.

AND NOBODY BELIEVES ME WHEN I SAY MY MOTHER
HANGS BY HER HAIR.

I made that up, the children say, because she never comes to visit.

To prove we live in the circus and travel the whole world, we made a long wish list that we're going to keep adding to.

Every child's allowed to make a wish.

We sat at the table and the children stood in line for us the way they do in front of the bread store in Romania.

My sister wrote everything down.

When we go back to our parents, we'll buy all those presents in foreign countries and give them to the children.

My sister and I have our own games.

I climb onto her shoulders and fall down to the gravel.

She drinks water from the cows' trough.

I put dirt on my bread and butter.

She squeezes her finger in the door.

I scratch myself until I bleed.

She tears out a handful of her hair.

I straddle the edge of a chair and fall onto it.

We want to go to the hospital.

I don't have lice anymore.

Frau Hitz shaved me bald. My sister stood next to us and cried.

My sister doesn't usually cry. She's like my aunt.

You can't cut off her hair, she screamed, our mother will send the police if she finds out!

My sister had lice too.

Pauli.

Heidi.

Vreneli.

Röbi.

Gabi.

Almost everybody's name ends with an *i* here.

I'm glad I don't have hair anymore. I want to stay bald all the time and perform in the circus on the ground only.

MAYBE OUR PARENTS GAVE US AWAY BECAUSE I DON'T
WANT TO HANG BY MY HAIR.

I'd be happy to hang by my hair, my sister says.

They gave us away because the circus director didn't want to pay for us to travel, she says.

That can't be true, my mother says on the phone; the home is so expensive she's only working now to pay those costs. So she could have used that money to pay our fares.

Her voice is loud and sounds happy; she doesn't really want to hear how we're doing.

She says every time, I'll be bringing you back soon.

That's a lie.

The children talk about the circus like a zoo.
Their eyes sparkle or they start snickering.

They think all circus people are blood relatives, all make love with
one another, all sleep in the same trailer and eat from the
same dish.

And then everybody lives outdoors and oh isn't that great!
They can't even imagine how we have to practice all the time and
how we have to deal with people copying other people's acts
and how you could fall from up in the big top and be dead the
next day.

They think it's all just fun.

IF MY MOTHER FALLS, SHE WON'T DIE JUST FOR FUN.

Only actors die for fun.

The children laugh when they hear I'm going to be a movie star.
But when you think about it, I already am one, a little bit anyway,
because my father's often filmed me. When I'm older, he's going
to film my life story.

Frau Hitz doesn't like hearing that. She turns red in the face and
says as if she memorized it: All people are the same; nobody
should want to be anything special.

The important thing is to be industrious and humble.
God doesn't like it when people are lazy.

People are here to take care of the world.
They musn't become a burden to anyone.
They have to have a job and earn enough money that they can give
some to charity.

And they have to keep their houses clean always.
That gives them peace.

But she also says we're made in the image and likeness of God.

IF WE'RE MADE IN THE IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD,
THEN WE'RE ALLOWED TO BE AS FAMOUS AS HE IS.

Frau Hitz would definitely not see eye-to-eye with my father.

In one of his movies he played both a murderer and a dead person. He splashed tomato juice on the walls and in the bathtub, lay down in it and played dead. In the scene before it he shows the murderer unlocking the door and creeping along in the dark.

Then you see the murderer stabbing a man with a kitchen knife. My father took a plucked chicken and stabbed it a few times. In the movie the chicken breast is the man's stomach. In a different hotel he filmed a fire and sent the balcony up in flames.

He's also directed an airplane crash. First you see the airport and the people, then the plane takes off into the air and disappears in the sky.

Then you see my mother, my aunt, my sister and myself screaming, crying, and making the sign of the cross.

He filmed the crash with a plastic plane burning in the woods. For that scene he burned some clothes and suitcases too.

My mother often has to hide things from my father, because he'll cut them up for his films or give them to somebody as payment or burn them.

He even burned my favorite doll for his crime movie THE BEAUTIFUL GIRL IN THE WOODS.

Woods.

A pretty blonde with a parasol doing tricks on a rope my father tied between two trees.

A mass murderer takes her by surprise.

For that scene, where the dead girl is found mutilated in the woods, my father tore an arm and a leg off my blond doll that talked and made a burn wound on her face.

My doll was just gone all of a sudden—vanished.

My mother suspected a trapeze troupe from Russia. Communist criminals, they even plunder their own people!

Behind the arena she gave them dirty looks and cursed them.

When my father showed us his crime movie, I discovered my doll. I left the doll in the woods because it had a hole in its face, he said wringing his hands.

Don't cry, I'll make sure we travel back to Rome, and then I'll buy you two dolls.

Three dolls! As many as you want!

Don't cry, he yelled; I'm making these movies for you!

People need to know what kind of a father you have!

Your mother thinks I'm an illiterate. Her tongue's made of red pepper! She married me so I'd take her to the West. Don't you think I know that?

We want to go back to our parents, we say to Frau Hitz.

First you have to finish school and then learn a trade, she says.

We've had a trade since we were born; we're circus artistes!

That's child labor. If the police find out your parents will be arrested.

When she's talking, Frau Hitz puts her nose up in the air as if she were hanging from a meat hook. Her face draws up lengthwise; her mouth drops open.

I step inside Frau Hitz.

Frau Hitz is full of shelves inside; on them are perched little policemen with little notebooks and little pencils.

They're pencil sharpeners by trade.

The one who uses up his pencil fastest is allowed to go up to a higher shelf.

The one who works hardest becomes the sharpener king and is allowed to toss his shavings down onto the others.

The children's wish list is getting longer and longer.

My sister was suddenly picked up by Frau Schnyder.

Your parents have separated.

Your father wants you to come back to him, she tells my sister,
and you're going to travel to France together. I'm very sorry, but
I couldn't stop it.

My mother sent me a message that she'd soon be picking me up too.

The telephone says your father took Boxi too. The oil paintings!
The money!

Pimp—in bed with a black girl!

He laps up young blood everywhere!

I'll be picking you up soon.

I'll be picking you up soon.

I'll be picking you up soon.

Etc.

Ever since my sister went away I've been telling my doll Anduza
the story of the child in the polenta.

THE CHILD'S COOKING IN THE POLENTA BECAUSE ITS
MOTHER JABBED SCISSORS INTO ITS FACE.

My doll Anduza is my sister now.

Anduza's father is named Herr Finster.

Ever since they started teasing her in school, she's been pulling
her doll's arms out. Sometimes she lays buttons made of bread
and butter and bites them.

Anduza only cries when she has a toothache.

The teacher hit Anduza not long ago because she peed on the floor.

Are you out of your mind! the teacher screamed.

Everybody heard her and laughed.

Ever since then Anduza's doll has been peeing on the floor too.

She always gets hit, and then Anduza screams: Are you out of
your mind!

Anduza's father often grabs the doll under her skirt. Then he
makes eyes like a fish. And breathes like he's under water.
Anduza's going to have to throw away the doll sooner or later.

In school there's extra homework as a punishment, because I don't
want to learn what the animals are called anymore.

I took a guinea pig to bed, and for that Frau Hitz locked me in
the attic.

In the attic I write my own punishment:

MY FATHER DIED OF ABSENCE.

MY MOTHER LIVES IN HELPLESSNESS.

MY SISTER IS ONLY MY FATHER'S DAUGHTER.

I'VE GROWN UP LITTLE BY LITTLE.

And I don't want any children.

And I don't want any children.

And I don't want any children.

And I don't want any children.

And I don't want any children.

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And I don't want any children.

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First I went to the hospital.
Then my mother came and brought me back.

3

1

Backs grew all over my father's body.

No sooner do I start talking about him than my mother gets a
nasty look.

Before he went away there was a big fight.

My mother beat up my sister, fell through a window, and slashed
her wrists.

Yes, I slept with your husband! my sister supposedly screamed.

Your father sucked out my heart and then threw me away! my
mother says. I was in the hospital, so how was I supposed to
come and take you out of the home any sooner! But God doesn't
sleep; now your sister's left him too. She saw to it that she got
pregnant by some stranger so she could get away from him!

I DON'T REMEMBER WHAT MY MOTHER USED TO SMELL
LIKE.

At Christmas and on other holidays she's all loud and jolly, then
suddenly she starts crying or she picks a fight.

She doesn't talk about our time in the home.

They gave you away because they kept on drinking till their brains turned soft, my aunt says. Your parents thought happiness was lying around the streets here!

Your aunt is jealous because she doesn't have any children, says my mother. She's always lived off me and my success! Without me she'd never have seen the West!

Not long after I came back from the home my aunt went away too. She married a young lover and moved herself and her stuffed animals into an apartment.

He took people's pictures during the intermissions at the circus and sold candy. Now he works in a hospital and she has a job in a hotel.

Frau Schnyder's in the wedding picture too.

She keeps sending me messages that I should come back and go to school again. It's not too late.

But what's going to happen to my mother?

She can't perform her act anymore, not since the accident.

We'll arrange a big parade, my mother said to the circus director. A sensation!

I'll hang from the crane of the big ship sailing to Africa.

You call the TV stations, the news reporters, the radio people!

The other artistes will stand on the ground.

The orchestra will play.

I'll be let down from the ship to the dock and unroll a big poster.

And on the ground we'll all get into a truck and drive through the city to the circus.

What do you say?

Later on we'll have a big poster with a helicopter on it.

The only woman in the world who hangs by her hair from a helicopter!

li-copter!

We'll be millionaires!

On the appointed day my mother was lowered to the ground by
the crane very slowly, like a crate of porcelain.

Down there were the artistes, the TV people, the newspaper reporters.

The orchestra was playing.

I was standing up on the ship.

She came to rest.

Everything was going well.

But then she suddenly changed her mind, made a sign to the crane
operator and yelled: Hoist it back up! Hoist it back up!

Hoist it back up! she urged with a smile.

When you're afraid, you take your heart into your mouth and
smile, my mother says.

The crane was set in motion again.

When it reached the height of the ship and was supposed to rotate
in over the deck, it hesitated and suddenly lurched backward.

My mother dropped the poster and grabbed for the cable to soften
the blow.

The picture stretched out before my eyes like rubber.

The crane turned into a hand.

My mother was flung back and forth across the whole sky.

No! No! Stop! shouted the circus director.

Her neck! Oh my God, her neck!

A short circuit stopped the crane.

My mother stayed hanging in the air outside the ship.

She looked like an empty skin.

The night before the accident I dreamed my mother cut off my hair.
Long hair buries itself in the ground and is drawn to the dead,
she said.

When she spoke her teeth fell out of her mouth.

Are you the mother now? my mother asked.

I put her eyes into myself and looked at her.
Her face was a clock face. The hand had dug into her skin and cut
off little slices.

Whatever you say out loud comes true, my sister once said. She
forbade me to mention my fear about my mother out loud.
Would the accident not have happened if I hadn't thought about
it so often?

Your father cursed us, my mother says, he bribed the crane operator!
How can that be when he doesn't even know where we are?

But I'm relieved the accident has happened at last.

Now I don't have to be afraid about my mother hanging in the air
any more.

That's over.

She'll never be able to do her act again.

We have to be glad you didn't break your neck, everybody says.

That you're still alive.

Be glad.
Be glad.
Be glad.
Be glad.
Be glad.
Be glad.
Be glad.

My mother's not glad.

She drinks more white wine than she did before.

The medications are killing me, she says, I can only stand them
with wine. I can't hear my heart anymore!

She doesn't slaughter chickens anymore either. The food isn't al-
lowed to taste as good as it used to. Now that she doesn't hang
by her hair anymore, good food makes her gain weight.

If I had known what democracy is doing to us, I would never
have left home! my mother says. We're going to paradise, your
father said.

Paradise—yeah sure!

Here dogs are more important than people! When I write to my
family how the shelves in the stores are filled with dog food,
they think I've gone crazy!

Here everybody has warm water in their bathroom and a refrig-
erator in their heart!

But God doesn't sleep; he'll make a sea out of the tears of the
poor. When we get to heaven, we'll be able to swim there. And
then we'll come out of the sea and our skin will be twenty-four
carat gold.

IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY MY FAMILY IS LIKE SHATTERED
GLASS.

2

I'm thirteen.

My mother says I'm twelve, because thirteen brings bad luck.

Sometimes she says I'm sixteen or eighteen.

My father took all his movies with him.

We'll have to find somebody else to make a movie star out of me.

My mother's impresario has sent me to film producers a few times.

My mother unpacked her bag of pictures and told all about our successes.

But nothing has come of it so far; in fact, everything went wrong the very first time.

My mother and I were brought in and the producer looked at the pictures. Then he took me into a room with a big bed and turned on several spotlights.

My mother had to wait outside.

Imagine your dog's getting run over, he said.

There on the bed!

I grabbed my head, screamed, and writhed around.

Good! Good! he said. Now I'll leave, you get undressed, and we'll repeat the whole thing.

But just when I was starting to get undressed, my mother burst into the room screaming, took my clothes, and dragged me out of the apartment.

These are Mafia people, they rape children, help, police!
What's the world coming to? A disaster! I'm a Romanian woman
but not stupid! I'm going to go on TV and tell what you were
getting ready to do to my daughter!
I screamed at my mother: This is my profession! Let me go, this is
my profession!

Did my father work any differently when he made his BEAUTI-
FUL GIRL IN THE WOODS?

My mother has a new husband.

She met him in a hotel where he was staying with his dog Puff.
He's a journalist, she said.

It turned out soon enough that he wasn't a journalist and that he
couldn't pay his rent.

That's when he joined forces with us.

But he had to leave his dog on the beach because my mother's
afraid of big dogs.

So to make up for that he gave me a little dog.

Bambi.

In the hotel Bambi goes into the bathroom to pee.

Where dogs are prohibited we hide him in a bag.

He sleeps on my stomach or my rear end, and that keeps me warm.

Bambi doesn't eat bones; he's a person just like us. On our little
gas hot plate I cook him chicken with rice. For dessert he gets a
mashed banana with milk and butter cookies.

Bambi is my child.

I told him about the home. He perked up his ears.

Bambi has lots of personality. He's going to be famous too.

When it rains and he's afraid, I tell him the story of the CHILD IN
THE POLENTA.

The child in the polenta has a dog's skeleton, and everybody's afraid of it. If it looks at somebody, they turn to a skeleton themselves.

In the hotel I now have a room just for myself and Bambi.

I'm afraid of being left alone in a strange city. I wouldn't know who to turn to.

I'm not allowed out on the street by myself, and if I went anyway, I'd get lost. I can never remember where the houses are and what the street names are, and I always have the feeling they're being built and then taken down after I pass by.

I GET THE FEELING I'M CRUMBLING AWAY.

My mother is teaching her new husband magic.

He pulls Bambi out of a flaming cauldron, tosses rings into the air that turn into a chain, and makes pigeons fly up out of his walking stick.

They want to call themselves DUO MAGICO.

We've already taken publicity pictures for the agency.

In the hotel we stretched a sheet along the wall, my mother put on one of her costumes and her new husband a dinner jacket, and I took the pictures.

I don't think this new husband has any profession at all.

Before my mother thought of doing the magic act with him, he raised worms and sold them to fishermen. The trunk of our car was filled with wooden chests rotting and covered with dirt that we dragged along with us from city to city. To water them we had to smuggle them into our hotel room by night and stack them up in the bathtub.

Soon he ran out of patience and let the worms just dry up.

We unloaded the chests at a rest stop on the autobahn.

Before his worm business he worked on a construction site for a while.

And my mother and I helped out an old farmer who paid us in potatoes, onions, and watermelons.

With the money from the construction site he and my mother bought themselves beer, wine, and cigarettes.

And for me one comic book every week.

We never go on vacation. If we don't perform or do business, we're broke and have to borrow money.

Where is our house?

The suitcase with my mother's porcelain dishes is still around.

My mother and her husband want to appear in nightclubs with their magic act.

The nightclub owners would rather have her and me.

My mother practiced a juggling act with me; we put on her circus costumes and performed.

After the act my mother took a seat at one of the guests' tables and ordered champagne.

I was introduced as her little sister.

But nobody was allowed to touch me, she added.

In one of these places I was discovered by the vaudeville owner

PEPITA.

Now I appear in vaudeville.

At first I danced with the other women in the chorus line.

My appearances grew more and more frequent, and Pepita gradually started moving me to the front.

THE BODY—that's how I'm announced on life-size posters in every city.

Little blue-striped sparkling stars shimmy on my nipples; I paste them on with sticky tape. I wear a sailor's cap and salute when

I sing.

I sing loud, shrill, breathy, swaying my hips.

And I look like a famous movie star. Because now I'm blonde and put a birth mark between my nose and upper lip with makeup.

My mother has signed a five-year contract with Pepita.

But if I'm discovered by a movie producer, we'll leave sooner.

Pepita would have a problem if she took us to court, because I'm a minor.

Pepita wanted me to perform naked.

But since I'm too young, I paste a triangle of hair between my legs.

That's something my mother thought up.

It looks real. And I feel dressed.

My mother sews my costumes the way she used to do for herself.

The choreographer Vargas coaches me in the dance numbers.

My best number is THE TELEPHONE.

On stage a bed.

I'm in it wearing a see-through negligé.

The phone rings.

With slithering movements like a snake I pick up the receiver and

sing my name softly into the phone,
listen,

OH.

Slowly, almost so you don't notice,

singing the whole time,

stroking my legs with the receiver,

I raise the negligé.

Whistling and yelling from the audience.

Slide down off the bed,

mince over to the ramp.

Pass out pictures of myself,

Let them grab my legs a little.

For this number alone Pepita had ten thousand postcards with my
picture printed.

My mother is always waiting for me backstage with a robe.

My daughter is still a virgin, because I keep her that way!

When she says KEEP she makes a fist and smiles. She loses no
opportunity to say I'm still a child, one she saved from a film
producer who wanted to rape me.

Since the accident my mother has grown a few new skins. Each
one seems to belong to a different woman.

No man has touched me where it counts. I think about nothing
else. I want to be raped by two men at the same time.

Mary Mistral, the big star of this vaudeville troupe, shows her real pubic hair, but when I'm on the people clap and whistle louder because I'm much younger.

Before the general finale Mary Mistral puts one foot up on a chair and has her mother—she also travels with her mother—comb her pubic hair. Her mother kneels as if before the Virgin Mary and says: My daughter's hair is our biggest asset. Look how long and thick it is!

I'll never perform totally naked, I'd rather starve, I said to the reporter.

That went over big in the newspapers.

But I couldn't explain to him about the triangle.

That evening Mary Mistral grabbed herself between the legs, pulled her pubic hair and threatened to cut my face up the next time I insulted her.

What a woman! Her skin is like a leather satchel and her breasts artificially perked up.

No matter how she moves, her breasts stay as stiff as cheese covers. When I'm discovered, we'll use Mary Mistral's threats as grounds for breaking our contract.

Almost every week we perform at a different fair, in a big tent. Sometimes in old movie theaters, in bars where we dance on the tables, in ruins with their roofs caved in. Once it even rained onto the stage during the show.

In the big cities the theaters are beautiful, and they have heat. There's even a bathroom.

Between tours we live in the capital.

Then I work in advertising.

Typewriters.

Stockings.

Flamenco skirts.

Salves to tighten up the bosom.

Pepita finds me the jobs.

I'm her best property, she says.

My mother's always there.

It will be the same in the movies, she says, lots of light and crowds of people who can look after us.

Pepita has a little daughter and a husband who looks at me like somebody who's deep in thought.

If I had a chance, I'd enjoy kissing him on the mouth.

In the capital we all live together in the PENSION MADRID, which we already know from our travels with the circus.

In other hotels we live as if we were in the train station, with suitcases half unpacked on a dresser, but here we unpack almost everything.

The PENSION MADRID is a kind of home for old artistes. Most of them have been living in their rooms for years—dancers, magicians, women for hire.

It's run by old, skinny Doña Elvira, who does all the cleaning herself and spends the whole day loaded down with white bed-sheets, creeping along the corridors and listening at the doors. When I caught her doing it once, she said: I want to just be sure nobody dies. But you don't have to worry about such things. That will come soon enough, and on its own.

Toni Gander the dancer walks around all day in a silk robe and a hairnet. He never leaves the house because he has a stiff leg.

In the small common kitchen he cooks meals for himself and his three cats; they're allowed to eat with him, and from the same dish.

In the magician's room pigeons fly around.

My mother wanted to buy them for her magic act, but they're too old to be of any use.

A former woman for hire has a snake in her room.
He's my husband now, she says.

After midnight the area around the PENSION MADRID is completely dead.

When we want to enter the house, we have to clap our hands until the porter comes. He sits in a little booth at the end of the street and is growing into the ground. All night we can hear him toiling from door to door and rattling his rusty key ring. With each step he pulls his feet out of the ground like beetles. He looks like a root with a white eye.

In the city everybody lives where his own key fits, he mutters.

He tells everybody he defended his country; then he sticks out his hand waiting for a tip. A tip for peace!

The PENSION MADRID is the only place we keep coming back to, either because we're performing in the city, have a break, or are out of work.

It's gotten to be a little bit like home.

My father, my sister, and my aunt used to live here too when we were still together.

During the day Mary Mistral wears a wig. Her hair isn't as thick up there as it is down there.

Why does your face age faster than the rest of your body?

From behind Mary Mistral looks younger than she does from the front.

Before my name got in the papers and I got so many bookings,

Mary Mistral and I were friends—a little bit anyway.

I learned from her how to make eggs sunny-side up.

First put oil in the pan and then the eggs right away, before the oil gets hot.

My mother doesn't cook things that simple.

She doesn't eat them either.

What I learned from Mary Mistral when we were making eggs was what I have to look for in a man.

What I have to look for is that he's got plenty down there.

My mother doesn't tell me things like that, even though she does them. Before her new husband came along, a few men had been on the scene and had given me presents.

4

I'm growing backward.

My mother's trying to make me smaller each year.

I'm still a child who has to be protected, she says.

A child! Does a child look like this?

I've watched how Mary Mistral looks at a man. She narrows her eyes, clenches her teeth, and makes her lips quiver. She tosses her head back at the same time.

I do the same thing, but it's not working out that well yet. It's embarrassing when a man looks at me for a long time. It's so blatant. I'm surprised these men's wives don't object.

My mother's husband is an educated man; he reads books. I don't know anybody besides him who reads books.

He's always asking me very embarrassing questions. He asked me once in front of other people if I knew who invented radio.

Before I could say anything he asked me if I wasn't ashamed not to know.

I didn't say another word all that evening.

Not to my mother, either.

My mother says she was in school for eight years and goes down a list of countries and their capital cities.

It could be that she really did go to school; she has nice handwriting.

The letters from my relatives are also in nice handwriting.

My mother wrote to them all and told them how many schools

I've been to and how she puts all her money into private tutors for me. I can read and write six languages.

I never got beyond my lessons with Fräulein Nägeli.

My mother doesn't even want to hear that.

It gets more embarrassing every time there's news from home; my family must think I don't feel any need to reply.

Go ahead and write, my mother pressures me.

I can't, I say.

She gives me a dirty look. How can you say that about your native language! What will people think—that we got away from the shoemaker so we'd be worse off here than we were at home—that my husband left me and my daughter can't write? Is that what they're supposed to think?

After an argument like that she cries like a child. Then I can't touch her, because if I do she turns away and says she has nobody to make her tea if she gets sick.

When she calms down, she says: Your native language is like the blood in your veins, it flows by itself.

So write and it'll be fine!

Then she drinks white wine.

And she gets very cheerful and loud and puts on Romanian records and dances.

And kisses me with big smacking noises as if she wanted to suck me dry.

I'm not sure if my family's expecting letters from me.

They send us doctors' prescriptions and wish lists with cutouts of feet for the right shoe size:

Please don't be angry with us.

We love you.

God will give you back everything you've given us.

If you can and you want to, please send us more.

I have a boil as big as a child.

We wish you and your friends there only the best—health, happiness, and may all your wishes come true!

Please don't be angry.

It's hard living here.

Medicine is very expensive.

We send you kisses!

You should know that my mother is very worried.

Please don't be angry with us!

I pray to God every day for you.

Could you find work there for my father?

I've written you a lot about my problems, but I haven't asked how you are.

We send you kisses!

We're suffering.

May God fulfill all your wishes. He should make you rich so you can help us!

Life is a pile of shit.

I'm your uncle Pavel, I knew you before you were born.

You have a soul like God's bread.

Please send us money so Ana can go to school.

Happy New Year!

Ileana throws up all the time because she has to starve so much.

I kiss your hand.

Cornelia can't walk anymore.

I was the first person to take you in my arms after you were born.

Doina looks like you. She can say her name already.

Please don't be angry!

We're your family.

I'm your old aunt, I carried your mother barefoot up to the mountains during the war.

My sisters don't believe I have no money! Don't tell them I'm doing so badly. They'll be glad I'm unhappy!

Dear ones, when you're finished reading this letter, tear it up!

I'm your cousin Josefina, I'm the same age as you and can do everything around the house. Please find me a good man to marry!

We send you warm kisses!

I'm your uncle Petru, I showed you the swans in the park, do you remember?

I appear in two magic acts, but with a real magician from Paris. In one of them I'm in a cabinet, the door is closed, my face, hands, and feet remain visible. Then he stabs through the walls with a few swords. At the end he takes out the middle part of the cabinet like a drawer.

In the second one, Mary Mistral and I walk on stage and we each lie down in a movable chest. Head, hands, and feet visible. We're sawed in two, rolled, and spun all around the stage and then put back together again.

When we take a bow, each of us has the other's legs.

My mother's husband still has a lot of practicing to do before he can do such hard tricks.

My mother thinks Pepita is going to hire him.

Even though he's only a few years older than I am, and I'm the one who's now earning the money for all three of us, he treats me like a child too.

I heard him telling another man who was asking him questions about me that I'm his daughter. Does he ever have a screw loose! He's always acting like an idiot, and he drinks so much beer you'd think he had farmland inside him that needed watering.

Mary Mistral's mother is very old and stingy; she patched up her worn-out boots with wire.

What can she be doing with all the money her daughter's earning? Mary Mistral doesn't seem to be married or to have children, even though she's old enough.

In twenty years I'll still be younger than she is now.

I'm going to die young.

Mary Mistral told me about the end of the world.

She's religious; Jesus Christ hangs on her mirror. Before the show she kisses him, makes the sign of the cross, kisses her fingers, and draws them across her pubic hair.

I can understand my mother making the sign of the cross before her performances in the circus, but what could go wrong with

Mary Mistral?

I don't make the sign of the cross.

Mary Mistral says Jesus Christ is the best lover; all she needs to do in the shower is close her eyes and let him go at it. Jesus Christ knows best of all what a woman needs, she says, and when you shower from below, the Holy Spirit will come and make you happy.

The man's a pig, my mother says.

He could be your father!

She won't listen to a word on the subject.

I heard her say to her husband that I provoked the man or else it certainly wouldn't have happened.

You're like your father!

The man and the woman suddenly showed up at Pepi's.

I'm as beautiful as Marilyn Monroe, they say.

My mother presented me to them like a piece of cake. I had to turn around in circles and smile. I'm going to make my daughter a movie star! She's a natural beauty! She'll marry Prince Albert of Monaco. A handsome man. If he sees my daughter he'll go crazy! She's intelligent, all she does is study, no drinking, no looking at men, no *taca-taca*—no whoring! She's speaking as softly as a feather. She'll bear lots of children for me and Mama will take care of the children in the villa! I live only for my child. When my child goes away I'll die! Romanian families stay together always. Beautiful!

It soon turned out that they were just members of the audience, though, not the people who were going to discover me.

The woman was pregnant.

When we appeared near their city, they came for a visit.

Brought their sons along.

We're supposed to spend Christmas at their house.

The man's a goldsmith.

My mother invited them all over to eat; we sat at a large table in front of our trailer.

In the picture we look like a family.

After the show the man's sons lay down and slept in the trailer, and we went dancing.

The man treated me like his daughter.

He took my hand and sat me on his knee.

His wife and my mother laughed.

My mother's husband shot me funny looks.

They have a beautiful big house, gleaming wood furniture, a color television with remote control, genuine oil paintings, glasses with gilt trim, an expensive porcelain dinner service, and shelves with books. Our house in Romania was much larger and more beautiful, my mother says.

I can't remember that.

I know from my mother's stories that I scribbled all over the walls with my sister's colored pencils and owned a red plastic telephone from Russia that I used for calling up swans.

We had a maid named Wetta and a big dog, Merzischor. I used to sleep in the dog basket with him and wanted to eat from the same bowl. Wetta knitted me a sweater out of Merzichor's hair. I called Uncle Petru FATHER because he let me smash glasses.

I don't remember my father.

My aunt said that if she hadn't been around my father would have had his way and made my mother abort me, because, he supposedly said, how can you be traveling around with a newborn when you're fleeing to a foreign country?

After I was born my mother left me with my aunt while she and my father wandered from place to place with the circus.

When she came back, I called my mother AUNT.

And my aunt MOTHER.

They got me out of the habit, though.

The goldsmith's two oldest sons each have their own room. And their own books. I don't have any books.

Books make you stupid, my mother says.

That's right, Schlucki, her husband says, very pleased, don't let anything impress you.

When I told the sons we'd been in Africa, they said that's on a different continent.

My mother's answer: she knows that.

Between the continents is the sea, the sons said.

I remembered Fräulein Nägel's lesson.

The sea went away from Switzerland and settled between the continents.

The man called me at the PENSION MADRID, to which we'd returned sooner than expected, and told me he loves me and that I shouldn't be afraid.

The telephone is in the corridor.

I heard it ringing and ringing from the room I have to share with my mother and her husband.

My mother has forbidden me to speak to him.

At night I sneak out into the corridor and wait for the phone to ring.

As long as my mother's snoring, nothing can happen to me.

The man's wife told my mother I polluted her marriage.

They're Catholic.

Before we departed, she scrubbed the stone floor on her bare knees, crying and praying, as penance for her husband and me.

It started that afternoon by the TV.

My mother, her husband, and the goldsmith's wife had gone to lie down.

The sons were sitting on the floor in front of us, the husband and I on the sofa.

Suddenly he undid his pants, took his thing in his hand, and rubbed it until a white liquid squirted out.

I didn't dare make a move.

The man put his finger to my lips.

Lick, he whispered.

One day he brought me presents, a short tennis skirt and sneakers.

My mother said I can't play tennis and it wouldn't be worthwhile learning now, because we'd be leaving soon anyway.

The man insisted on taking me with him.

It reassured my mother that the sons were with us.

But her husband had to go as well, she said.

Let her go on her own, my mother's husband answered, she's old enough to take care of herself.

My daughter is still a virgin, my mother said threateningly to the sons; you mustn't let her out of your sight!

On the very first day the man got his sons out of the way when we were on the tennis court.

Then he asked me if I wouldn't like to go to the dressing room with him.

I nodded.

We locked ourselves in the toilet.

Open my pants, he said.

His underwear felt plumped out and wet.

Have you ever done this before?

I said no.

Take out my cock and do whatever you want, he said.

I felt him through his underwear but didn't have the nerve to reach inside.

You can take it in your mouth, too.

The goldsmith's name is Armando.

My mother once had a man named Armando too. And he was married too.

So why does she get so upset about me?

My mother's Armando owned a nightclub in Paris.

My parents and my aunt performed there.

Above the club we had a large apartment with long mirrored corridors, like a hall of mirrors in the fun house.

We were living in a trailer on the campgrounds.

My father wouldn't let my mother go out alone, which is why she took me along as a rule when she went to see Armando. On the way she would buy me a Mickey Mouse comic book and candy. She took me into a room that looked like a doctor's waiting room.

She said with a smile that I could lie down on the sofa and read or sleep. It's so nice here, isn't it, Armando was so happy I was here too, but they had something important to discuss for a little while. Her eyes gleamed like pickled onions.

While I waited, I poked out Mickey Mouse's eyes on every page.

When I was finished, I'd walk back and forth in the room.

Would eat all the candy.

My heart was pounding in my head.

It got dark outside.

In the room it started to snow.

The sofa froze.
The walls froze.
My hands and feet froze.
My eyes.
The snow covered me over.

At home the sons said they'd played tennis by themselves; often
we weren't even there.
Armando said well in fact we did leave once or twice for a short
time, just to take packages to customers from his store.

A little later everybody showed up at the tennis court.
From the dressing room I could hear my mother yelling.

Where's my daughter? I'll kill myself!

I killed Bambi by mistake.

It was an accident.

Mary Mistral called me a MURDERER.

Then she laughed and said: So what, he was only a dog. Forget about him!

Bambi trusted me, and I killed him.

I've got a rash on my face and neck. It's spreading like fire below my skin.

I'm ashamed to perform.

Everybody stares, and some people in the audience even make signs and laugh.

My mother has brought me a guinea pig from the market.

Bambi is in heaven now, swimming in the sea of the poor. When we see him again, he'll be made of gold, she says.

But I'm not letting Bambi go!

I packed him in a plastic bag and put him in the freezer. On the way from one town to another I'd put him in a cooler to keep him frozen.

I'm not going to let Bambi go!

I didn't kill Bambi!
If they take Bambi away from me, I'll scream until everything in the world falls apart.

THE CHILD IS COOKING IN THE POLENTA BECAUSE IT
HAS A VOICE FULL OF STONES.

Why did Bambi have to stick his head in the crack of the car door?

That's prohibited!

Sticking your head in car-door cracks is prohibited!

It's prohibited!

Prohibited!

If God were God, he'd now have to come down or up and help me bring Bambi back to life.

I want Bambi to be alive again!

If he's not kept on ice, he'll rot.

And if I don't find somebody to stuff him I can't ever let him thaw out.

It was an accident.

On the autobahn.

Bambi stuck his head out the door just when I slammed it shut.

Covered in blood I ran to the rest stop with Bambi and laid him in a cooler.

He's dead, somebody said. Calm down, he's dead!

He can't be dead. If I can stop the bleeding with ice he'll be all better again!

What happened! my mother was screaming. What happened!
Please give me more ice. I need more ice.

My dog is running through the streets; he's a skeleton, no flesh, I can see through him. Anyone who sees my dog skeleton is allowed to punish me. You mustn't cry, says my mouth, because your mother will start worrying if you do. My mouth is always hungry, mouth hungry, hungry, sew mouth shut! I don't like dolls. My legs belong to somebody else. They fill a whole room. I have a hole and it's bleeding. That's not so bad, says the black-haired one, you went in your panties, she says, I'm your mother, she says. I stuff bread into the hole, don't want to bleed into my panties. THE SKY LOOKS LIKE A RUPTURED BLOOD VESSEL. IN SOMEBODY'S EYE. I don't want the comedian PIPER touching me! Don't want that! My legs and I perform the sketch THE MERRY WIDOW with him in Pepita's show, tomorrow stop eating! When PIPER touches me in THE MERRY WIDOW, my breasts rot. As of tomorrow stop eating, everything tastes like plastic. You can't be doing this, Pepita says, stop eating, she says, stop, you're getting heavier and heavier, you look different from the posters, you can't be doing this! The dog is dead. Put the dog in the shoebox, the shoebox in the refrigerator. The dead dog's hair is growing, overgrowing the dog, the box, the refrigerator, me, the room. An angel disguised itself as a dog, dog beheaded, stuff dead angel. The angel bares its teeth. My angel laughs blood.

We must have a good life.

I'm grateful. I'm glad I'm here.

I'm doing well.

I'm very much in demand at Pepita's now.

I have fourteen appearances in each show.

During the peak season we have six shows per day at the big fairs.

I'm learning a lot for later, for when I'm discovered.

I dream about Bambi all the time.

He falls from the balcony, goes splat on the ground, and empties out.

The sugar is named Bambi and changes to snakes in my mouth.

My mother gives me a new dog. It's wrapped in newspaper. When

I go to unwrap him, he bites my finger off. My finger says: Why are you beheading me?

I don't want to sleep anymore.

I just want to rush.

I just want to be rush, rush, rushing all the time.

My mother is very gentle with me.

I don't like that. I feel as if I constantly have to say EXCUSE ME.

My mother goes in and out inside me.

I look like a picture of my mother.

I look without me.

My rash isn't getting better.
Then I suddenly couldn't speak anymore in the middle of a show.

Pepita sent us to Madrid to recover.
I didn't want to be in any publicity photos.
Then I was supposed to dance with the other women in the chorus
line again.
My mother said no.

Pepita fired us, even though my contract hadn't expired.

1

My aunt took us in.

She paid our airfare too.

We didn't have any money, even though my father hadn't been around for a long time to spend it all.

I would have liked to buy my mother that house of ours with the money from Pepita.

I'd pictured happiness differently.

Frau Schnyder was happy I came back.

Right away she sent me to a language school for foreigners.

My mother took me there and picked me back up afterward.

We held conversations there.

What is your name?

What is my name?

What is my neighbor's name?

My name is such and such.

After nine months of language school Frau Schnyder sent me to career counseling.

There I was tested on my general education.

The career counselor and I sat face to face, baffled.

With each question I couldn't answer, they grew friendlier and more insistent, as if I were a deaf-mute.

At the end of the session I was cautiously taken by some woman to Frau Schnyder in the next room.

She handed me off like a package.

I had never felt so ashamed.

You don't have to know all that stuff; my mother shouted. Can they juggle? Do they hang by their hair? Do they do the split? If things keep going this way, they'll drive my child crazy! We'd have been better off staying with Pepita!

Between my mother and me the air was full of potholes.

You'll do just fine, said Frau Schnyder.
She gave me a book:

YOUNG PEOPLE'S DICTIONARY IN COLOR.

I tore a page a day out of the young people's dictionary in color and memorized it.

I kept having to rummage through my aunt's drawers and closets. I had never hunted through the drawers of people who stayed in one place.

In the closets were piled-up clothes from dead neighbors. Everything for Romania.

Bedsheets, towels, washcloths, warm underwear.

The apartment was filled with stuffed animals, tiny or human size, along the edge of the sofa, on the nightstands, on the bed.

Gold-trimmed vases with price tags.

Carpet, another carpet, still another small carpet on the large carpet, another carpet.

Embroidered doilies on the arms of the easy chair.

An Elvis Presley poster on the door.

Elvis mirror-plated candle holders on the sideboard, plastic flow-ers, a Blessed Mother that lights up, a seven-branched candelabra, a big blow-up champagne bottle, a wrought-iron woman with a broom, a set of teeth from some wild animal.

On the walls Jesus, Mary, the Matterhorn, a Romanian village scene with a round dance, my aunt in front of the Christmas tree, me in my grandfather's arms, a certificate for giving pedicures, a plastic-covered lampshade with a picture of my grandmother.

My mother and I are working in a chocolate factory.

My mother's husband isn't allowed to work. He has to leave the country on a regular basis and then keep reapplying for a residency permit.

He and my mother are constantly thinking up ways for us to get money.

We want to smuggle chocolate out of the factory so we can sell it on our own.

But we can't tell my aunt. She and her husband have changed a whole lot. At ten in the evening we have to walk around the apartment on tiptoe so as not to disturb the neighbors.

My mother altered some of her circus costumes and sold them to go-go girls.

We still have all my Pepita costumes.

When you're better, you can perform anywhere you want, my mother said. People will be lying at your feet! Anything these go-go girls can do, you can too, and better!

I don't want to do anything but be in the movies, I told Frau Schnyder.

She made a worried face.

Well then at least you'll have to go to acting school, she said.

If I don't, we won't get any more money from the Refugee Aid.

Frau Schnyder signed me up for the entrance exam at acting school.
My mother took her bag full of pictures and told people, in several
languages and with broad arm movements, how talented I am.
I felt as though I were in the circus parade.

I played the bed scene from Pepita and the merry widow. But I
didn't have to get naked.

From the classical repertoire Frau Schnyder practiced Schiller's
Saint Joan with me.

Before our scenes the teachers did exercises with us.

All the students stood in a circle, moved like animals, and made
noises.

I did the split, danced flamenco, and sang a song by Raffaella Carrà.
Then we each had to read out of a book and then tell in our own
words what we had read.

My head felt like a field of boulders.

No sooner did I speak one word than my whole brain slid away.

For the final test the school principal called each student into a
room individually.

The teachers were sitting behind desks. They were very tall, their
heads reached to the ceiling.

The principal's mouth opened. Words came out.

All I could hear was. We're sorry, but we're not running a circus here.

Before I saw my father for the last time, he made a movie in which God was one of the characters.

My mother played God's grandmother and I played His guardian angel.

I'm wearing my white lace dress, white knee socks, and black patent leather shoes. My fingernails are pink and my cheeks red.

ANGELS ALWAYS HAVE RED CHEEKS, MY FATHER SAYS,
BECAUSE THEY'RE OUT IN THE FRESH AIR A LOT.

As God, my father is wearing his old black tuxedo.

My mother tied a scarf around her head like the old women from the country in Romania and put on her flowered morning robe made out of curtain material.

At the start of the movie you see my father as a circus director in a red tuxedo.

My grandmother lives in the country, and in her garden he says, there's a tree underneath which it's always raining.
Then you see my father as God sitting under the tree.

GOD IS SAD.
HE'S PLAYING A HUNGARIAN SONG ON THE VIOLIN.

My mother is standing at the window and waving. She's made polenta for God.

The song on the violin is so sad that the fields, the flowers, and the trees in the garden grow sad too.

The circus director appears again and says that the garden fence, the window, the door, and even the polenta have started to cry.
My grandmother shakes her head and says something you can't hear, because she's inside the house.

Then Boxi runs across the field.

He has pink angel's wings in his mouth and sits up to beg in front of a bush I step out from behind.

I put the wings on and skip over to the rain tree with Boxi.

The rain is falling from a watering can.

The guardian angel and Boxi dance to God's sad song. But it doesn't make God any happier.

The circus director appears and says: Out of love for poor suffering humanity, God will eat polenta. He's a foreigner himself, traveling from country to country. He's sad, because he has to start out on a long journey again.

The grandmother is crying.

Boxi is whimpering, and he draws his tail in and puts his ears back.

The guardian angel keeps on skipping.

GUARDIAN ANGELS ARE NEVER SAD, THE CIRCUS DIRECTOR SAYS. THEY'RE THERE TO SPREAD HAPPINESS.

In the next scene God, the grandmother, and the guardian angel are sitting at a table and eating polenta as a farewell meal.

At the end the grandmother stands at the door and waves.

THE END

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TRANSLATOR'S AFTERWORD:
A HOME IN LANGUAGE

1. LANGUAGE AS HOMELAND

Aglaja Veteranyi was born in Romania 1962 and escaped in 1967 with her immediate family, all circus performers, from lethal poverty and a reign of terror in Romania. After a time of wandering, the family was granted asylum in Switzerland, a base from which they were constantly on tour throughout Europe. As with the narrator of *Why the Child is Cooking in the Polenta*, Veteranyi's stepfather was a clown and her mother an acrobat, but while the novel depicts its protagonist as initially somewhat sheltered by her mother, Veteranyi was actually forced even as a little girl to juggle and perform dance routines.

The family was Romanian by nationality and not Rom by ethnicity, as far as is known, but their wandering life made them outcasts indistinguishable from Gypsies and subjected them to even greater instability. Michael Stewart (190-3) details the extent to which the Roma and Sinti are still today widely shunned and spurned, and the Veteranyis, nomads living in a *wardo*, a gypsy caravan in effect, were treated accordingly. The narrator's precious, ephemeral home, the trailer, stigmatizes and isolates as much as it comforts, so at the end of *Polenta*, when she and her mother are staying with an aunt now ensconced in middle-class life, their career as performers over, it's no wonder they can't even begin to imagine what to do next.

Return to Romania would also have been out of the question. Veteranyi left when she was five (Gieser 65), so her memories were

sketchy but reinforced by what she heard about her extremely destitute relatives left behind. "All I can think of is how I want to go back," she says in *Polenta*—narrator and author so closely interrelated that I will for now refer to them interchangeably—but it's an escapist moment of pure sentimentalism negated by letters reporting outright starvation. Even by the low standard of other former Socialist countries, "Romania is different. . . . almost at the bottom of the European heap," as historian Tony Judt writes (250–1), because Ceausescu's austerity programs had destroyed the economy. "Romanians were so poor they had no belts left to tighten" (253). And even if Veteranyi had contemplated going back after 1989, she would have been prevented not only by this harrowing poverty, but also the dangers of daily life. "Every post-Communist society saw deep divisions and resentments; only in Romania did this lead to serious violence" (252).

Veteranyi only attended school sporadically during her early years and came over time to realize how narrowly restricted she had been. The mere fact of living mainly adrift in foreign countries caused her family to shatter like glass, as she says near the end of *Polenta*, and when it dispersed for good, she went back on her own to the most familiar place she knew, Switzerland, the country that was her childhood bane as well as her salvation. She found shelter and support there, but felt she could not have remained human if she'd needed to accommodate herself to any typical way of life or career path. At the end of *Polenta*, her aunt and the aunt's new husband have joined the middle class with a vengeance, working regular jobs, going to bed and getting up early, settled at a fixed address in an apartment filled with tacky objects, their former zest for life gone. It's a depressing foretaste of what would

have happened to Veteranyi if she had followed the advice of her case worker, the well-intentioned Frau Schnyder—"Mrs. Taylor" or, more literally and pertinently, "Mrs. Cutter." True, her aunt has rescued her and her mother when they were stranded, and the aunt can now afford to be generous in sending clothes and money to Romania, but her life has grown lackluster, marked by middle-class pride in earning money and acquiring possessions. Veteranyi is dimly aware, even as a child, of what she'll be exposed to if she follows a conventional career path, for she has already been a victim of Frau Hitz's Protestant social authoritarianism. Armando's wife's Catholic sexual hysteria, and Fräulein Nägeli's well-meaning but essentially ineffectual do-gooderism. She knows she will take on some of those traits herself unless she can go her own way, so she stubbornly refuses all suggestions made by her job counselor and persists, to the despair of Frau Schnyder, in her fantasy of becoming a movie star. Even after traumatic encounters with Pepita, Mary Mistral, and Armando, all traceable to exploitation by her mother, she's still the naive child captivated by visions of hobnobbing poolside with Sophia Loren, but she also exhibits a healthy streak of self-preservation in not letting the social workers and job counselors cram her into any common mold. At the end of the novel she recalls playing an angel in one of her stepfather's home movies, dancing with her dog Boxi to cheer up "God," who's sad because He's a foreigner too. This performative act of projection, this escape into capering and frolicking to hide her own sorrow, is a fantasy she needs either to abandon or to turn into reality, but a reality she will determine, not one her stepfather has scripted.

Veteranyi did indeed make her childhood fantasy into a practical program of artistic training, but the acquisition of

some basic skills had to precede her further development. When she returned to Switzerland at age seventeen, she was fluent in Romanian, Spanish, and German but illiterate in them all. She taught herself to read and write German and then enrolled at the Schauspiel Gemeinschaft (Acting Community) (now the Schauspiel Schule Zürich—Acting School of Zurich). Whereas in the novel the narrator soon flunks out of acting school, Veteranyi in actual life declined to take no for an answer and finished with such distinction that she was appointed an instructor.

Against all odds, Veteranyi created a rich life in Switzerland, shaping her art and her work by evolving meaning and structure within a system of cultural subsidies that afforded her maximal independence. Starting in 1982, at twenty, she became a freelance writer and actor, and in 1988 she became co-director, along with Christian Seiler, of the Schauspiel Schule Zürich. She contributed prolifically to literary journals and anthologies and to theatrical publications. From 1992 to 1998 she co-directed the writers' workshop Ohrenhöhe (As High as Your Ears); in 1993, with René Oberholzer, she founded an experimental theater collective called Die Wortpumpe (Word Pump); and, with Jens Nielsen, another performance troupe, Die Engelmaschine (Angel Machine), in 1996. She continued writing poems, plays, and fiction and often adapted her prose works for the stage, to great acclaim and success. Unlike other immigrant writers of higher international profile, Veteranyi may seem to have "fallen through the cracks of national literary markets" (Cernahoschi), but new readers of *Polenta* and others unacquainted with her work will not fail to see its quality and will not wonder that she is now being assessed by literary historians as an important contributor to the eastward

shift of recent literature in German (which includes such authors as Radek Knapp from Poland, Dimitré Dinev from Bulgaria, Ibrahim Amir from Kurdistan, Astrit Alihajdaraj from Kosovo, and Vladimir Vertlib from Russia—to name only a few).

Now is the point at which we must distinguish definitively between the seemingly artless narrator of *Polenta* and her creator, an artist deft in narrative skill. Veteranyi placed her artistic intentions and strategy clearly on record by participating in the Ingeborg Bachmann competition in 1999. For those unfamiliar with the Bachmann competition, it bears saying that its method of selecting winners may make it the most unnerving literary event anywhere, all the more since it is broadcast live from Klagenfurt, Ingeborg Bachmann's native city. The competition attracts a large, dedicated following, like a sporting event, with fans glued to the TV for all three days, and it is updated frequently, almost hourly, on blogs and in the news media. The Bachmann competition is modeled after the gatherings held in Germany just after World War II by the members of Gruppe 47, writers who met for a good many years to read one another their new, still unpublished work, each in turn occupying a "hot seat" in which he or she would be subjected to immediate, often unsparing criticism. This deliberate harshness, which was carried over to the Bachmann competition from its beginnings in 1977, was motivated by the moral imperative to restore truth to language after its abuse during the Third Reich. In the Bachmann competition, a jury listens to the contestants in front of an audience and responds with spontaneous criticism, gloves off, no holds barred. At the competition in 1999 (*Die Autoren Bachmann Preis*), *Polenta* was greeted with some respect, although one judge, Thomas Hettche, rejected it as "Romanian kitsch." Others found the use of a

child's perspective unconvincing and thought the voice was overly contrived, not natural or authentic enough (*Die Autoren*). And when another judge, Iris Radisch, compared Veteranyi's narrator to some of those in the fiction of Herta Müller—another German-language writer of Romanian background who has since been awarded the Nobel Prize—Hetteche disallowed what he considered an unwarranted upgrade of *Polența's* worth. It should be said that since there is no requirement that the judges *substantiate* their on-the-spot feedback, their comments are anything but definitive; as Cernahoschi notes, "the verdicts often sound arbitrary" (Translations of comments from the Bachmann competition are mine.)

Veteranyi's responses to the Bachmann panel's criticisms are instructive. She calls the incongruity resulting from her deployment of a child's viewpoint a "kind of self-defense" emotionally and her one means of achieving basic articulation, adding that the humor arising from such an incongruity is "sometimes the only possible way to write about certain things that are very sad—for that matter, the only possible way to write about them at all so that they're able to take form and not remain strictly private" (*Die Autoren*). The child's perspective paradoxically grants Veteranyi the distance from her life's material that alone can give it immediacy, for it enables her to recapture lived experience through narrative, as if the events were occurring once again in the process of being told, rather than being filtered through the detached, analytic view of an adult writing discursively in retrospect. Hence also the predominant use of you-are-there present tense. If one of the crises of literary expression since Mallarmé's time has been the dilution through thought and experience inevitably undergone through formulation in language, Veteranyi's narrative stance rescues her experiences from unarranged,

unarticulated memory, on one hand, and from streamlined, over-knowing memoir on the other. The judges apparently did not consider that *any* narrative voice is always a stylization away from "pure" realism, and that the voice of this narrator in particular is the only one that could have told the story at all.

That voice, after all, has to be able to register the author's adult retrospective viewpoint but at the same time the child's passage through successive stages of awareness, the social implications of what it means to read and write a language. As is the case for many people in transition from agrarian, basically feudal lifestyles to urban mass living, writing can often be seen as an enemy, a way of exercising control and regimentation through bureaucracy. Writing was one of those "significant emblems of modernity" (Maderthaner and Musner 6), "whose force the . . . population sought to escape through material and symbolic acts of destruction" during times of accelerated change.

In one way, then, a way that necessarily makes the narrator's unrest more acute, the very fact of telling her story in written form is a subversion of her heritage, heightening a conflict all the more intense in that, for her family, the power of writing is held in high respect and deep contempt at the same time. Her mother sneers at "the dictator"—never named—for being illiterate and for having bought his high-school diploma. She longs to find some person willing to write a book about the family; it will be titled *Iron Door and Door to Freedom*, esteeming the ability to write as a passage to liberty, first from the illiterate dictator ruining her country and then from the glum inarticulateness and hence oppressiveness of experiences left unrecorded. Yet the mother also fears that her girls will be driven crazy if they learn anything more than practicalities

like juggling and doing the split, and she's especially irate that the school is wasting their time by teaching them the useless skills of reading and writing. The narrator can write only one word in Romanian, but it's emotive enough ("Kiss") to be acceptable. Beyond that, literacy is suspect, just as the girl knows only one person who reads books, and she considers it an odd pastime.

Writing is also suspect and frightening through its use as a means of chastisement. The narrator has to work on written punishments while locked in the attic, so writing implements become a symbol of repressive order when she looks inside Frau Hitz and sees shelves up which little policemen with miniature notebooks and pencils climb higher the faster they sharpen their pencils. In light of how sternly the narrator is punished by being isolated and then made to write, the presence of a mere pencil calls up images of enforcers, if ones who, as in a typical bureaucracy, don't actually have to write anything to get ahead.

The writer's desire to persist comes through realizing that personal and family history can be brought into alignment with verifiable reality only if transmitted in fixed form, and in writing at that, thus countering the natural tendency of oral transmission to embroider tales into myths and legends. That legendary quality deprives the family history of any fixity in time or place. The narrator's stepfather is not interested in recording that history; instead of the usual documentary-style home movies, he makes escapist fiction films, symbolically killing his daughter in a crime story by dismembering her doll. The shape of Veteran's writing opens access to the ugly reality behind the escapism, for in one of those connections below conscious awareness that so adeptly unify the apparent randomness or mere chronological structure

of *Polenta*, the stepfather's act of aggression furnishes the girl with a temporary coping mechanism in the children's home. In reaction to having her head shaved for lice, the narrator displaces her guilt and aggression, imagining her doll peeing on the floor and tearing the arms off its own doll in turn. Her doll's father, by the way, is named Herr Finster—"Mister Dark"—and we are led to conclude, though the narrator never quite states it, that her stepfather attempted or actually perpetrated incestuous acts upon her of the same kind her sister underwent.

Certhanoschi stresses a central dynamic of Veteran's narrative technique by referring to "the dilemmas of the chosen perspective," though it might be more instructive to call them paradoxes. Creative ambivalence and anomaly reign everywhere in *Polenta*, both in content and technique. As one example, the very appearance of the text on the page—something the Bachmann jury could not have seen, since *Polenta* had not yet been published—presents wide gaps of space, pages almost blank, and aphoristic or summary passages in capitals, as if the narrator's attempts to arrange the words were burdened by uncertainty, irresolution, hesitancy, and the need to find anchoring points, all arising in turn from the struggle to achieve basic aptitude in written expression (Gieser 67-70). Written German is the vehicle of her struggle to articulate in basic ways what will endure beyond the moment. She's writing to find a place of her own, not to claim authority or climb the career ladder like the pencil-sharpening policemen, writing essentially for self-exploration, to define herself and her world.

As her writing proceeds, the narrator's language gradually becomes more sophisticated and poised—moving from childishly generic designations of people and places to specific names for

them while at the same time moving from a vague foreign location to a recognizable Switzerland in which she can give a competent account of herself and her experiences. She is correspondingly able to begin using past and perfect tenses occasionally, as a variation on the eternal, childlike present, and to make statements in the subjunctive mood. While she never sounds like a different person or takes on a bookish tone, she begins little by little to use a more precise, nuanced vocabulary, in that way recreating the general linguistic development of a child and the increasing mastery of an immigrant gradually acquiring a new language.

Veteranyi's happening to come of literary age in Swiss German allows her to further intensify the paradoxes of *Polenta*, focusing more strongly her themes of language and meaning through a peculiarity far more striking than would be the case in standard German or another language with fewer discrepancies between what is said and what is written. "Frau Hitz speaks in a different way from what we learn in school," the narrator notes as soon as she's exposed to formal German. "Writing is different from speaking," she notes—always, and in every language, but the gap is unusually wide in Switzerland, where the written language is the same standard German as that used elsewhere (with a few tiny orthographical exceptions) but the spoken language a dialect so divergent that it often baffles other native German speakers. Some, in fact, argue that Swiss German should rightfully be considered a language of its own. At any rate, reading Swiss-German authors like Gottfried Keller or Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, Friedrich Dürrenmatt or Max Frisch in the original gives no indication at all of how enormously different their spoken language would be; in fact,

Swiss-German writers are frequently more stylistically meticulous than their German counterparts. Some famous contemporary Swiss-German writers, like Hugo Loetscher (202–5), have judged this discrepancy a kind of challenging stigma or even cross to bear, but it provides Veteranyi with occasions for her narrator to observe, with all the acuteness of seeming naïveté, that "in every language the same thing is called something different." Her point is as well taken as Walter Benjamin's observation (12) about how French "pain" and German "Brot" mean the "same" thing but mean it in a different way; but it is also plausibly the comment of a young girl just noticing these anomalies for the first time.

2. FUNNY STORY, SAD EVENTS

By any measure of achievement, reputation, or self-realization, Veteranyi was successful in achieving her goals, which makes it jarring to learn that she committed suicide in February 2002 by the grim method of drowning herself in Lake Zurich. She had been living for some time with clinical depression, which treatment apparently could not relieve. It would be arrogant to claim understanding of what is at heart always a mystery of suffering and invasive to requisition such suffering to make a point. Still, readers may gain insight by recalling, through the similar fate of other writers, that literary expression is not always the reliably curative therapeutic act it is often considered. Like Jean Améry or Primo Levi, Franz Innerhofer or Paul Celan, Veteranyi's suicide occurred long after the overt traumas these writers' works record,

lending sad validation to Améry's heartrending remark that a person who *was* tortured *stays* tortured.

Veteranyi's torture took the devastating but unspectacular form of routine exploitation and abuse in her early years, both on the larger scale of societal repression and the smaller scale of a family whose emotional chaos and moral shabbiness traumatize its own. Several reviewers were struck by the success with which *Polenta* depicts grim episodes in a lighthearted tone, and that success is owing to a narrator childlike and knowing at the same time. While Veteranyi could not banish her suffering in the personal realm, the distancing she brings to *Polenta* creates a memorably articulated chronicle of sorrows.

From a God who experiences hunger, to the repressive, shame-based reprisals of Frau Hitz—forcing a child who's stolen chocolate to eat it until he vomits—physicality shapes the movement of this narrative. The two girls attempt to injure themselves—"We want to go to the hospital"—and the narrator at last escapes via a total psychiatric breakdown when she is locked in the attic for taking a guinea pig—poor substitute for Boxi—to bed, whereupon she instinctively rejects the physical closeness for which she's being punished as she writes compulsively, over and over, "I don't want any children." Exploited in her body as a circus performer but denied the intimacies of the body, the narrator learns through the system to exploit bodies in her turn; she and her sister comfort themselves in the silence of the orphanage by sneaking into the nursery and pinching the babies. Just before her breakdown, the narrator pictures the child cooking in the *polenta* while her mother, who traumatized the girls by abruptly

dumping them at the orphanage with no explanation, is jabbing scissors into her face. Home is nowhere, betrayal is everywhere, and *Polenta* traces a sad devolution from physicality as a savoring of delicious foods, including the mother's chicken soup, to a chronicle of punishment, mutilation, self-rejection, and sexual exploitation. The orphanage literally drives the narrator mad, and the circus, her accustomed environment, is always in a foreign country. The only home, then, is the family's trailer, the door of which she has to keep shut so home won't evaporate. It's not very secure at the best of times in any case, for both parents abandon the children more than once, and the narrator must pay the double price of being abandoned and then feeling guilty about her anger at that abandonment.

Polenta is by no means a standard psychological novel, but it would reward study from a psychoanalytic viewpoint if only because of the density of its associative structure, where elements of naïveté and corruption collide and echo on virtually every page. Veteranyi's stylistic devices, narrative choices, and use of genre conventions, seemingly deployed more by instinct than calculation, all serve a single unifying effect, that of revealing keen conflicts in the narrator's mind: agonizing, but not understood. As in so many other first-person novels narrated by adolescents, networks of objects assume symbolic meaning and so allow the reader to comprehend what the character does not—*Huckleberry Finn* or *The Unvanquished* or *The Catcher in the Rye* are well-known American analogues.

The narrator of *Polenta* is under a taboo not to become aware that her mother is so destructive to her, but tracing a few of the

objects through the novel makes this tension manifest. Hair and its various meanings: her mother has hair of steel, and it supports the family, even at the risk of the mother's life; the girl swears she will never let her hair be put to that use, and she deliberately pulls it out in bunches; she is disoriented though relieved when it is shaved off, hoping to remain bald so she won't have to duplicate her mother's circus act; she has fantasies of her mother's hair catching on fire during the performance; she wonders if her parents sent her to the children's home because she doesn't want to hang by her hair; to hide her daughter's age and add titillation, the mother pastes on her a triangle of false pubic hair during the former's nude shows; Mary Mistral shows her real pubic hair, and part of Mary's act is having her mother comb it in front of the audience; and the narrator notes knowingly that one retired male dancer at the Pension Madrid spends every day in a silk robe and a hairnet, signals of effiteness if not queeniness. All this exposure (literally) before puberty!

The narrator's stepfather is another important cause of her conflicts, but a secondary one. Just before her collapse in the children's home, after she learns that he has left the family, the narrator reflects that he "died of absence." Though an ordinary circus clown, he aspires to status and respect as an artist, shown by his ambitiously produced amateur films, and through casting her in them he instills in her a need for expression through performance that goes beyond juggling, dancing, and acrobatics. In her eyes, his main offense in abandoning the family was taking Boxi with him. On the other hand, the mother is a continual, overbearing presence in the narrator's life, even during periods of abandonment, and the whole dynamic of the mother-daughter relationship is

based on unrelieved fear. Laura Gieser shows (80) that the fear starts out being *for* the mother, whose act of dangling by her hair from a great height is dangerous ("My mother lives in helplessness," the daughter reflects before her breakdown), but that it soon turns into fear *of* the mother, fear of the damage caused by her emotional volatility, her unreliability, her ethical and moral inconsistency, her exploitation of the child, and finally, fear of total domination by a mother physically crippled but now all the more in control, not helpless at all. Gieser likewise helps us (70) to understand the acuteness of the conflict; she informs us that the word "polenta," taken from Italian, is in Romanian *mama-liga*, meaning something like "mother's home cooking." It turns out that the narrator's conflicts are based less on feeling alien in Switzerland than on being engulfed, prostituted, and denied a voice by her mother. And if Gieser possibly overstates the case by calling the daughter a victim of a Medea-like mother (70), her comparison conjures an apt image of a mother willing to cook her own children, in this case sacrificing them to her own emotional chaos. Mother's cooking is poison.

3. CONTEXT AND INFLUENCE

Irony is the sustaining climate of comedy and humor, a mode *Polenta* deftly exploits through the clash between the narrator's victimization and the naive responses and droll formulations with which she expresses it. The Bachmann judges were not in a position to appreciate *Polenta's* rich irony for what it is: a highly skilled narrative technique long employed in novels with political and

social content, evoking in readers a more complex reaction than a somber tract would. In *The Leopard*, Giuseppe di Lam pedusa chronicles from the jaded, pessimistic standpoint of the world-weary Prince of Salina the greed, stupidity, lust for money, and power motivating the foundation of the Italian Republic in 1870, otherwise often portrayed as a triumphant milestone of liberal progress. Through the pratfalls and heartaches of his character Guy Crouchback—immortal name for an anti-hero—Evelyn Waugh fiercely condemns British policy in World War II while indulging in zaniness and buffoonery rare in any work of fiction, let alone an indignant polemic. The satire in the novels of Jane Austen or Barbara Pym depends for its very existence on this same apparent clash of irreconcilable tones, as it does in the work of a Nathanael West, even if his palette is much darker. How much more compelling is the voice in *Polenta*, how much more appealing to a range of emotional reactions and accordingly able to tell a more layered truth about ambiguity and uncertainty than is presented in monolithic work like the fiction of Herta Müller or many other displaced writers. Some have argued for the presence of a vein of humor in Müller's writing that escapes me, but the humor is unmistakable in Veteranyi, whose comments to the Bachmann judges revealed her understanding of the need for balance between pathos and humor, tawdriness and lyricism, gluttonous appetite and religious longing.

Readers who know German will find instructive comments by Gieser (74–6) about the possible influence on Veteranyi of certain other writers: Eugène Ionesco, her fellow Romanian, who saw “no contradiction whatever between comic and tragic” (74; my translation); the German-Swiss novelist Francesco Miceli,

originally Italian-Albanian, a master of calculated stylistic naïveté; the early twentieth-century Romanian “protodadaist” Urmuz, who “pursued the radical dissolution of literary traditions” and enjoys “cult status among the Romanian avant-garde even up to now” (74); and Danil Kharms, notable creator of “comic-grotesque anti-narratives” and proponent of “infantilism as an esthetic strategy meant to cast doubt on modes of discourse from art and daily living ordinarily taken for granted” (76). The picaresque and carnivalesque shape the narrative approach and plot structure of *Polenta*: both the overall narrative viewpoint and the specific linguistic formulations preclude any romance or indulgence in nostalgic yearning for an idyllically evoked homeland or any sense of adventure about carefree life on the road, as Gieser notes (68). Adapting unconventional style to conventional genres, *Polenta* deromanticizes the kind of story often indulging the sentimentalism of childhood memory. Whatever Veteranyi's sources, they cannot fully account for the originality and integrity with which she has combined them into a memorable, authentic narrative that captures with rare immediacy the tragedy and comedy of human struggle.

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AGLAJA VETERANYI was born in Bucharest to a family of circus artists who toured Europe relentlessly until they finally settled in Switzerland. An actress, performer, and artist as well as a writer, she only published one novel—*Why the Child Is Cooking in the Polenta*—during her lifetime, though other books have appeared posthumously. She committed suicide in 2002.

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