

Heike Geißler

Verzweiflungen

Essay

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An Essay

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This book contains a joke. Now that it occurs to me to begin this way – to start by distracting from despair – I don't know where it is, I just know I included a joke. The joke, which I couldn't reproduce now, isn't a special joke, it's not long or elaborate. It's probably not even particularly funny. It's one of those you've often heard already, something like this:

*A chicken crosses a road.*

*What's missing?*

*The punchline.*

(That's obviously not the joke that I mean.)

I don't want to say that despair has me in its grip, but I presume that's actually the case. My instinct, as I said, is to distract from despair, but now we're here, and now I'm starting.

Making notes on despair, setting out despair, writing despair up and writing it down, wrestling it down.

As if it were my opponent.

The necessity of looking back at despair, at moments when I've despaired or noted the despair of friends, neighbours or complete strangers. I wrote down what I felt, what I observed, to pacify my despair, to bury it sometimes. But despair, this much all those who know it will say, is immortal, its energy returns to earth, an expanding plant with stringy roots of thread, spit or mucus.

The wish to uproot the despair plant from its habitat, to pluck, tear or entice it, to remove it from its nourishment and stow it away in a box, a warehouse, inside a book.

The wish to carry out some kind of stocktaking.

This craving for a closing look back, the craving to write an ending, an end to despair, an end to the reasons to despair.

I want to transform despair into constructive or silly acts, into non-despondency, into objection, or maybe into fairytales or gold.

Søren Kierkegaard, who will put in an appearance here, wrote: ‘So to be sick unto death is, not to be able to die – yet not as though there were hope of life; no, the hopelessness in this case is that even the last hope, death, is not available. When death is the greatest danger, one hopes for life; but when one becomes acquainted with an even more dreadful danger, one hopes for death. So when the danger is so great that death has become one’s hope, despair is the disconsolateness of not being able to die.’

Better to address death right away. Better to let death in right away.

Death is present. And the deadly all the more.

Better to address everything that threatens otherwise to become subtext, to squeeze between the words or into the words themselves.

Better for me to say right away what I’d rather not say, but which is permanently throwing itself into my thoughts, hanging on loose associations, standing in my way mid-sentence.

And this isn’t a pose. This is a necessity.

So I’m taking a deep breath, trying to get what follows over with quickly, and informing you that from the age of around forty, I thought I could get through life un-raped.

That didn’t work out though.

I’m amazed myself, and I’d like to ignore it. I’d like to be able to visit the city where *it happened* again. Then again, that’s not true. I don’t want to. Away with the city, away with the whole big city, away from my options. I’m not wrestling for the city, and nor am I wrestling to wear the dress I was wearing again. I liked that dress before *it happened*, liked it a lot, I’d got it at a slight discount because one place on the zip seam was undone, and I

agreed to sew it myself. I'd like to be able to just throw the dress away, but I can't sharpen my fingers enough to touch it again, to grant it its significance by throwing it away, and I don't want to take it out on the dress. The dress is incidental. I have a dress in my wardrobe that's a witness, I have a city in my mind that I can't go to anymore, because I get breathless if a train even approaches the city, if it's announced as the next stop on the line. Not until the train has left the city can I breathe calmly again.

Thinking of the dress and the city is enough to make me swerve and freeze at the same time. I turn to stone, as they say, and claim to be forceful, extra-hard-to-weather stone, but I'm more made of sandstone: All my shapes dissolve under the influence of weather and time. I can handle it and can't handle it at the same time – to have been written upon in this raping way; I wish I could omit the place of that writing, those parts of my brain, my muscle memory, extract them, keep them in a separate place and one day observe them separately, but they're constantly pressing to be part of me.

I write that entirely without feeling. And nobody will expect me to recreate the event, to describe the despair in the light of my realisation that what happened had to be called rape. To go into detail. What it says here is enough.

I find it hard to map the territory of my destruction.

It exists.

It shouldn't exist.

And after all the years in which I thought, penises are alright, okay, actually really good, fantastic, I then thought: I don't want to see you penises ever again.

Penises to ploughshares!

Penises to carrier bags!

I want to say no more than that. Only this:

I haven't got through my life un-raped, and as a consequence I won't have got through my life un-raped.

In *small white monkeys*, Sophie Collins quotes Denise Riley: 'What I have in mind, rather, is that feeling of emitting an aura of lying, and the corresponding fear of not being believed.'

Hélène Cixous writes: 'I hope you will forgive me if I use the word "truth". The moment I say "truth" I expect people to ask: "What is truth?" "Does truth exist?" Let us imagine that it exists, therefore the feeling exists.'

I'm stuck at a point where I know what happened to me, but don't want to acknowledge it and so I sometimes want to think none of it happened to me, and so I sometimes think: It didn't happen to me.

Cixous continues: 'Perhaps going in the direction of what we call truth is, at least, to "unlie", not to lie. Our lives are buildings made up of lies. We have to lie to live. But to write we must try to unlie. Something renders going in the direction of truth and dying almost synonymous. It is dangerous to go in the direction of truth. We cannot read about it, we cannot bear it, we cannot say it; all we think is that only at the very last minute will you know what you are going to say, though we never know when the last minute will be.'

Ah yes, I had spoken of death, or spoken to death, that's where I was.

Death! I'm trying to tell the truth.

Death – I can barely utter the word truth.

Death – alongside truth, I really like good, beautiful lies.

Our present-day lies are a disaster, however. They're misanthropic, profit- and power-mad, narrow-minded, tendentially deadly. And often very boring and obviously calculated. This is not a good time for good, beautiful, magnificent, magical lies. For wild but harmless, fun lies.

I seem to be living in a time I never wanted to live in.

Brutal, warlike, ideological, grim, with a strange sense of humour. I want to run away and perhaps I only live in protected niches these days. I'm constantly shocked and can neither get used to the cannonade of bad news and hostility, nor resign myself to it.

I laugh in despair, and I'm all the gladder and laugh all the more loudly about the simplest of things, though they're only allegedly simple.

*It's funny.*

When Grock the clown comes on stage with his concertina and jumps onto a chair, but the seat breaks and he ends up standing inside the chair, trapped by the legs like a sprawling bush, its branches prevented from breaking or getting too much in the way, and when he composes himself but then goes on playing the concertina, only to leap out of his position: It's funny, and much more. As if pulled upwards, the great Grock settles down on the chair back and crosses his legs, his right foot on the surround of the seat. He plays.

I think of the highwire acrobat Karl Wallenda in the midst of his spoon collection, which I know nothing about, which I'm only aware of because there's this photo of him at a round coffee table with spoons arranged in circles on it, radiating out from a larger serving spoon to the edge of the table. All different kinds of spoons: mocha spoons, teaspoons, sugar spoons, a

few soup spoons suggesting movement, as if the centre with the serving spoon were issuing more and more new spoons, the serving spoon serving up spoons from a large supply.

Karl Wallenda wanted to end his career, but he went on with it. He said: 'I'm so damn lonely on the ground.' He performed his last highwire act in 1978, at the age of 73. A rope was hitched at a height of 37 metres between the two towers of the Condado Plaza Hotel San Juan, Puerto Rico. There were strong winds on that day, they ought to have cancelled the performance, and the rope was not sufficiently secured either. Karl Wallenda fell from a great height onto a taxi: no scream, no circling of his arms.

And I don't know: Am I so damn lonely on the ground too? Did I fall, or was I thrown, along with the present and all those I know, from the hand of a god I don't even believe in?

I can't answer that; it might be the wrong question.

But really, no one could have known (apart from a possible god, perhaps) that the whole state of the world would get in my way. In the way of me, who like most people leads a life that seems ever less stable and could be impaired, interrupted, ended fairly easily, unannounced and very vividly by the politically and economically powerful. No one could have priced that into my ideas of the future or even slightly prepared me and all those I know and like for the fact that our former dystopias are becoming and have become reality, that the state of the world is seriously getting in our way in every regard. And I don't want to be prepared, in any case.

The group of those who aren't immune, who are impressable, impairable, is huge but apparently not relevant, and we stand staring open-mouthed at events. That too, more internally than externally; who has time these days for amazement and shock?

Of course, you can't talk about a uniform group; its members are too disparate, and too disparately exposed to the dangers. The group is made up of all those who have nothing left to counter the dangers, and those who are still making provisions, distracting themselves, saving, have more or less recuperated from an illness and can at least partly fight back or recover from damages. I'm in the latter group, and I view the others with equal measures of empathy and fear. For as Kateryna Mishchenko writes in her article 'Erste Gedanken an Heilung', using war refugees as an example: 'In the grid of time, war refugees appear as guests from the feared negative future. Their enforced reduction to naked survival, their existences placed into question, put these people behind the times. The closer they are to the front, the more bygone seems the human body, and peace as an embodied idea. Time is so terribly wasted.'

How near the feared future is.

How here the feared future is.

And how much fear-space is still possible.

On earth is the land of despair that I inhabit, of which I've become an inhabitant; it's crowded here, though that impression might be wrong. I've become transparent in this land, which exists everywhere. That means I can't show convincingly how raddled and frayed I am; I appear as a blurred trace, as a faded image, a creature as if calling from below: *Hello!*

*Greetings from an invisible Raggedy Ann.*

Anyone who wants to see can see how things are going for me.

Yes, I'm fraying and disintegrating beneath a thousand things.

*And then I disintegrated into a thousand parts.* I say it like that because it sounds better than saying I disintegrated, shattered, that I couldn't clear my head anymore. I thought: a thousand parts, that's a lot, but you can still put them back together.

In the hallway, a cardboard box of a thousand pastel-coloured bouncy balls. They're props for a play I've written, which I'll be staging and performing with my friend and colleague C. We dreamed of ten thousand bouncy balls, but we only had the budget for one thousand, which were delivered to my home in bags of a hundred. The kids and I opened bag after bag, hurling the balls on the ground. The aim was to make them bounce off the ceiling three times over; we didn't manage it. Afterwards, the floor was smudgy from the balls, greasy. If you walked on it in socks you'd slip surprisingly in places.

Whenever anyone asks us what the play's going to be about, we improvise. What we don't say, but we do know: At the end, all the bouncy balls fall at once from the stage sky. And knowing that is as banal as it is consoling.

I was never much good at being broken.

Actually, I wail and howl for shock, mental overload, stress and fear. I cry and wail all day long, everywhere I go. Invisibly and discreetly. For the most part, internally. I internally scream out a draining, wretched and gruesome sound.

I think this sound is appropriate, but you won't hear it from me. I'd be embarrassed, I'd think it was the wrong moment, that my reason was ultimately negligible, not reason enough to scream here and now, to roar *like an animal*. I would relativize until it seemed inappropriate even to me to scream like that: loudly, energetically, for long enough not to be confused with a short expression of shock, which would then pass over into laughter because there was no reason for that shock, surely.

Screaming internally, I hasten away from the supposed and actual shocks, I rarely raise my voice, I slip away politely, that's my mode of motion.

Someone once said maybe I ought to look for a different sport, and urgently, in other words suggested a better form of compensation as I scurried past them.

If you say so, I thought, not contradicting them, but I was surprised: You can misjudge anything and think of it as a problem that can be regulated by sport.

I don't scream, then. I wither and wilt, somehow. I shrivel in a silent way, the famous suffocation on everything that ought to come out but can't come out. Despair makes my body broken, it makes me nervous, greedy for distraction and numbness.

This is a rescue operation.

*[A quick note from the translator:*

*As you can probably tell, Heike Geissler's book-length essay has no strict structure other than the chronology of her work on the play with the bouncy balls. In the meantime, she moves through the world as a walker and observer of poverty and injustices, as a partner and as a parent of two teenage boys. Recurring themes include homelessness and authoritarianism, fairytales, elections, capitalism, fascism, sexualized violence, family, and her attempts to cast off despair. She quotes a wide range of poets, writers and theorists, especially women, and makes a short list of goddesses: 'Mary Beard, Eva Illouz, Maggie Nelson, Sadiya Hartman, Frigga Haug, Sara Ahmed, Christa Wolf, Hélène Cixous, to name but a few.'*

*Read on for the ending of the book.]*

M. and I arrive slightly too early at the Gorki-Kiosk, where the election party is happening. We knock and they let us in; we help them get set up. We come together, then, and act like we're celebrating. What are we celebrating? We're celebrating spending time together. We drink. M. and I place napkins on the long table and drink. My plan is to take the first train back home, the plan is to know at midnight that Harris is winning, not Trump. Our plan doesn't work out. Our intuition is off. But we're banking on the night, on all the votes not yet counted. We bank on the redemptive and then wild progress of the blue bar on the chart. We play table tennis. M. pops two orange ping-pong balls in her coat's breast pockets; they glow through the fabric. We run around the tabletop with a theremin-player, using every surface the space has to offer: walls, windowpanes, chairs. The balls leap chaotically. We act out scenes from the election campaign during the match. Politics has long since lost the game, but it won't let us go.

I'm actually tired. There are actually other things to do. C. comes and joins us, and we go outside for a smoke. They warn us to be quiet, a woman next door likes making complaints. From then on, I have to suppress my laughter. From then on, all I want to do is laugh.

We sit and talk and drink or stand or run around the ping-pong table or after the ball. M. goes home. At some point C. leaves, and I hurry after her. We run to the train; I'd lost track of time. On the Regional Express, we search for more election results. We call up page after page and console ourselves yet again with the thought that it could be hours until the final results come through.

We know better than that. We set an alarm so as not to miss changing trains in Dessau. We cling to simple actions.

It's cold in Dessau, so cold, but the train comes early, or it's a different one arriving late. We sit down on the warmest seats. There's a man sitting near us.

I say: So all women ought to leave now. Just leave. It's such an affront, such a gut-punch, so impossible. A convicted sex offender becoming president of a country. And they're congratulating him. I want Germany to break off diplomatic and economic relations, I want his crimes, his punishment to be taken seriously. I want the blows against women not to be intensified by the state accepting this monster.

I say all that loudly, so that the man opposite us definitely hears it all. So that he can say: I'm so sorry. I'm ashamed.

Or so that he can say: I know you take me for a man, but I'm not. I feel with you. Something like that. So that we can talk.

What we get – we who look like women, are taken for women and are entirely or more or less women – is punishment, ridicule and threats.

I and everyone I know already knew it anyway.

And a while ago, my father said he couldn't believe women who pipe up thirty years or so later and report rapes and want to hold the perpetrators accountable.

I said: Sometimes people remember too late, sometimes they can only allow themselves the memory much later. And the thing that makes you think they're faking if they don't report it straight away is part of the hostility, the oppression that makes victims stay silent for so long.

He said he couldn't believe so many women get raped and assaulted.

I said: I'm speaking here as a person who grew up from a girl to a woman in this society. And I don't know a single woman who grew up without being assaulted, without experiencing abuse. And I know a lot of men who had the same experience. Almost everyone I can think of has experienced situations in which someone assumes they won't tell, no one will believe them anyway.

He said: Then it's all much worse than I thought. Then we're living in a terrible world.

C. and I almost miss getting off at Leipzig central station. We almost get run over at the tram stop. We cross the tracks at a run, run back, the trams following their usual confusing choreographies. There are a lot of people out and about. Early-morning rush hour.

We might still be drunk.

We're tired and wide awake.

At home, I wake my older son and ask if he's feeling better enough to go back to school. He isn't. His cough is bad. He asks who won the election. I say we don't know yet. They haven't finished the count yet.

I'm as hard as a rock, so hard I can't bend.

I make a coffee that I don't drink in the end, and wake my younger son.

You smell of smoke, he says.

Yes, I say, people were smoking at the election party.

He asks: Who won?

I say: We can't say for sure yet.

He asks: Who was in the lead the last time you looked?

I say: We have to be very strong. He was in the lead.

Still warm from sleep, my son says, correcting everything perfectly calmly: That can't be right. You're definitely wrong.

I hug him: Thank you for saying that.

Tears shoot to my eyes. I press myself briefly against his shoulder. I'm sorry, I say, for being like this right now, but I'm so grateful for what you said.

Him: Tamam.

I know: At the end of the night an election result awaits, and posts like this: ‘Your body, my choice. Forever.’ (Nicholas J. Fuentes, white supremacist, catastrophic brain, apocalyptic heart)

There’s no end in sight.

At the same time, there is yet another end behind me and all those I like.

And then back into restlessness. I’m out and about.

After a short sleep, I make lunch for my sick son and go for a walk in the city centre.

I photograph the posters in the windows of closing-down shops, branches of major chain stores:

*Flash sale.*

*Everything must go.*

*Last day today.*

etc.

Once, I had to be in despair again for the length of a not-too-long book.

That's enough now.

One last thing:

‘what then

the right to love

the right to be afraid

the right to cut and run

the right to shit on everything

the right to be with yourself

to straighten things out with yourself

to be at home with yourself

where else

the right to hit out

the right to wring people’s necks

or your own

the right to be good

the right to love

what else’

[Helga M. Novak]