

festival neue literatur reader 2017

Featuring book descriptions, translated excerpts, and brief biographies of Festival Neue Literatur 2017's chosen authors: Jürgen Bauer, Zora del Buono, Simon Froehling, Fabian Hischmann, Antje Rávic Strubel, and Marlen Schachinger.

Festival Neue Literatur brings six of the most important emerging and established writers from Germany, Austria and Switzerland to New York City, where they join celebrated U.S. writers Francine Prose and Darryl Pinckney in a series of conversations and readings.

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Jürgen Bauer **Das Fenster zur Welt**

Roman

SEPTIME

THE WINDOW TO THE WORLD *DAS FENSTER ZUR WELT*

BY JÜRGEN BAUER

EXCERPT TRANSLATED BY MARSHALL YARBROUGH

Das Fenster zur Welt (*The Window to the World*) (2013) chronicles the friendship between two grieving individuals: the eighty-year-old Hanna, who is reevaluating her life after the death of her elderly mother, and the much younger Michael, who is mourning the loss of his boyfriend following their break-up. Michael is an out-of-work actor, though it becomes clear that both he and Hanna are trapped in a game of roleplaying, as mother, caretaker, or lover.

An unlikely bond grows between the two characters as they embark on a road trip through Bavaria, a metaphorical journey through the past and towards the future. The book stages an exploration of generational and sexual difference while blurring the distinctions between loss, hope and freedom.

Excerpt from pages 8-19 and 24-26.

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THE WINDOW TO THE WORLD
DAS FENSTER ZUR WELT
BY JÜRGEN BAUER
TRANSLATED BY MARSHALL YARBROUGH

After such a long time, it felt wrong to be here again. Michael opened the door and stepped through the heavy black curtain. There were a few other men standing in the front room. He looked around and then went straight to the counter, paid the cover and received a plastic bag. Not much was happening in the changing area, a small room with a few benches. He hadn't been here in the last few years, and even before then he'd come only rarely. He'd take the tram, grab a seat — most of the time the trip took longer than the time he spent inside. Whatever he might have been able to find here had been easier to get through other means. He was amazed at how a place which in its very function promised arousal could have a front room with such an unspectacular, almost stuffy feel to it. You felt like you were waiting in line to buy movie tickets. Michael took off his clothes: shoes, jacket, sweater, jeans, T-shirt, underwear — the only things he left on were his socks. Then he stuffed everything into the plastic bag and put on his tall boots, the kind that were so popular here. For a moment he paused, glanced down at himself and wondered: would he be cold? No, they were mindful of the temperature here — their courtesy had to extend that far at least.

Naked, he walked over to the changing area. The boy there forced a smile, took Michael's clothes, took them into a separate room and came back with a number that he put in Michael's hand. Did it mean something that the boy barely glanced at him? He was still good looking, wasn't he? He was unnerved, but forced himself not to think any more about it, just said thanks and went through the door into the bar.

Inside, several of the men were already cosied up together

in semi-private booths. Others — the less attractive ones, Michael noted — leaned against the bar or sat on barstools and drank beer. Michael had almost forgotten how ridiculous it looked for grown men to be lined up naked one next to the other, acting as if it were the most natural thing in the world that other men were having sex all around them. He liked this stuffiness, this boredom. *What did other people think went on here?* he wondered. Everyone was naked, of course, and naturally most of them were looking for sex. But that didn't make the scene any more exciting than your local bar just before closing time. The two men enjoying themselves right there at the bar weren't even graced with a glance from the others. Was it jealousy? It probably had to do with the fact that the men didn't make for a particularly tantalizing sight. One of them had set his half-drunk beer on the bar and took a sip from it every now and then. Michael had always been put off by the fact that the ugliest men here got the most sex, just as a matter of course, either because they didn't overthink things, or because they didn't care and just took what they wanted.

Michael walked past the bar — he hadn't come here for a beer. On the other side of the room were stairs that led down to the lower level, and that's where he wanted to go. A young man leaned against the railing sizing up everyone who walked past him on their way downstairs — presumably considering whom he should follow. That was really kind of cheating, but what was Michael supposed to say. He pushed past him, walked quickly down the stairs and moved the curtains aside. He gave his eyes a moment to adjust to the total darkness, then felt his way through the room and waited, in the dark, to be touched. Michael tried to picture how all this would look from an outside perspective. Perhaps like an act of desperation, a way of getting over his breakup with Ernst, a way of forgetting. It was just a few days ago that Michael had first come home to the apartment that Ernst had emptied while he'd been out. Or maybe what he was doing here seemed more like a sexual bacchanal, using bodily stimulation to drown out, at least for a little while, his profound feeling of loss. But in that case wouldn't he start sobbing and call out Ernst's name, hear it echo into nothingness off the bare black walls? It would be more dramatic to dash out of the club, naked, into the rain — though it wasn't raining — and to stand there for a while, totally soaked, to peer up at the sky and burst into tears. A shame, then, that tears had always been tough for Michael. He couldn't ever start sobbing on

cue.

Michael was glad that it was so dark here and that no one saw him or knew who he was. He was here because he liked the feeling. The feeling of the many hands on his body, the unexpected touches that he couldn't see coming in the dark, his body's surprising reactions, which in this room were even more intense. It didn't change anything about his feelings for Ernst, it didn't cover up anything either; this was no bacchanal. It was at best a massage, a massage by other means. And he didn't feel guilty, he didn't feel dirty, at most a little bit seedy. But it also didn't do anything to change the fact that he missed Ernst. He was trying something out, that was all. And yet he wasn't fully present, he moved from one spot to the next, bored, whenever the hands touching him started to linger. After a while he decided to check out the bar after all, and slowly felt his way to the door.

When his eyes had again adjusted to the scant light, he saw a naked man's back at the bar, one that he couldn't mistake. Ernst really hadn't waited long to go looking for some quick sex, he started to think — though considering his own position he decided it would be ridiculous to think on this further. After all, he was here, he was naked too. Ernst was leaning over the bar, alone, drinking a beer. Michael wasn't sure how one was supposed to act in such a situation. He thought for a second about heading for the exit and hoping Ernst wouldn't notice him, but then he just kept standing where he was and waited to see what Ernst would do. He was too curious to take off now.

After a while Ernst finally turned around and saw Michael looking at him. They both stood rooted in place; neither took a step towards the other, but they also didn't act as if they hadn't seen each other. Michael didn't want to show any signs of weakness. The thought struck him as absurd, after all, here they both were, two men who had just broken up, standing naked across from one another. Nevertheless, he wanted to hold on to some amount of dignity, as ridiculous as that attempt must have come off in this situation. He looked Ernst up and down, the man who a short while ago had been his partner. The sight of his naked body completely surprised him, and he was frightened of this feeling. On the one hand, he recognized Ernst's body, had in the past few years grown completely familiar with it, and even now seeing it immediately called up smells and tastes that he associated with it. He couldn't do anything to stop

this, he could feel how Ernst's body had always felt against his, and all at once, across the distance of the room, he had its familiar smell in his nose. And on the other hand, the sight also seemed fully new to him, close to uncanny. This body that in the last few years had become almost as familiar to him as his own seemed like something cut out and pasted against this background. It had a completely new aura. Were they supposed to be ashamed of themselves, should they feel guilty; was this the final punch line to their relationship, the farce on top of the tragedy? Ernst was still looking Michael in the eye, and now he slowly began to smile. It was a warm, almost benevolent smile, a familiar expression that caught Michael in its spell and made him finally go over to Ernst. Only after a few steps did he start to think he recognized something else in this smile as well, a calculated readiness to concede, an understanding condescension, like you often see in the way parents look at their children. But now it was too late.

"Did you come here to prove something to me?"

"Hello Ernst."

"Because of the note? Is that why you're here?"

Michael wanted to immediately turn around and leave, to run away from the accusatory tone in Ernst's voice, which betrayed both aggression and arrogance and yet wasn't totally without affection.

"Or are you here to prove something to yourself?"

He was talking about the note he had left him. The note that Michael had found on the refrigerator door, after he had come back to the empty apartment where he and Ernst had lived together.

You never do anything at all.

I don't think you're even gay.

It was the strangest goodbye note he could have imagined.

"I'm not here to prove anything."

Strangely enough, during his relationship with Astrid he hadn't really felt he was missing anything. The irrepressible lust for men that he had started feeling quite early on had, during his relationship with her, become a far-gone memory from his teenage years, and only after their breakup had it fully emerged again. Only then had he admitted to himself that he actually was gay. But was that true? Weren't there lots of men who lived with women and still had sex with men despite that? The note had gotten to him in a very strange way. Not because of its brutality, nor because of the coldness it revealed, it had gotten to him because it had raised a disturbing question: Who was he if he wasn't even aware of his body and its

needs?

"I'm here to have fun."

"Is that something you're even capable of?"

"I was up until now."

He lied.

"I feel like you just want to be unhappy, no matter what."

"You know, you're one of the few people I know who can just fire off a sentence like that and be so totally sure that they're right."

A song was playing in the background. It sounded like plastic. Michael didn't know it — he hadn't listened to new music in years — but it made the conversation all the stranger.

"Did you go? Did you talk to her?"

He didn't know what Ernst was talking about.

"To the doctor. Did you go?"

Ernst had set up an appointment for him with a psychologist he had found on the internet. He had had to spend weeks convincing him before he had finally agreed.

"Did you?"

"What?"

"Talk to her."

"Of course I talked to her. I mean, you paid a ton of money so that I could. Or at least I guess you did. But are we really going to stand here and talk about my shrink?"

"And?"

"And what?"

"What did the doctor say?"

"Isn't that subject to doctor-patient confidentiality?"

Struggling to make a friendly gesture, Michael twisted the corners of his mouth upward.

"I just want you to be doing okay."

Now Michael couldn't help but laugh, loudly enough that a few of the men near them turned around, despite the music still droning out of the speakers. People weren't used to loud laughter here — looks were all you needed to communicate.

"You want me to be doing ok? I'm doing wonderfully. You broke up with me, but I'm doing wonderfully. I come home at night and half the apartment is empty, but I'm doing wonderfully, couldn't be better. Unemployed and alone in an apartment I don't know how I'm going to pay for. Doesn't that seem wonderful to you? A note on

the refrigerator. Not a word, no discussion, no call. You want me to be doing ok? For how little you clearly care about me, does it even matter to you how I'm doing?"

"I love you."

Michael looked from one corner of the room to the other in disbelief. He let his gaze sweep over naked men's bodies, from the bar to the exit, from the stairs that led to the darkroom to the door that led to the toilet. But no one was watching them, no one stared in disbelief or distress on account of the words they were speaking, a conversation that surely no one had ever had here before. Things were playing out as they always did.

"You were the one decision in my life that I never regretted," said Michael.

An old Madonna song was playing in the background now. Ernst stiffened.

"It was just too much for me. I couldn't bear it alone, no one could have."

Michael could think of nothing to say.

"Do you know what I wanted more than anything else in the past few years? Just one totally normal evening."

"I wanted nothing else."

Now Michael wasn't lying. That was what he had wanted. What he still wanted. But clearly it wasn't something he was capable of. Ernst snorted. It sounded like a cough. Michael looked in his eyes.

"I should have just done a better job of acting," he said.

"Acting?"

"Acting. Acting like I was happy. It works, eventually. Like in the theatre. Spend enough time pretending until you develop real emotions."

"There was so much you would have needed to change. To do differently."

"But I could also have just acted like everything had changed. I was just too honest with you."

"I'm not your audience."

Michael tried to cry but it wouldn't happen. He couldn't find any emotion in himself, nothing that could force any tears out of him. There was just this dull feeling, this heaviness behind his eyes. Ernst turned away.

"I just wanted to have one normal evening again. Like

before. Nothing spectacular, no grand show of affection. Just a normal evening with you. But no matter how it started, every night just took a bad turn at some point. It was totally undramatic. Things just veered off course. And there was nothing I could do to stop it. Nothing at all. I was helpless.”

“And I was the guilty one. Like always.”

Michael knew that he was guilty. But he only ever became aware of his guilt too late, looking back with hindsight. Only then did it become clear to him what part he had played. He had let Ernst down, time and time again. Not out of malice, not because he wanted to fight, nor out of anger or frustration, but simply because he was incapable of doing otherwise. How often had he sat with Ernst at the table and noticed his smile as if he were seeing it for the first time. The sight of it had taken him completely at unawares, every time, this wide, winning, completely sincere smile, showing an openness that knew no hidden agenda, no malice. This radiant face that he had immediately fallen in love with back then. When everything had been simple, uncomplicated and effortless. How often had he wanted to say something nice, just one small thing — nothing more would have been necessary. And how often had he then said something else instead. Something that, as soon as it had been spoken, became a thing he couldn't take back, no matter how much he wanted to. How was it possible, when you had such a clear picture of yourself, when you knew what you wanted and what words you should say and things you should do to make that happen — how was it still possible to act so contrary to what you felt?

Michael looked at the floor like a small child who had been caught in a lie. He always knew what part he had played — when they fought, when they weren't speaking. And not once was he able to act differently. How would he have described it? As a runaway train? A car with no brakes? Michael looked at Ernst. It was almost uncanny to him how alike they had become over the years: the short hair that was already starting to thin a little on top, the three-day beard. They had even assumed the same posture. Like how dogs start to resemble their masters, he thought.

“If you'd changed just one thing, it would have been enough. All you needed was a new perspective on things,” said Ernst.

Michael knew that Ernst was right.

“A new outlook. Anything new. But you did nothing. Abso-

lutely nothing. You rejected everything and pulled away. We weren't even sleeping together anymore. Why do you think I wrote what I did?"

He felt like he'd been caught.

"All we would have needed was a fresh start."

That too was clear to him. And still, what was he supposed to respond with other than:

"I know what I need. I don't need you to tell me. You're not in my life anymore."

"I missed you," said Ernst.

"I was always there," answered Michael.

"You brought me down. You and me both. For no reason. I tried to understand it. To understand you. I worked really hard to do that."

He had. Michael nodded.

"But it didn't work. I couldn't get to the bottom of whatever it is that makes you tick." It became harder and harder for Michael to keep listening to Ernst.

"I gave you time for yourself. It didn't help. I stood by you. I was understanding. I was tough. I booked a vacation. It didn't help. I went looking for a new apartment. Nothing changed."

Michael knew that Ernst was right, and he was still defiant, angry.

"But you didn't want to live the life with me that would have made me happy. All you want is to pick me apart. That's your one goal. Even now, still."

"Can you not imagine that there are people who just want to be happy? Why couldn't you be ok with that?"

Michael wanted to say something, but he just couldn't.

"Did she help you?"

"Who?"

"The doctor."

"I didn't go through with it. I ran away when they called my name."

All Michael wanted was to get his clothes on again. He felt naked.

[...]

When Michael got back to the apartment, his gaze again landed immediately on the spot where the shoes were missing. It had been the first sign that from now on he would be alone again. Ernst had never spent much money on clothing, but nice shoes had always been important to him. Now, every time Michael opened the door to the apartment, his gaze was immediately drawn to the empty spot on the floor: Ernst's black loafers, his tall brown leather boots, the beat-up Doc Martens that he couldn't throw away, his house shoes, and his countless sneakers. All gone. Michael's shoes had taken on a sad look ever since.

He tossed his bag in the corner and hung his jacket on the doorknob, took a quick deep breath and then opened the door to the living room. At first glance everything was the same as ever, and it had been this familiar, everyday sight that had so struck him that day. No half-empty living room where you could immediately spot the holes and shadows left behind by missing furniture, where it was clear in which places Ernst was absent; it had remained their shared living room, the long-familiar space. Michael had to look a lot closer, had to search through desk drawers and shelves if he wanted to see how Ernst had disappeared from his life. The books in Ernst's half of the bookshelf were still there, he wouldn't be coming back for them. But the record collection was gone, and also the printer that Ernst had bought. The fruit dish was gone and likewise the pillow with the flower print that Ernst had brought back from his grandmother's apartment after she died. His clothing had vanished from the bedroom, but there was no need for Michael to check the kitchen — Ernst had never owned any cookware. On that day he had even taken the dirty clothes in the bathroom with him, leaving only a single T-shirt hanging on the laundry basket. He wasn't sure if Ernst had left him the shirt on purpose or if it had simply been left there unintentionally in the rush to pack. That day he had carefully folded the shirt and tucked it under the mattress in the bedroom. Just in case.

He sat down on the bed, and as his gaze fell on the half-empty dresser in the corner he finally started to cry. He hadn't cried when he had first come back to the cleared-out apartment. He hadn't cried since then. Here, only now, was a visible sign of his feelings, the things that up to this point he hadn't been able to get anyone to understand. It was as if only now had Ernst provided him a reason

for his sadness.

The months before their breakup he had tried to talk to Ernst, to explain himself to him, even though he himself didn't understand. The more Ernst had tried to lead a normal and happy life and to do things that he knew Michael liked, the more loving he had been towards him, the more understanding, the more furious Michael had become, since it was clearly his fault, and his alone, that none of it had any effect, that none of it did anything to change how empty he felt. And the more desperate Ernst had become, the more tenacious he had been in trying to find something with which he could reach Michael, the more closed-off and aggressive Michael had become. He had begun to hate himself for it. And when Ernst had finally left, he had hated himself even more, had felt this aggression towards himself even more intensely. But now he didn't feel hatred anymore, only sorrow. As if a long-lasting pain had finally stopped. After a while Michael washed the tears away with the bedspread, stood up, grabbed his phone and dialed.

“Elvira, I need some new stuff.”

jürgen bauer



Born in 1981, Jürgen Bauer works as a writer and journalist in Vienna. He majored in theater studies and published his book *No Escape*, about the theatre director Barrie Kosky, in 2008. He was a participant in the New Writing program of the Burgtheater Vienna. In 2013, he published his first novel, *Das Fenster zur Welt*; his latest novel, *Was wir fürchten*, was published in 2015. He was a writer in residence at Literarisches Colloquium Berlin in the summer of 2015.

marshall yarbrough



Marshall Yarbrough translates from German. He has translated novels by bestselling authors Marc Elsberg (*Blackout*, Transworld, 2017) and Charlotte Link (*The Unknown Guest* and *The Rose Gardener*, Blanvalet, 2014 and 2015). His translations of work by Anna Katharina Hahn and Wolfram Lotz have appeared at n+1, InTranslation.org, and in the journal SAND. His critical writing has appeared in Electric Literature, Full-Stop.net, Tiny Mix Tapes, The Rumpus, and The Brooklyn Rail, where he is assistant music editor. He is a member of Cedilla & Co., a translators' collective.