

Late Guests

Gertrud Leutenegger

Novel

German



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Author

Gertrud Leutenegger was born in 1948 in the Swiss canton of Schwyz. Since 1975 she has published novels, short stories, poems and plays, for which she has received numerous awards. Having spent many years in the Italian-speaking region of Switzerland, she now lives in Zurich.

Photo: Peter Peitsch

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Late Guests is a novel about life and death, love and escape – and how these are connected. Gertrud Leutenegger takes us along on a dreamlike journey through the night to the small village in Tessin from which the narrator had fled a long time ago. The story is told from the perspective of this woman, whom the reader gets to know better over the course of the novel and yet can never quite grasp. She has returned because Orion, her former companion and the father of her child, has died. She notes with astonishment: “And I’d never left.”

“Orion is dead! Unnoticed in the night. Fear and love, fury and escape, all of my heart’s happiness and its disturbing irrationality coincide in the moment as I breathe in the smell of the moldering wooden door.”

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Excerpt translated by Tess Lewis

1.

Dusk is falling when I enter the tree-filled oval. Everything is still – only the gravel crunches under my feet. There is not the slightest breeze up here on this clear February evening. Below, Lombardy is covered by a veil of mist, lit up by diffuse lights. In the cemetery, I lean my head for a long time against the locked door of the funeral chapel, filled in summer with the twittering of swallows, as impenetrable darkness streams towards me through the two door windows. I can't make out the slightest outline of a coffin. Orion is dead! Unnoticed in the night. Fear and love, fury and escape, all of my heart's happiness and its disturbing irrationality coincide in the moment as I breathe in the smell of the moldering wooden door. But Orion is young again. He sits on the outer deck of the Hudson River ferry, a battered vulcanized fiber suitcase at his feet. He never felt lighter than when he was traveling with that suitcase. He has it with him even now, it must be standing next to his coffin. I just can't see it in the darkness of the funeral chapel. Orion waited patiently for death to come and take him on this final passage. He didn't do himself any harm! Something like a feeling of triumph flashes through me. Fierce gratitude. Pressed against the door, I bow my head.

The shade of blue in the tinted arched windows of the small vestibule goes out. The enormous mountain range towering over the village blends with the night sky. Here and there a photographic medallion still shimmers and a scent of moss and ivy wafts from the abandoned graves. Back on the tree-filled oval, I only now notice the remains of snow sprinkled with confetti near the horse chestnuts along the street. And what are those ruddy folded ears sticking out of the dirty white? I tug gently on one and an entire pig mask with a flattened snout appears. Bits of gravel are stuck in the nostrils, the painted eyes are disproportionately large, not small, slanted, appropriately pig-sized slashes, but instead dominant with black pupils rolling in satisfaction. Very

quickly, as if the piglet might otherwise begin grunting, I slip it back in the snow and stand up. The linden trees bordering the oval on the side facing the lake down in the plain tilt sideways under the weight of the village's stories, bending under the sway of the mountain; their crowns, constantly pruned, bud anew each spring. And I was never away.

2.

At three o'clock this afternoon, the mourning bell will have sounded for Orion. The strangely high, monotonous ring that made us catch our breath every time, interrupted the sounds in the village and in the sudden silence, its plaintive cry penetrated into the narrowest streets. Only the waterfall behind the village still thundered audibly; impetuous and unconcerned, it thundered down the rock face. The children, whose Fasnacht Day has ended, will soon know that Orion is dead. They will no longer have to run across the square when he appears in great summer heat in his long, black coat and wide-brimmed hat or on a frosty winter morning in the flapping suit, as thin as tissue paper, that he wore at our wedding. His stoic imperviousness to any kind of weather made him seem a mythical creature from some other climate and on top of that he usually slept during the day and spent the night staring at the stars in the last remaining depths of the heavens still free of the Lombardy smog. Perhaps at dusk the children will now venture into the garden on the south side of the village where Orion's telescope stands, half-overgrown with ferns and nettles, and finger the rusty screws on this monstrosity, which gleams amid the bushes like a fallen moon rocket. Orion had often promised to show them the Andromeda Galaxy with its three spherical dwarf galaxies but when they crept up close to the telescope at the appointed hour, there was never anyone there.

From the oval, I glance once more at the funeral chapel in the cemetery. I won't be able to lay my hands, my head on Orion's coffin until tomorrow. Nothing suits his final repose better than this bolted door. For years it stood open; for years it swung open and shut; for years I wasn't able to look at the terrors lurking behind the door with

detachment and without fear. Hadn't they been there along with all of life's splendor? When Orion pushed open the door to his abysses, I was also immediately on the other side of the threshold. I had too vivid an imagination, that was my undoing. Now death has closed the door. The veil of mist over Lombardy has thickened. Surprised, I pat my light coat – why didn't I dress more warmly? When news of Orion's death reached me, I immediately rushed to the train. I wanted to see him one last time, to touch him. The trip was long. I can't remember anything other than that. I can never recall a thing from trips south, only from the trips home, every return a cut of the knife deep into the wound canal of the journey over the Gotthard Pass with that final look down at the Leventina, torn with pain, with just the child in the car, fleeing.

I had been assured that I'd be able to stay the night in the inn on the edge of the forest even though the inn keeper had long stopped taking in guests. In the village they haven't forgotten that I'd often sought refuge there earlier. And after all, I know under which stone in the garden loggia the inn keeper hides the key when he is away. Since the flood of migrants began to reach Sicily, he has been returning to Modica more often. Only a few windows in the village are still lit, here and there a screen flickers in a dark room. I make my way through the narrow streets without hesitating. The walls of the houses lean in towards each other, leaving only a sliver of the night sky free. As if in a labyrinth, the plashing of water in the numerous fountains echoes here and there: fountain troughs of granite, former coffins from Roman times. The curses and shouts of daily business have fallen silent but I suddenly hear light footsteps with intermittent hops behind me, the steps of a child Orion entrusted to me as in a dream.