

The Imposition

Ariane Koch

Novel

German



A young woman ekes out a living in a house that is too big in a town that is too small right by a triangular mountain. When a guest turns up, she takes him in without hesitation. The guest is as promisingly new as he is strange and he quickly becomes the captivating centre of attention, but also the victim of inquisitorial fantasies of power. Until he finally escapes the clutches of the increasingly obsessive landlady and she herself, alone again, embarks on a long-awaited journey and now becomes a guest in her turn.

"Sometimes I don't know anymore if the guest really said that. Because the guest doesn't speak my language. Maybe I thought I could read everything in his eyes. Maybe I was the one who saw forlornness in his eyes."

Title

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Ariane Koch, born in Basel in 1988, studied fine arts and interdisciplinarity. She writes – also in collaboration – theatre and performance texts, radio plays and prose. Her texts have won numerous awards and have been performed in places like Basel, Berlin, Cairo, Istanbul and Moscow. Ariane Koch has been granted various fellowships, including one from the Cité internationale des Arts in Paris (2020). She has been teaching at the Institute for Aesthetic Practice and Theory at the Basel School of Art and Design since 2019. The Imposition is her debut novel and nominated for the aspekte-Literaturpreis 2021.

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Excerpt translated by Laura Wagner

The guest sits at the table and eats tangerine slices. When things are overly small, I have to screw up my face and place a hand on my heart – or on the spot where I assume it is. It has always been easy to deter me from any wickedness by showing me miniatures.

The guest is very delicate, so delicate that he almost wafts apart. I didn't notice this at first because he knows how to hide it well. If you are as delicate as the guest, you are in a lot of danger. He could easily get caught in the clutches of lunatics. My great-grandfather, for example, was the esteemed leader of a sect. Unfortunately, I was not lucky enough to meet him in person. And so all I have is a single photo of him that shows him sitting at his desk, his hair sternly parted, gazing towards a visionary future. Furthermore, I was fascinated by the fact that he is said to have improvised the sermons he made by dropping the Holy Scripture onto the lectern at which it is said to have opened at a chosen passage guided by the Lord's gracious hand and thus determined the content of the sermon.

My great-grandfather might have said that one had to have faith in the page that opened at the holy book's fall and after all, he was but a servant of the Lord who had no choice but to let His will be done.

Next to the small town in which I have come to lie as though in a sarcophagus stands a tall mountain that resembles a pyramid but that cannot be viewed from the inside like the actual wonder of the world and which, besides, is covered in snow. You can, if you so must, climb the mountain. Personally, I refrain from doing so, the view is ruined for me. You can't see as far as I would have liked, I prefer to remain at the foot of the mountain. Some are afraid of the mountain's shadow.

I know everyone in the small town but usually I pretend that I know no one. I have experienced something at almost every street corner, different layers of time have started to overlap. Everyone gathers in

Rondell Bar, which is right next to my house. Initially, it was supposed to only be open for one hundred days, but they turned into thousands. The waiters change every week, each of them more horrible than the next, but all of them have their hair tied up tightly and other than that you might say that there has never been anything interesting to see here either. I have always known that I am ungrateful. My parents predicted it early on and I never denied it.

The guest was unknown territory, just appeared out of nowhere. He got off the train, swung his suitcases and that's how our eyes met. I'm not sure if it was his insane idea to come here. I was standing on the other side of the platform, was about to leave. Well, I was hanging around the train station at any rate and got an overview of the destinations I could potentially travel to. But I never got on a train.

I can't deny it: The guest seemed familiar when I stared at him for the first time through my gold-framed glasses – or was it him who fixed his gaze on me warmly through his glasses, standing on the other side of the platform, while we both knew that we had come from opposite directions, just as we would be leaving in opposite directions by tomorrow or the day after tomorrow at the latest? It was this look from the guest that became branded in my mind and that I have been searching and sometimes finding in other people's gazes since then, today in that of the presenter of a philosophical talk show, as he fastened his eyes on a young French writer.

On the radio they said that zoo animals were no longer used to people and started to flee at even the slightest human movement, none more so than the flamingos. I liked the idea of people wandering through zoos as the animals fled.

An interview with the head of tourism of the small town – into which I was born involuntarily and in which I don't intend to die – followed, tourism had to be stimulated by presenting the small place as a city. This statement seemed so absurd to me that I didn't know what to do after hearing it. Crumbs of a croissant had been generously spread across the counter of Rondell Bar, which is covered with a marble-look

adhesive film. They glistened golden in the sun. The mountain, the head of tourism went on to say, was a big attraction but the cableway was already starting to break down, the cars swaying dangerously, refurbishments would be necessary soon.

I'm not always frequenting the bar as early as lunchtime, but the recent appearance of the guest had made me get out of the house that morning to begin my search for him.

Outside, people whom I could only make out as shapes, were walking along the streets. I observed a resigned mother whose child was pulling her hand in a tantrum. Sitting at the marble counter, my legs crossed, I imagined that only tiny people lived in the small town, driving around on tiny bicycles and drinking one ristretto after the other from tiny coffee cups. I would be able to pick up the round bar easily, turn it and look at it from all sides, the people sitting at the counter trying to hold on, screaming, their tiny drinks had already fallen down, spread across my jeans in tiny droplets. The people, now hanging, would stare at me with huge tiny eyes as I tore the round bar in half like a donut. I imagined the small town becoming smaller and smaller, shrinking down to a tiny dot, only I stayed big so that there was no longer any room for me. Then I remembered that this was already the case.

Now there was a report about the increasing violence towards nursing staff on the radio. The waiter turned down the volume and the voices drifted away.

People are lying under the awnings, some in sleeping bags, some in tents, some in sleeping bags in tents. Most have stowed away their luggage in holes in the street that are blocked with small trap doors. How often I have seen them crawl out of the holes, dragging bulky pieces of luggage out behind them. The people have assumed the colours of the houses in front of which they lie, are grey like the asphalt, while their neon-coloured tents and sleeping bags shine throughout the town. In winter, there is a team in orange protective vests that finds people without a permanent home and takes them food, and sometimes cleaning wipes as well.

There is a woman I have noticed many times before.

During the day she wears immaculate clothing, a light grey coat, and hurries down the street – as though she was going to work. When night falls, she gets into her sleeping bag in threadbare tracksuit bottoms and looks out dully, in my face, and I look in hers when I cross the road once more, from Rondell Bar to my house or the other way around. We don't say anything, all we have is this look we share.

At the end of the street – where the woman sometimes sets up her temporary resting place – there is a furniture shop specialised in sofas. The furniture shop could even be called sofa store, that's how tightly packed they stand in the window. The business hours have been extended into the late evening hours so that professionals can find the time to visit it too. Couples often go in, try out sofa after sofa, leave again, astonishment about what they just bought written on their faces. Soon the heap of cotton will be delivered to their home. Soon a van is going to park in front of their house. Soon two guys are going to manhandle the heap of cotton from the van, carry it up the stairs, bumping into everything. Soon the heap of cotton is going to be in the flat of the couple that sits down on it incredulously, sinking into it.

Sometimes I would prefer to have less good eyesight. But then I might not have seen the guest as he held the coins that were foreign to him in one of the cones of light at the round bar counter of Rondell Bar. We were sitting across from one another in a safe distance, sipping a beer each for hours and then another. One on one side of the round counter, the other on the other side. Our line of sight cut straight through the circle, connected us two dots with one another, pierced the centre, the waiter, who kept shifting from one foot to the other. Maybe it wasn't the first or the last time that I drew these kinds of lines at Rondell Bar. Anyway, nobody sleeps anymore in this town, most sit at the counter, sipping alcohol from tin cups and thinking about who in which diagonal they could start an affair with. I often sense the future lines of connection between the locals, the potential intersections of the secants. When someone tries to approach me, I usually walk around the circle in the opposite direction so that we never meet and are

always the same distance apart. Because every now and then strange men send me letters too in which they write that they had seen me and didn't know me but that they had liked my smile, of which they are sure that it was intended for them. Try as I might, I can't remember having smiled ever.

The guest walked around like a flycatcher whose sticky paper insects cling to. He was obviously looking for accommodation, he just didn't seem to know it yet. He wandered around Rondell Bar, along the alleyways, up the mountain.

In any case, it felt a little eerie to me.

Suddenly, I saw him everywhere as though there were no other people but him, as though he was forever roaming the town swinging his luggage, examining the growing split in the clouds through which the moonlight burst. All the while, his silver outline shimmered.

I put my binoculars down for a moment so that the image could burn into my retina like a dying flash of lightning on the night sky.

I have a very large house even though you wouldn't think so from the outside. My house is huge, though not as big as the mountain that stands out sharply against the light. My house doesn't belong to me, I'm only watching it so that it doesn't fall apart. At some stage, my siblings are going to take over the house. At some stage, I'm going to have to move out of my house, be expelled, when my siblings register their desire for the house that is. My siblings have the money to say that my house should belong to them. My siblings can become big landowners while I am the guardian of a ruin. My siblings are going to move into my house and renovate it and rebuild, are going to turn it into something other than it is now. Maybe it will become even bigger and taller, but definitely more luxurious. Certainly it will be painted a different colour.

In any case, this house has always been a different one to me over time.

When my parents moved in here with me and my siblings many years ago, I installed a small cable car to the neighbour's house and exchanged letters with the

child next door. Sometimes we also showed each other objects by holding them to the window – a silent conversation of things dancing up and down the glass. I could make out a stuffed polar bear, for example, then a pair of scissors. I replied with a stuffed donkey and some indefinable shrubbery I had made in kindergarten. As I got older, I cut the rope, which fell onto the hedges and was but a trembling line leading through the gardens. I have the sinking feeling that there had been no reason for this, but the contact to the neighbour's kid was broken off forever.

The cats too came and went, were run over, became fat, were neutered. I remember Rambo, Cesar and Napoleon. Sometimes one, then the other had dominion over the gardens, strutting through the foliage with his tail raised. The territorial boundaries were constantly fought over, the smell of cat piss was in the air – and my parents' attempts at moving the cat's toilets by putting pepper on the ground failed.

Today there are all dead. Their lives passed away in the gardens.

I am still here. Dwell like the guard of a tomb among the things that I don't own and that are falling apart bit by bit. It is not a good idea to lean on the walls too much. Stones fall off the façade and the front lawn is covered in leaves, in dirt, in snow