

The Merging

Julia Weber

Novel

German



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Die Vermengung

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The Merging, the second novel by Julia Weber, explores the extent to which it is possible for women to reconcile dual roles as both mother and artist. The Merging is a lyrical examination of the challenges faced by a woman, mother and artist, offering an authentic, honest insight into her life – at once incredibly intimate and deeply political.

“I tell H. that if it isn’t possible to protect our spaces, especially the artistic ones, to separate them from the spaces we need for everyday life, and since we’d be sharing everything anyway, we might as well mingle art with the rest of our lives.”

Author

Julia Weber was born in Moshi (Tanzania) in 1983 and moved to Zurich with her family in 1985. After finishing her compulsory education, she did an apprenticeship as a photographic assistant and completed a professional degree in design. From 2009 to 2012, Weber studied literary writing at the Swiss Literature Institute in Biel. In 2012, she founded the Literaturdienst, and since 2015, she has been co-founder of the art action group “Literatur für das, was passiert” which supports people on the run. In spring 2017, her first novel *Immer ist alles schön* was published by Limmat Verlag (Zurich). In 2019, she founded the feminist authors’ collective “RAUF” with six other writers. From 2019 to 2021, she wrote a weekly column for the “Tagesanzeiger”. In spring 2022, her second book *Die Vermengung* was published by Limmat Verlag.

Photo: Ayse Yavas

The Merging

Julia Weber

Excerpt translated by Helen MacCormac

During the night when the child is asleep and I can't sleep for fear it might stop breathing, I write. I've moved the cot over to the table where I work and I keep peering in, keep putting my finger under the child's nose. I describe the smells I can smell, the clothes I wear, sounds and people I might hear or know. I look at the child and wonder is it paler now? and rest my hand on its tiny chest. Then I continue to write because I can feel its ribcage, gently rising, up and down.

"When I say "hope," I don't mean hope for anything in particular. I guess I just mean thinking that it's worth it to keep one's eyes open." *Maggie Nelson, Bluets*

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I'm sitting in the kitchen, looking out the window into the yard and because the pigeons are cooing in the copper beeches, I write about cooing pigeons, and because of the woman pushing a pram down the road, leaning on it as though she can't walk without it, I write about a woman who loves her child. I look up and it's 12:07 and I see B. emerging across the yard. She moves slowly towards me. Her hair is so bright, almost white. She raises her hand when she sees me.

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Perhaps my writing moves in the way something approaches when I can't recognise who or what it is, I know the movements, the sound tells me something, it's familiar but I can't quite grasp it. Then for a moment there it is, perfectly clear, focused, and the next moment it's gone.

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Are you made of milk? one of them asked me. Are you real or did I wish you here. Create you? Am I sitting beside my wish?

I am real, I say, I am Ruth, I want to be a sparkle of light, not shadow. My love lives in my skin. Just under my surface. And I sit at the window with my feet on the windowsill. I broaden my gaze and imagine my skin is the surface of the world. The whites of my eyes turn whiter. Small hairs on the top of my lip, fine blonde hairs.

There are two big windows in my room, facing the street, and white curtains at the windows like freshly fallen snow. And there are the pigeons that coo, pacing up and down the windowsill. There's the click of their claws on the tin sill and the wind caught up in the white of the curtains, on some days it sighs its way into my room and expands. Sometimes it lies down in my bed with me. Here I am, morning, noon, and nights too, I lie here naked, my milky skin. And so the wind lies down with me, touching me, on me, all over me.

And when I spot signs on my skin in the sunlight, small spots, marks that weren't there yesterday, when I see dark patches on the street below my window, blobs of chewing gum, beer stains and other things people have discharged from their bodies in the night, things forced up their throats because there's no space left in their bodies, and no space for their bodies in the world. Then I believe all things are tainted in the end, older, torn open, covered up, buried. Flecks of people and me a mere fleck in the world someday. Then I look up from the street to the sky and think, dear God, don't let me be old. I can't grow old, dear God, all I have is my mouth, the sensuousness, without a mouth, with a dry mouth, I am nothing, I'd be invisible. Without my young legs, without the sweet smell of my armpits, the fine peachy hair above my mouth. Dear God, don't let me be wasteland, invisible, sandstone skin, I don't want to spoil, smell aged. Dear God make it so that I can stay in my body.

And sometimes God is nothing to me, I don't believe He exists. Who is He anyway? Or what? I do think I'm to be pitied. For who could pity me more than God? Him the old man and all the rest.

Sometimes I fall into myself, barely human, more of a well, stay under, lying in my own knee-deep water,

a play of moonlight resting on me.

I oil my skin.

I moisturise the spaces between my toes.

When I go out and shut the door behind me, when I climb down the dark narrow staircase, and then step out onto the street, I shine right into the people on the street who turn their heads to see me. When I am with people, they feel like summer inside.

And to the woman who carries herself like a bag of washing on its way to the laundry, I say:

Come to me.

Come with me, I say to her.

She is startled and stares at me, I know she'd like to.

Come with me, I say to her and she stares me in the face, my pink lips – and looks – away.

Do come with me, I say to a man and he too is startled, grasps his finger, twists his wedding ring.

Best not, he says and walks away from me.

Turns back. Looks at me.

Me in my lime green dress standing there, at the corner in the shade of the beech tree, watching him go. Me wriggling my fingers like insect legs, like the buzz of spring, lifting one of my pale legs to cross the other, leaning against the wall. And as I arch my neck to look up at the beech tree, all the way to the top, my neck must look lovely, my neck is an arc of sensuality. Every so often, I sing a song. If I don't know the words I hum and then, because humming isn't singing, I fall silent. Mostly I glow. Mostly people can't explain the glow. Mostly they see me and wonder how something like me can even exist.

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H. is in the kitchen, sitting on the computer in a dark grey dressing gown, searching for houses in the south of Sweden. Every so often, I hear him cough or clear phlegm from the back of his throat. Right by the sea would be best, he calls, the house, so you can hear the waves breaking. On the coast, he calls. With a veranda perhaps? Perhaps with red doors and windows.

The sound of the sea and the wind. And solitude, solitude more than anything, he calls.

I am sitting on the toilet, outside three children in bright ski suits charge across the frozen field. One in red, one in green, one in yellow. No wind.

I reach down between my legs, dipping the white test stick into the enamel bowl, into the stream of yellow. Urine runs over my hands. Warm. Still sitting, I put the stick on a piece of toilet paper and wash my hands, turning my top half slightly to the left as I do so. My hands go red under the hot water. I lather them with soap. And I stay sitting there, staring at my legs, at the seven moles on my left leg and the eleven moles on the right one, most of them are on my thighs with fewer further down, then on each foot there's just one. There's a plastic turtle on the side of the bath. A turtle with a yellow cord and a much smaller turtle at the end of the cord, and if you pull the small turtle, the big one whirls its four legs like propellers and ploughs through the water, if you put it in the water.

Two minutes later, I stand up, pull up my knickers, pull up my trousers, do them up, and go to see H., taking the test stick with me. I go across the hall, along the grey plastic floor, go into the kitchen, light is falling through the window and I sit down on the other side of the old wooden table. And because it's old, the table wobbles and because it wobbles the salt cellar on the table wobbles and topples over, and because it's round, it rolls across the table and falls to the ground. The lid comes off and salt spills out onto the kitchen floor. A small cloud of salt. I put the test on the table between H. and me and we look at it.

A cross means pregnant, he says.

Yes, I say.

H. looks up.