

Vertigo

Saskia Winkelmann

Novel

German



Saskia Winkelmann's debut novel Vertigo describes the outlook of a woman who seeks freedom through drug use and ends up losing her grip on reality. Winkelmann perfectly nails a tone that moves between heady intoxication and sober reality.

"The ordinary way is through the streets; everyone goes that way. But there's also the thicket and I'm going to fight my way through that."

Title

Höhenangst

Publisher

Die Brotsuppe, Biel/Bienne

Publication date

April 2023

Pages

196

ISBN

978-3-03867-080-3

Translation rights

Ursi Aeschbacher

aeschbacher@diebrotsuppe.ch

Author

Saskia Winkelmann was born in 1990 in Thun and studied language arts at the University of Applied Arts Vienna and contemporary arts practice at the Bern Academy of Arts. She writes, organises events and moderates talks. She also DJs under the stage name Kia Mann. Her texts have appeared in literary magazines, newspapers, a zine, on stages and on a record cover. She firmly believes in the power of the collective and in radical honesty, but also that nothing is certain other than the fact everything changes. Höhenangst is her first novel. She lives in Bern.

Photo: Eglė Šalkauskyte

Vertigo

Saskia Winkelmann

Excerpt translated by Imogen Taylor

I met you in a swimming pool. You swam like an otter. The laugh stuck in my throat when I thought I'd lost you to the water, but you resurfaced a minute later, far behind or ahead of me. I can still feel the sting of chlorine in the place where my mouth meets my nose.

I met you on a big wheel. You spat on the ground and then turned and picked up a tiny dog, almost a rat, that was on the ride with us and, as we reached the highest point, you held it out of the carriage and laughed. Its mistress shrieked. I hid behind my candyfloss.

I met you at a boxing gym. You hit a punch bag that someone was holding, until a woman had to come and restrain you.

I met you as a child. No one else saw you and I didn't know your name. You were always there when I was alone. We were brother and sister. You were the most imaginative person I knew.

I met you at a kitchen window. You were smoking and you asked me: What are you thinking? And then: What are you really thinking? Your presence made me wild and inclined to drink.

I met you in a dream. You lived in the room next door. You didn't eat. You were thin as a stick. You never spoke. Your expression varied like disco lights changing colour and you screamed at night.

I met you in a toilet. You plied me with lip balm and chewing gum as I stood at the mirror trying to wipe smudged mascara from my face.

I met you at school. Because you scribbled all over my books. Because you took a bite out of my sandwich. Because you borrowed coins for vending-machine coffee.

Your head is bent at a strange angle, as if a giant had picked you up to lick your ear and accidentally squeezed too tight. Like when a child reaches for a beetle without realising how vulnerable a wing case is. Or how easily a wing can tear. I brush an ant off your face; it drops onto the forest floor. Beneath it a black hole gapes and swallows it. I don't fall into the hole. I don't follow the ant. I compose myself.

Your pupils are staring into the morning sun which illuminates everything around your body and me. I have to screw up my eyes, but the glare doesn't bother you. I start to cover you with wet leaves. They glisten. When I'm done I look into your face. It's not beautiful any more. I get a feeling for the word soul. It's a strange glassy thing between the brown leaves. I stare at it in fascination, watching it swell. I forget you for a moment. I forget what words are for. I see everything. I see, briefly, all the words I know laid out before me, combining and recombining and falling apart. The sun climbs higher. I can't move.

I used to have a pair of desert mice in a terrarium. When one of them lay there dead one morning, the other scampered around all over it, as if it weren't there. It treated the dead mouse like any other inanimate object. It knew there was no longer a mouse in that body and it went on its way without bothering to sniff the bundle of fur and bones and flesh.

You once said that when someone dies, it means that someone has never lived.

I feel like calling you. I take my phone from my pocket and search for your name. There's a ringing sound under the leaves.

You don't pick up. I go on covering you, scooping leaves onto your eyes, your nose, your dark-brown hair. I take a big branch and lay it over the top. You're no longer there. I get up and walk away, leaving you behind me. I don't change my pace. A soft ball of warmth grows inside me. I imagine you curling up inside it, snuggling up in the nest in my body, like a young, naked mouse. I don't see why we shouldn't both live in one body, why you shouldn't take up residence inside me. I sniff up the snot that is running from my nose to my upper lip. My breath makes clouds in the air. The warm ball in my belly grows bigger, pressing my organs against my abdominal wall. It hurts and I have to vomit. When I look up I see a branch hung with rosehips so red you must be able to see them from town. The ball grows smaller, my lungs fill with air again and I lie down on the grass and look up at the clouds for a few hours. Each individual raindrop contains all the colours of the spectrum. It's a perfect moment.

Then I run.

I run and rain pelts my face. The raindrops pour in at my

jacket collar and over my ribs; they soak the fluff in my belly button. I can't remember when the rain started. When I come to the big bridge, I'm hot and wet; I've run all the way without stopping. If the sky were clear, I'd see the mountains over there to the right, beyond the town. They're covered in snow almost all year round. I turn my head. My spine crunches and then snaps; it's so loud, it must wake everyone in the surrounding houses who isn't awake already. The peaks of the mountains are so beautiful—far enough away to forget, near enough to surprise you when you happen to catch sight of them. I stand still and look more closely. I look at them the way we practised—as if seeing them for the first time. The mountains have faces, they're looking at me, coming nearer. They stare back at me. They're not beautiful any more. Is it just me, or is there a furry animal lying there in the snow? And why can't I see it properly from here? Straining my neck, I turn my head the other way, panning my eyes to the left like a camera until I see the hospital. For a moment I hesitate; then I walk down the sixty-four steps to the Botanical Garden. The cotton-wool feeling that's enveloped me for hours starts to let up; my limbs grow heavier. The gentle rushing of the river and the patter of raindrops on its surface massage my eardrums and whisper that it will all be all right. There's a gardener, watering or digging or pruning in silence. I expertly sidestep him.

The Botanical Garden is like a library. It's quiet in here. Everyone who enters speaks in whispers. Even usually noisy people move as if trying not to wake some sleeping thing. Most of the time there's no one here at all.