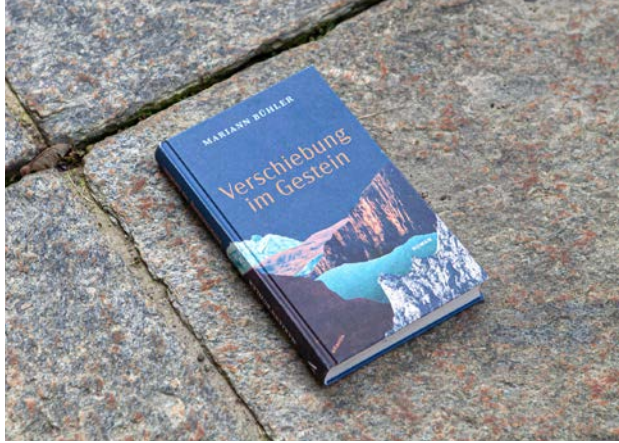


Shift in the rock

Mariann Bühler

Novel

German



In her debut novel Shift in the rock, Mariann Bühler traces the lives of three characters in a remote Swiss mountain valley, whose stories become more and more intertwined as the novel progresses.

"The valley is narrow. There is only room for one road in it, with a few villages strung along it."

Title

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Daniela Koch,
koch@atlantisverlag.ch

Author

Born in 1982 near Lucerne, Switzerland, Mariann Bühler studied English literature and linguistics, Islamic studies and gender studies in Basel and Berlin. The author, literary agent and event organiser lives in Basel. *Verschiebung im Gestein* (Shift in the Rock) is her debut novel.

Photo: Ayse Yavas

Awards

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Excerpt translated by Jamie Lee Searle

The valley has no bottom. Its slopes, at their lowest point, meet at an acute angle. The meadows above the forest lend the valley a softness, at least from afar.

Beyond, where two streams flow together, the valley opens out into a small, tree-dotted flood plain. From time to time, a storm makes the rivulets swell to floods the shade of milky coffee, and for a short while they burst their banks. Here, where they join, they wrestle with one another and tear out everything that has grown in their vicinity. They tumble stones, leaving sand behind, and entangle flayed tree trunks that the sun gradually coats with silver.

The streetlamps shine above the deserted high street. The church bells are still silent on the hour. Elisabeth can hear the few cars even long after they've left the village.

She gets dressed in the dark, washes her face in the bathroom with cold water and goes down into the bakery. The neon lights come on above her head, making a gurgling sound. She blinks into the glare.

The fridge hums softly. Boxes and sacks stand in rank and file on the shelves. There are knives and dough cutters hanging above the work surface, and piled above these are baking tins, bowls and measuring cups, organised according to the consistently identical stages of the baking process.

Elisabeth opens the oven door, kindles the stacked wood, and watches as the flames spread. Fire needs space and air; as well something that's both instinct and knowledge. Without having to give it any thought, she knows whether to intervene or be patient. She chooses the pieces of wood by shape and shade, seeing within them the heat they're capable of, seeing how long the flames will nibble at each knur, seeing how to pile the logs so they burn as evenly as possible. She can smell when the oven's too hot, and knows when the heat has distributed itself through the stone. She senses the nocturnal weather outside, and her hand reliably translates temperature and humidity into the position of the air supply valve. Similarly, she can hear when there's too little water in the dough, from the rubbery sound it makes. It's as though baking has become a part of her body.

She closes the oven door and walks through the dark passageway to the shop, which is lit only by the streetlamps.

She turns on the coffee machine, and it lets out a quiet purr.

Back in the passageway, she plucks a fresh apron from the pile and knots the ribbon behind her back. She doesn't have a work jacket like the one Jakob used to wear. That wouldn't be right; she wouldn't feel entitled to it.

She lifts the cloth from the dough she prepared the previous evening. It looks swollen and blows bubbles, smelling sweet and sour all at once. She scoops out a portion and tips the viscous dough into the plastic tub; the same one Jakob used to store the starter.

Elisabeth measures out the water and pours it into the kneading bowl. She heaves sacks of flour onto the cart and pushes it towards the machine. A few years ago, to save her back, she bought herself a kneading machine that's a little lower than the old one. Everything else in this room is just the same as it always was.

She lifts a flour sack onto the edge of the kneading bowl, struggling a little, and empties in almost all of it. Then the yeast and finally the salt, to keep the yeast in check.

After she selects the lowest speed, the bowl begins to rotate. The kneading hook moves from side to side and up and down, hardly gripping onto anything to begin with. Flour and water trickle away, and only gradually come together.

Elisabeth glances over at the oven. Her hand reaches for the valve and moves it a few millimetres.

Inside the kneading bowl, the hook turns and pulls the dough in whirling circles. She switches it to the second speed.

As she refills the coffee beans in the bakery, the trickling sound accompanies the drone of the kneading machine. Then the coffee grinder starts up, drowning out everything else.

With just a few deft movements, Elisabeth compacts the ground coffee and turns the pistons on the machine; her other hand has already placed a cup underneath, she presses the button.

While the coffee flows into the cup, Elisabeth leans against the worktop and looks out into the street. A car comes into view, then disappears. She waits for the duration of one cup of coffee to see whether another will pass by. A cat crosses the street and vanishes between two houses.

Elisabeth places the empty cup in the passageway and squints once again into the neon light of the bakery.

The dough is now clinging to the hook. She adds a dash of water, which is swiftly absorbed. Then she turns off the machine, tips the basin and packs the dough into plastic boxes, leaving space for it to rise, and covers the boxes with a linen cloth as though she's tucking them into bed.

That's what she always used to say to Ruth. That her pieces of dough, which she would handle so roughly back when she was a child, were going to sleep in the big "mother dough". Only then does the yeast begin to do its work.

Elisabeth heaves the covered boxes onto the shelf and pulls the next flour sacks onto the cart, then she pushes them to the kneading machine, which will soon contain the squelching dough for the rolls.

She makes her way through the shop with the broom, then mops the floor. She drinks another coffee, and heaves the box containing the dough for the rolls onto the work surface.

For these, she weighs the dough only once a month, more out of curiosity than necessity, to see whether her instinct for the clumps of dough has changed. But she's consistent; never out by more than a few grams.

She cuts the portions, then rounds them in the palm of her hand or rolls them out, bathes some of the dough pieces in brine, lines them up on the slats and leaves them to rise.

Outside, dawn has slowly crept over the horizon. Whenever a lorry goes past, the ground shakes.

Elisabeth peeps into the oven. The embers are radiating a steady, orange glow. Soon, only ashes will remain of the wood.

One last time, Elisabeth heaves boxes onto the cart. She lifts the first cloth. The dough sinks in on itself with a sigh, as though it were exhaling after some great exertion. Elisabeth sighs along with it. It's elastic, like young skin. Her hands plunge into its soft warmth. She stacks pieces of dough onto the scales, adding a little, taking a little away. Part of the weight will get left behind in the oven as steam.

She has heard that some people find dough repulsive, because it looks too much like the human body. Perhaps there's some logic to that—the starter is a living thing, after all. Using the heel of her hand, she shapes the loaves into uniformly-sized spheres, lays them on the trays, piles the trays onto the shelves. She flours the loaves as though she were powdering magnificently-rounded bottoms. Or breasts.

She opens the oven door, then the ash drawer, and sweeps into it the remains of the fire. The metal of the ash valve screeches across the hot stone. Pulling a cloth out of a bucket filled with water, she tosses it in the oven, pushes the hissing and steaming scrap swiftly to and fro, then pulls it out again before it can catch alight.

Bread shovel by bread shovel, she distributes the rolls throughout the oven. As the little balls of dough plump up, a crust forms on them. Once they're the right shade of golden brown,

Elisabeth retrieves them with sweeping hand motions, and places them on the shelves to cool.

She lays out the ingredients for the fillings. The filled rolls are known as *Eingeklemmte* here – something that's been "clamped" between things. She likes the name.

The oven has now reached the correct temperature for the loaves. These develop a crust before they dry out, and are baked through just before their crusts get too dark. Elisabeth etches a quick pattern into the dough, allows the loaves space to rise, and shuts the door after the last one.

She slices gherkins and eggs, spreads butter, cream cheese, mustard and mayonnaise, and generously tops the halved rolls with cheese, ham and salami; this is what her customers come to her for, from far and wide. She arranges the filled rolls on platters and places one after the other into the display in the shop, putting the remaining rolls in the baskets.

Back inside the bakery, Elisabeth sweeps loaf after loaf out of the oven with the bread shovel, using it like an oar. They're not too light, nor too dark; a magnificent brown on top, and lighter on the sides where they were nestled close to one another. If she taps the bottom of a loaf, it sounds hollow.

When she closes the oven and leans the shovel against the wall, silence descends. The only sound is the crackle of the loaves.

She makes another cup of coffee and wipes the sweat from her brow with the tip of her apron.

Elisabeth refills the paper bags and individual papers for the bread. There are still plenty of coffee cups. It's far from ideal, using these disposable cups, but with her small range of merchandise, the coffee really makes a difference in turnover.

The bus appears around the bend and stops in front of the old Post Office. Two or three sleepy-looking silhouettes break away from the bench at the bus stop; a fourth hurries over.

Almost as soon as the bus has disappeared, the street lamps go off. Behind a window on the other side of the street, a light is turned on and then off again. Elisabeth unlocks the shop door.