

Excerpt from a correspondence with the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie. August-October 2007, presented at the Africa-Forum of the Federal President of Germany in Kloster Eberbach 2007.

Happy birthday, dear Chimamanda!

I wouldn't be too concerned about your wrinkles; they're an expression of character, and at thirty you gain "a new wondrous ability...the ability to remember" as Ingeborg Bachmann put it in her brilliant novella *The Thirtieth Year*.

It's raining here, it's becoming Autumn. Since I need a place to store my motorcycle, I looked at what appears to be the only available garage left in Potsdam. It belongs to a garage complex located somewhere between a neighborhood of prefabricated buildings and a man-made lake. The lake was created when they built the freeway here. The freeway connects the 70's GDR prefab houses to the city center, where the dilapidated baroque houses and Art Nouveau buildings have been so perfectly restored, they now look newer than they ever could have in their original form, and now West German celebrities have settled nearby on the Heiligensee (Lake Of Saints). Capsella and Common Rue are growing over the garage complex. The paint is peeling off the gates, and the door to my garage is jammed. The garages were built back in GDR days by the few car owners among the prefab apartment building dwellers; now they're rotting away and don't look much different than they did back then; they're still just as drab and they tell a lively story about death. The whole complex will likely be torn down in 2008. The garages stand on valuable land. When it got so dark that I couldn't tell the difference between the pale light blue of my garage and the pale yellow and green next door anymore, a man came up to me. He wore a cap made of corduroy and was rolling one of those plaid shopping baskets behind him, that's how East and West Germany will remember the men from the GDR from now on, thanks to the film *The Lives of Others*, especially if they were up to no good before the Reunification. He seemed as though he'd always lived here. I started talking to him because we were the only ones on this gray garage terrain, and I thought direct contact might induce a trace of human empathy, but I couldn't understand his answer. He mumbled, chewed his words, finally he got them out, but it sounded distorted. As though he hadn't spoken to anyone in months. Then he disappeared the way he arrived, in the gloomy evening haze.

The man looked like one of those guys they're constantly writing about in the newspapers; at least every time I open them. They're talking about parts of East Germany, rural villages, idyllic landscapes, where there are hardly any jobs to be had. The entire summer, I've been reading articles about a small town in the Uckermark, the articles sounded like reports from a disaster zone: only one woman for every three men.

I read that women are studying and looking for work in the West, North, or South of Germany, they're leaving for the cities as soon as they finish high school, while the men are staying behind. The old men are there anyway, and the young ones barely finish high school. They don't want to leave their row boats behind, nor their workshops and friends, they prefer to stay with their mothers who cook and clean for them; they disappear into the isolated haze of closed shutters, stare at the tube, have no goals, tune-out. Maybe they go and meet their pals in the town square for a beer, in a pub for a beer, nothing but beer. Researchers have been sent into these disaster zones, they compile research reports that explain the difference between male and female inhabitants in percentages, and make connections between the absence of females and the increase in male aggressiveness.

"Men without women", they say, "become alcoholics and right-wing radicals."

Towards the end of the summer, the articles changed; women readers, they suggested, would be treated like queens. If a young woman would go there, three men would immediately turn around when she stepped off the train and shout: "beautiful woman, beautiful woman!" All of the articles had such an unbelievably hysterical undertone that I actually considered going into this disaster zone. As an author, I can work anywhere. And since we, Chimamanda, spoke about our role in society: that would be a major task! I could improve the ratio, and ensure that these men wouldn't turn into skinheads and smash everything to pieces. In a certain sense, I'd be taking the opposite direction on the freeway, driving from restored life into a lively story about death. Many of these regions have been declared as nature reserves, but they ought to be expanded, since for the first time in German history, the lower class in those towns isn't composed of immigrants and women, but primarily of German men. That's why the outrage is so loud. Given the legions of women worldwide, living under the most inhumane conditions, the yell sounds shrill in my ears. Only if men are clearly no longer the pillars, the players, the doers in society, does the outrage take on such catastrophic dimensions. My real problem with my newfound roll however, has to do with something else. Since the consequences of this catastrophe are described with such inevitability—it's considered a fact that men become aggressive without women—and beneath this statement, there lies a certain defiance, not unlike the childish sentence : *That's how I am, I can't do it any other way* – I wouldn't be going there to write. That wasn't my primary task. My first duty, implicitly expected of me, would be to quell the men's aggressiveness; certainly not through literature, but by having the violence remain within our own four walls. I can't get rid of the suspicion that all they need me for is to fill-in for the boys, so they wouldn't feel like the losers anymore.

Ife ojoo na-ato amu.

Recently, I sat with a German writer from Frankfurt at an American Café in Berlin. He told me about a trip he took to the GDR in the 70s. He was mid-50, wore a hanky in his jacket, elegant, self-assured, successful, and as he sat there talking, I wondered whether it would ever occur to him to go to the Uckermark to pacify the men. The GDR had left an indelible mark in his memory. He remembered a place where “decay, mold, and darkness” prevailed. The “snow-covered, pale” landscape had “reminded him of WWII.” It’s a “decay, mold and darkness” that I and many men of the disaster zone were born into.

When you mentioned you were looking for my books in translation, it occurred to me that my West-German colleague’s perception of the GDR corresponds to the American book market’s perception of the whole of Germany. The literature that’s mainly translated into English deals with Fascism and WWII. But perception isn’t something irrefutable, I hope.

Warm wishes,

Antje

translated by Zaia Alexander