

THE FEMALES

Wolfgang Hilbig

Translated by Isabel Fargo Cole
Two Lines Press (\$12.95)

The Females is the fourth Wolfgang Hilbig novella in a series from translator Isabel Fargo Cole and Two Lines Press, following *The Tidings of the Trees* (2018), *Old Rendering Plant* (2017) and *The Sleep of the Righteous* (2015)—texts detailing the psychic changes that a would-be writer undergoes while enduring harsh conditions as a blue-collar worker in East Germany. All of Hilbig's work deals with sexuality as it mutates in response to repression—his protagonists fuck mud puddles (“under the weight of the seething vapors all around something shot out from my body”) and garbage dumps (“Rotten fruit in the trash can, rotten glowing fruit and its wet heat”)—and *The Females* addresses the erotic aftermath of aggression and atrocity.

The scene is a factory housed in a converted concentration camp barracks for women, and, as in Hilbig's other books, the use to



which the surroundings were formerly put determines the main character's perception of what takes place in the present. It is as if his mind contained the “lascivious rhomboids” that the internees scratched onto the walls in their “unauthorized desire” for “love's banal mystery.” Suddenly his hallucinatory gaze takes in a world from which all the women have been removed. He discovers a womanless universe, and everything that's female—whether in it, in himself, or in his

language—haunts and distracts him: “I was no longer able to put a ‘normal’ text on paper, a simple careless description, without strange, overwrought accusations getting mixed in, attempts to compensate for some revolting cowardice of my soul.” The ubiquity and absence of womankind emasculates him, and self-loathing forestalls his attempts to write, to find employment, and to perform the most basic tasks: “I truly felt I'd been shut up in a quivering vagina.” His identity dissolves into phantasmagoria: images of an Earth in decay, and the grammar of a German tongue with no speaker. Indirection and despair possess him, until he happens upon a women's prison and sees the inmates in their yard—whereupon the visions that have been tormenting him appear as what they truly were, a nightmare of history. He proclaims his love for the prisoners.

Apart from the formidable job of rendering Hilbig's long periodic sentences into an English that feels enjoyably artificial in an elevated and literary sort of way, and that recreates his self-lacerating sensibility as something both familiar and strange—a retro Cold War *Unheimlichkeit*, perhaps—Cole lets her sense of world literature have free play, allowing the reader to create for oneself a sense of the position that Hilbig might occupy in an imaginary museum. She does this through a series of allusions to other authors, using the device of mimicry:

- Shakespeare: “It was a castration of the brain, and fair femininity was the forceps they used”
- Dante: “the midpoint of that trajectory that concentrically circled the place where I stood”
- Fitzgerald: “those hills and valleys of ash where a madman stumbled”
- Rimbaud: “in a boat of corrosive grief, unfathomably drifting in aimless circles to stand on the shores of another clime”
- Hopkins: “over the somber cloud-sails' silent race”

Although it's a pleasure to recognize the signals that indicate Hilbig's relationship with certain authors rather than others—which is a sort of domestication, after all, making him more ours than he is perhaps—this should not prevent one from trying to see what makes Hilbig unique. The proletarian criminal women of *The Females* (“they were called *females* because women staffed the guard details”) are the cousins, mothers, aunts, and sisters of the dissident “female target persons” whom agents pursue in Hilbig's novel ‘I’ (also available in English translation by Cole from Seagull Books). One can see Hilbig's subtlety as a diagnostician—his pitiless assessment of his time—in this novel, with its rebels co-opted by bureaucracy and its secretariat full of dissidents: “Disruption, however contradictory it might sound, was the true creativity.”

Hilbig is not likely to become popularly known, as he treats the subject of betrayal without lending it the spurious glamor of a Camus or a Moravia. Still, the author's refusal to base a plot on the bad faith of his society, and the extremely caustic portrayals of his novel, are of a piece, and they cast a light upon the four novellas. In them, Hilbig stands illuminated as someone who saw the interdependent literary worlds of the East and West in their full complexity. He depicted the damage that an inhuman system did to the common individual, and he showed how the machinery of literature actually ran.

— Erik Noonan