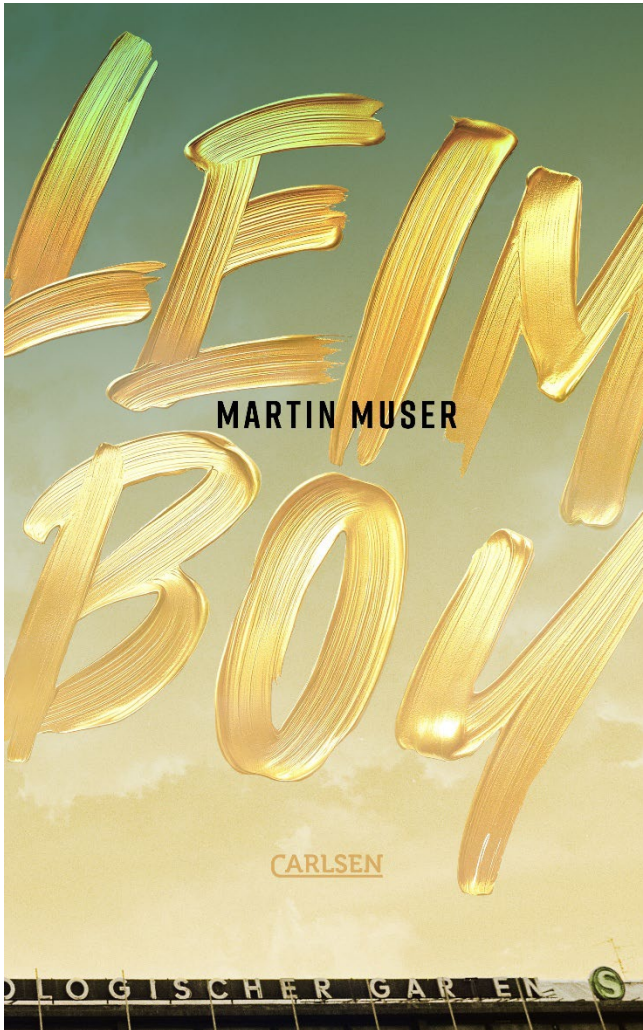


Martin Muser: Shadow Gap

Leimboy

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ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION

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Translation of p.65-77

[...]

Henning had company again. When Robert entered the apartment he heard voices coming out of the room, and shortly afterwards Henning came into the kitchen with a woman. She was almost cocooned in a handknit wool sweater, had more gum than tooth in her smile, and introduced herself as Regina.

Robert immediately placed the familiar dialect: Regina was obviously from Swabia. She was Henning's girlfriend and worked in a left-wing alternative print shop on Oranienstrasse. That was where all the political posters and flyers hanging on the apartment walls had come from. In contrast to Henning, Regina was open and warmly welcoming.

She found it "super interesting" that Robert was doing a carpentry apprenticeship and laughed when he told her about his first attempts at operating the frame saw. She suggested cooking something together, but Henning told her that the two of them really needed to get some more work done, so they disappeared into Henning's room again. Robert stayed in the kitchen and fixed himself a couple of wieners with mashed potatoes and cucumber salad. After a while Regina yelled "Ciao, Robert!" from the hall and he heard her leaving the apartment.

In the workshop, Peter and Jonas assembled the varnished panels of the cupboards. Robert pitched in and handed them the clamps.

Later they took their lunch break with the metalworking apprentices. Jonas was telling them about a punk-rock concert he'd been to when a beat-up Renault 4 pulled into the courtyard. Robert's first thought was that someone had the wrong address. But the car stopped directly in front of them, the door opened and a woman got out.

Jonas whistled softly. "Whoa, who's that...?"

The woman wore cowboy boots and pants with a wide belt. She pushed up her sunglasses. "You guys work in the carpentry shop?"

Jonas, slack-jawed, gawped at the woman's blouse. It was unbuttoned pretty far down, and it shimmered in the sun.

“Yes ma’am, we do.” Peter stood up. “Can we help you?”

The woman had a casually mature, self-assured way about her. The tone of her voice made it clear that she was used to calling the shots. “I phoned a little while ago and said I’d be coming by.”

“Then you must’ve talked to Mr. Kabisch,” Peter said. “He’s the boss.”

The woman gave a slight nod. “He said we could bring the desk right away.” She pointed to the Renault.

“I’ll let him know.” Peter disappeared.

Micha and Chrille also got up and left.

The woman went to the car. The back of it was covered with bumper stickers. Nuclear power - no thanks ... Make love not war ... the female gender symbol with a fist. “You guys are more than welcome to help.” She opened the hatch. “Nova, you too.” She sounded slightly annoyed.

Robert, following Jonas to the car, saw the passenger door swing open. He hadn’t even realized that there was someone else in there. The person got out and Robert stopped short, dumbfounded.

It was the woman from the train.

Robert stared at her, scarcely able to believe it. But it was her. No doubt. The way she held her head, the eyes, the mouth. Robert’s heart pounded. What a crazy coincidence!

With a blank face, she walked over to the driver, who was now pulling a woolen blanket off a bulky piece of furniture lying on its side in the back of the car.

Robert tried to catch the woman’s eye. Didn’t she recognize him?

“That thing is heavy,” said the driver. “The two of us were barely able to get it in there.”

It was an old secretary desk. Someone had painted it sky blue. It was a rather amateurish job; the coat was uneven and chipping off on the edges.

“Hey, she’s a beaut...” Jonas grabbed the desk’s legs and pulled it forward slightly.

Robert was still standing there as if hypnotized. He stared at the woman, waiting for some kind of reaction. But she didn’t even seem to notice him. Same as on the train.

“Get a move on!” Jonas’ harsh command broke Robert’s trance. “Gimme a hand here!”

Together they hauled the secretary out of the car and carefully set it down. Like an abandoned foal it stood there in the courtyard, the light blue now looking even more absurd.

Uncertainly, Robert again looked over at the passenger, who was fidgeting with her hair as if this whole thing was none of her concern.

So her name was Nova. And the driver was her mother?

Only a month ago they’d been sitting across from each other in the train compartment. Could it really be that she’d totally forgotten about him?

Or was he mistaken and this wasn’t the same woman?

She’d taken a little pouch of tobacco out of her purse and rolled herself a cigarette. On her wrist glowed the orange plastic watch he remembered from the train.

“Hey, you sure didn’t waste any time!” Kabisch came out of the workshop with Peter and greeted the driver. Then, brow creased, he walked over to the secretary. “So here’s the prized piece. Hmmm.”

Kabisch gave it a gentle test shake, scrutinized it from top to bottom on all sides and scratched his thumbnail over the paint.

Nova had Jonas give her a light. The sleeveless shirt, the tight-fitting striped jeans and the high-top basketball shoes made her seem younger than she had on the train.

The driver explained to Kabisch that the secretary was a family heirloom and they wanted it restored. “There’s a lot of history in it.”

“No problem,” said Kabisch. “We can do it. First we’ll have to strip off all the paint. Then re-glue the joints, repair the veneer, sand it, then either varnish or oil it.”

The woman looked at her daughter questioningly. “I’m for an oil finish. What about you?”

“I don’t care.” Shrugging, Nova streamed smoke from her lungs. “Whatever looks better.”

Her voice, too, was the one Robert remembered from the train. He didn’t get it: How was it possible that she didn’t recognize him? Had she forgotten all about him? Or maybe she just didn’t want to recognize him? For whatever reason.

“And can you give me an estimate on how much all this is going to cost?” the woman asked.

“Weelll,” Kabisch began, his gaze drifting down to her chest. “You’ll have to figure on 800 marks.”

That seemed like an exorbitant amount to Robert.

The woman didn’t bat an eye. “If that’s a fair price.”

“200 marks down. The rest on pick-up or delivery.”

The woman drew two 100-mark notes from her wallet and handed them to Kabisch.

“We’ll call as soon as we’re finished,” he said in closing.

The woman threw Nova a look and walked to the car. Nova stubbed out the cigarette with her foot and followed her.

Kabisch, Peter, Jonas and Robert watched as the Renault went jouncing out of the courtyard.

“Hoo boy, sure wouldn’t mind a few more customers like that!” Kabisch remarked. “Easy on the eyes.”

Jonas puffed out his cheeks. “Phew, the lady’s hot all right. And that little girlie of hers...” He clicked his tongue.

Robert listened to the exchange with only one ear. He was still searching for an explanation, and the comments made by the others reverberated in him like a muffled echo of his own desire.

Kabisch had no further interest in the secretary. Furniture restoration was not his specialty. And anyway, he always had the others do the grunt work.

This time Robert was more than happy to do it. The secretary was his link to her. To Nova. What a name! He could still hardly believe that their paths had crossed once more, that on a second occasion they'd been in the same place at the same time. It felt like a twist of fate. And the secretary desk was his guarantee that they'd meet again. At the very latest when the desk was picked up or delivered. And maybe then she'd recognize him, or he'd screw up the courage to ask her.

Stripping the paint was a nasty job. Robert had to wear gloves and goggles to avoid acid burns. A thick layer of caustic, strong-smelling gel was applied with a brush. That softened the paint and made it bubble up and wrinkle like old skin. Then Robert took a trowel and scraped off all the limp shreds of paint, bit by bit.

He wondered if Nova had been the one to paint the secretary. Maybe when she was in her rebellious teenager phase, when eye-popping bright blue was more appealing than antique wood.

Peter, who knew a lot about old furniture, guided Robert through the individual work stages. He also explained how you could tell that the secretary was from the Biedermeier era. The reddish hue of cherrywood was revealed beneath the paint.

"Look at the pattern of that veneer." Peter indicated the front of the secretary. "How it stretches all the way from the base to the crown. That's true craftsmanship."

Robert regarded the pattern and understood what Peter meant. The inside of the secretary was also elaborately constructed. Behind the hinged panel

were several trays and drawers that were topped by a little gable, like a Greek temple. The paint in the corners and crevices was particularly stubborn. Robert had to scrape it all out by hand and sandpaper the surfaces. Peter showed him how. "Always with the grain."

After two days Peter hadn't even finished a quarter of it. The whole time his thoughts circled unceasingly around Nova and the question of why she hadn't recognized him. Most likely she hadn't even noticed him in the train compartment and that's why his face hadn't lodged in her memory - as opposed to hers in his. So what reason did he have to even hope he could somehow still attract her attention? Robert sighed. His arms and hands ached from the repeated motions of sanding.

Peter came over to him in their lunch hour. "Don't ya wanna take a break and kick the ball around with us for a while?" But Robert wanted to keep going. Kabisch had an appointment somewhere and wouldn't be coming back that afternoon. So Robert could work in peace.

While he was sweeping up the shop at closing time, his gaze once again lingered on the pin-up. The thought of how Kabisch had caught him looking at it immediately made him flush once more. This time, too, the sight of it excited him. Robert recalled the grubby porn magazines that Steffen Ludewig used to show around after school. His parents had the newspaper shop at the train station, and Steffen would sneak the magazines out. Robert found the fleshy pictures repulsive. Still, some of them burrowed so deep into his memory that for weeks he couldn't get them out of his head, always seeing them in his mind's eye whenever he masturbated.

Again he looked at the pin-up and wondered why he liked this picture so much. Was it the woman's appearance, her expression, her figure? The way the camera looked at her? Or her look, which seemed to go right through the lens to him, awakening his desire as well as the feeling of being desired?

Maybe, Robert thought, that was why Nova hadn't recognized him. Because for her he was more or less invisible ... as a man ... inexperienced as he was.

Robert thought about the 50 marks Kabisch had given him, lying in his pencil case at home. In the meantime he'd found out where and what the Chacha was. A bar in the Gitschiner Strasse whose windows glowed red. He'd ridden by it often.

The telephone rang. Robert didn't intend to answer, but when it wouldn't quit he went into Kabisch's cubbyhole of an office and lifted up the receiver. It was Gitti. Her voice sounded friendly. "Ah, the new apprentice. Am I right, young man?" She wanted to know if Dietmar was still there.

Robert reported that Kabisch had had a few out-of-house appointments that day and was planning to go home directly afterwards.

"Oh, that's right! I'd completely forgotten about that. I'm such a scatterbrain. He'll be coming through the door any minute now, I'm sure." She thanked Robert and hung up. Slowly he let the receiver sink back down. It felt odd to be standing here all alone in Kabisch's realm. Like an intruder in a prohibited zone. Robert looked around. The shelves full of ring binders, the table covered with papers. Next to the calculator lay the book of commissions.

Robert hesitated. Stealing a side glance, he made sure he was really alone. Then he picked up the book and opened it. Kabisch had neatly noted and dated each commission. Robert paged through to the last entries and found what he was looking for: Secretary desk, antique, strip old paint, sand, re-glue, repair, oil-based finish. Below that Kabisch had written the address and telephone number of the customer: Sybil Arnim, Fraenkelufer 8, 1000 Berlin 36, 691196.

The next day Kabisch was again in an especially bad mood. The cupboards were scheduled for delivery, so he'd stayed sober. Robert helped load the pieces.

When one of the shelves slipped out of his hands, Kabisch shoved him away and yelled at him.

“Watch what you’re doing, you moron! – Like I said: This kid’s a walking disaster!”

Peter quickly picked up the shelf and in a low voice said it would be better if Robert continued his work on the secretary. Robert was glad when the truck rolled out of the courtyard.

When Kabisch, Peter and Jonas returned in the afternoon, Kabisch seemed to be in a better mood. The installation had gone well and Kabisch retreated into his cubbyhole.

Toward evening a surprise visitor entered the workshop. Robert was just sweeping up when he heard a cheery “Hey there! How’s it goin’?” behind him.

He turned around and looked into the friendly face of a rosy-cheeked woman. She waved briefly in the direction of the cubbyhole and smiled at Robert. “Nice that we finally get to see each other in person. I’m Gitti.”

Robert looked at Gitti in surprise. Somehow he’d pictured her totally differently. Gitti had the face of a doll, and everything on her was pleasingly plump: face, bosom, rear end, calves. In contrast to Kabisch, there was nothing coarse about her. And she’d obviously dressed up. She wore a black dress with sequins and red pumps. In one hand she was holding a clothes hanger with a suit draped in plastic wrap and in the other a pair of black loafers.

Peter, who’d been in the back changing into his street clothes, came up to the front. “And Peter’s still here, too!” Gitti beamed at him.

Peter made a slight bow. “Wow. You look great! What’s the occasion?”

Gitti told them that she and Kabisch had theater tickets. Harald Juhnke was starring in the comedy on the Kurfürstendamm. “I’ve been looking forward to it all year!”

Kabisch finally emerged from his cubbyhole and took the things from Gitti. "Then I guess I'll get gussied up, too." He disappeared in the direction of the restroom.

Peter and Robert, not quite sure what to do, just stood there. Gitti mentioned that she'd seen Juhnke seven times already and checked her make-up in her compact mirror.

Kabisch returned in his suit. He'd gelled his hair back. "Ooh! Don't you look sharp! You should wear a suit more often, Dietmar!" Gitti planted a kiss on his cheek.

Kabisch grumbled something and said that they'd better get a move on. Gitti took his arm and winked at Peter and Robert as she left. "See ya later!"

Through the window, Robert saw how Kabisch said something to her as they walked across the courtyard. It didn't look very friendly and Gitti dropped her head.

On Friday Robert again had classes at the vocational school, and when he changed trains at Bismarck Strasse he saw Nasrin, the sleepyhead, in the same car. She had headphones on and was leaning her head against the window. Robert nodded at her and wasn't certain she'd noticed him. But she smiled and moved her bag off the seat next to her. "Hi."

She turned off the Walkman and took off the headphones.

"We're in the same class at the vocational school," Robert clarified, sitting down.

"You're the guy from Kreuzberg," Nasrin said.

Robert nodded. "And you're the girl from the cabinetmaker's shop. Is that a good place to work?"

Nasrin looked at him with her eyebrows raised. "Are you joking?"

Robert understood. "Oh, guess not, then?"

Nasrin shook her head. "It's bad enough as a woman. It's even worse when your name is Nasrin and you look like me."

"Sorry ..." Robert didn't want to say anything wrong.

Nasrin laughed loudly. "It's nothing you have to be sorry about. They can't even get it through their heads that I'm Persian, not Turkish. Most people haven't a clue as to what the difference is ..."

Robert confessed he wasn't so sure himself. Nasrin explained to him that she and her parents had come from Tehran to Germany and she'd grown up in Bottrop. After finishing school she'd taken off to West Berlin.

"I was so tired of all those narrow-minded West Germans. Although the narrow-minded West Berliners aren't any better."

Nasrin's directness impressed Robert, but he also found it a little intimidating. Compared to her, he was super boring and ordinary.

Once again, Nasrin spent most of the lesson time with her head resting on her arms. Robert was bored and filled the margins of the worksheet with sketches.

After class he and Nasrin took the U-Bahn back together and gossiped about the teachers and the other apprentices.

Nasrin told him about her cabinetmaker's shop. Robert told her about Kabisch and his moodiness. And about the Biedermeier secretary he was working on.

Nasrin thought that the old furniture was much nicer than the new. And the pieces she liked least were those built in her shop. "They're all ugly as sin." As soon as she was able, she wanted to make her own things. Or join the theater and work on the stage sets. "That would be so cool."

Robert was astounded that Nasrin spoke so openly about everything with him. He wasn't used to that, and it felt nice. He asked if they could exchange phone numbers, and they wrote the numbers on the back of each other's hand.

When Nasrin got out at Eisenacher Strasse, she flashed him the peace sign. “See ya.”

Delighted, Robert smiled. It was exactly how he’d always imagined life in Berlin: constantly meeting people, making new friends and having good conversations.

[...]

English translation by Rebecca Heier