

Three Poems

Sarah Kirsch

trans. Abigail Wender

Sarah Kirsch grew up in communist East Germany (GDR),

as did many of her generation's distinguished post-World War II writers. In her early poems, she explored traditional lyric subjects—love, nature, and loss—and began soon to express her more non-conformist social and political views, albeit indirectly, coming into conflict with GDR authorities. Nevertheless her poetry garnered numerous prizes early in her career, including honors from Western Germany—the Heinrich-Heine Prize for *Zaubersprüche* (1973), her third volume, and the Petrarch Prize for *Rüchenwind* (1976), her fourth. Before her death, she had published more than thirteen volumes of poetry in addition to translations, prose, novels, and children's stories, garnering The Austrian State Prize for Literature, the Friedrich Hölderlin Prize, and the Georg Büchner Prize, among the most notable.

Born Ingrid Bernstein on April 4, 1935 in the Southern Harz region, she changed her name from Ingrid to Sarah while still a teenager in protest against the anti-Semitism rampant after World War II. Changing her name certainly must have tweaked her elders. In 1938, a law had required all Jews to change their official names by signing all correspondence and records with “new” Jewish names. Every woman was given the name “Sarah” and every man was called “Israel.” Kirsch graduated with a degree in biology from the university of Halle, studied literature at the university of Leipzig, where she was married briefly to Rainer Kirsch, and began earning a living as a writer and translator.

By 1968 her writing had grown increasingly less acceptable to authorities and she came under suspicion of the state. At the East Berlin Writers' Congress in 1969, the poem “Schwarze Bohnen” was attacked for its nontraditional form (no rhyme, no meter, no punctuation), as well as for its subjective subject matter. In “Ich wollte meinen König töten,” a subversive, feminist poem, Kirsch managed

to address a personal breakup (a marriage one suspects) and also allude to political rebellion and the disintegration of government. After Kirsch joined a group of dissidents protesting the expulsion of writer and singer Wolf Biermann in 1976, she was thrown out of the Writer's Union. She was granted an exit visa in 1977, initially moving to West Berlin. After she left the GDR, Kirsch traveled and taught extensively, making her home in a remote village in Schleswig-Holstein, where she remained until her death on May 5, 2013.

Schwarze Bohnen

Nachmittags nehme ich ein Buch in die Hand
Nachmittags lege ich ein Buch aus der Hand
Nachmittags fällt mir ein es gibt Krieg
Nachmittags vergesse ich jedweden Krieg
Nachmittags mahle ich Kaffee
Nachmittags setze ich den zermahlenden Kaffee
Rückwärts zusammen schöne
Schwarze Bohnen
Nachmittags ziehe ich mich aus mich an
Erst schminke dann wasche ich mich
Singe bin stumm

Black Coffee Beans

Afternoons I take a book in hand
Afternoons I put down the book in hand
Afternoons it occurs to me there's also a war
Afternoons I forget about all war
Afternoons I grind fresh coffee
Afternoons I put the ground coffee
Back together, beautiful
Black beans
Afternoons I dress myself naked
First make-up my face, then unmake it
Sing, am silent

Ich wollte meinen König töten

Ich wollte meinen König töten
Und wieder frei sein. Das Armband
Das er mir gab, den einen schönen Namen
Legte ich ab und warf die Worte
Weg die ich gemacht hatte: Vergleiche
Für seine Augen die Stimme die Zunge
Ich baute leergetrunkene Flaschen auf
Füllte Explosives ein—das sollte ihn
Für immer verjagen. Damit
Die Rebellion vollständig würde
Verschloß ich die Tür, ging
Unter Menschen, verbrüdete mich
In verschiedenen Häusern—doch
Die Freiheit wollte nicht groß werden
Das Ding Seele dies bourgeoise Stück
Verharrte nicht nur, wurde milder
Tanzte wenn ich den Kopf
An gegen Mauern rannte. Ich ging
Den Gerüchten nach im Lande die
Gegen ihn sprachen, sammelte
Drei Bände Verfehlungen eine Mappe
Ungerechtigkeiten, selbst Lügen
Führte ich auf. Ganz zuletzt
Wollte ich ihn einfach verraten
Ich suchte ihn, den Plan zu vollenden
Küßte den anderen, daß meinem
König nichts widerführe.

I Wanted to Kill My King

I wanted to kill my king
and be free again. The bracelet
he gave me, the one with the lovely name
I left it behind and threw away the words
I had made: Similes
for his eyes, voice, tongue
I arranged empty bottles
filled them with explosives—that ought
to chase him away forever. To finish
the rebellion utterly
I locked the door behind me, mingled
among the people, sought
friends in various houses—yet
freedom would not grow
This thing, Soul, the bourgeois part
not only remained, it mellowed
danced while I ran head long
into a wall. I went around the realm
investigated the rumors against him, collected
three volumes of misconduct, a folder
of injustice, his lies
I myself compiled the list. In the end
I simply wanted to betray him
I sought him out to complete the plan
kissed a different man, that my king
nothing would befall.

Bei den weißen Stiefmütterchen

Bei den weißen Stiefmütterchen
im Park wie ers mir auftrug
stehe ich unter der Weide
ungekämmte alte blattlos
siehst du sagt sie er kommt nicht
Ach sage ich er hat sich den Fuß
gebrochen eine Gräte verschluckt, eine Straße
wurde plötzlich verlegt oder
er kann seiner Frau nicht entkommen
viele Dinge hindern uns Menschen
Die Weide wiegt sich und knarrt
kann auch sein er ist schon tot
sah blaß aus als er dich untern Mantel küßte
kann sein Weide kann sein
so wollen wir hoffen er liebt mich nicht mehr

Near the White Violets

Near the white violets
in the park where he asked me to meet
I stand under the willow
Unkempt aging leafless
You see, she says, he's not coming
Oh, I say, he's broken his foot
he swallowed a fishbone, a street
has suddenly vanished or
he can't escape his wife.
All of us struggle with so many things
The willow sways and creaks,
Could be that he's already dead
looked pale when he kissed you beneath the cloak
Could be, Willow, could be
so let's hope he loves me no more