

THE BERLINER

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HOW TO HAVE FUN IN BERLIN WITHOUT BREAKING THE BANK

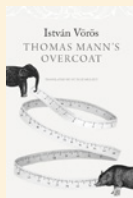


The Gorgeous Inertia of the Earth

Adrian Duncan

Serpent's Tail

Adrian Duncan is a man who knows his angles. Having previously worked as an engineer and visual artist, the Irish-born Berliner comes to literature with a unique sense for the geometry of life – for the distances, vantage points, and tricks of perspective that rule our relationships to each other and our pasts. His fiction features melancholic draughtsmen, mid-century bog-drainers, legendary bridge-builders and mathematicians on the run. His latest novel, a diptych, continues this literary experiment with space. The first half sees John, a wounded Irish statue-repairer on a work trip in an unnamed city, falling in love with an Italian woman while facing a repressed memory from his Catholic youth. In the second half, set 10 years later, the two are distractedly cohabiting when John finds out an old friend, now dying, has requested that he pray for her. But John has not prayed for years. Frantic, he roams the churches of Bologna, interrogating their silent stony statues – and having increasingly outlandish visions. Here Duncan, ever the geometer, has written an intriguing story about the spatial reasoning of intimacy: how lovers carve out space together, how reticent people bend or break, and how you can begin to see someone in a totally new light. – **Alexander Wells**

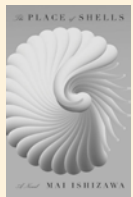


Thomas Mann's Overcoat

Istvan Vörös (trans. Ottilie Mulzet)

Seagull Books

In interwar Munich, the writer Thomas Mann becomes embroiled in a supernatural conflict with his tailor, Klaus, who may have sold his soul to the devil. In rural Hungary, a boy named Marci Tamás is haunted by an ugly coat and invisible elephant that wants to take his place in the family. Another elephant invites Hannibal, the Carthaginian general, to desert the invasion of Rome to search for woolly mammoths. Surreal, speculative, bizarre fiction has become a forte of the former Communist bloc, made popular in English by the likes of László Krasznahorkai and Vladimir Sorokin. Istvan Vörös' novel is a new Hungarian entry in this grand tradition. Everything here folds back in on itself – Thomas M. and M. Tamás, devils and elephants, the real and unreal – giving the book a vigor reminiscent of one of those unsettling dreams you have right before your morning alarm goes off. Even so, Vörös manages to outdo the subconscious: I've never before dreamed of Hannibal transforming into a giant monument to have sex with the passing clouds. – **Mathilde Montpetit**



The Place of Shells

Mai Ishizawa (trans. Polly Barton)

New Directions

A Japanese art history grad student in the German university town of Göttingen heads to the train station in the depths of the Covid-19 pandemic to meet an unusual visitor: Nomiya, an old college acquaintance, who happens to have been dead for nearly a decade after being swept away in the catastrophic Tōhoku tsunami. But his spectral apparition doesn't provide an expected narrative impulse: this is no ghost story, but rather a loose meditative journey through the narrator's psyche. There's startlingly little concern with the mechanics of Nomiya's apparent resurrection, and as he builds a new life in Göttingen he mostly seems real enough (no floating through walls, no attempted hauntings). His ghostliness manifests as psychodrama, as the narrator struggles to comprehend how this "castaway from the past spread through my mind like a bleeding stair". She questions her own feelings, but rarely the bizarre, unprecedented and seemingly impossible events surrounding her. The prose – in Polly Barton's translation from Japanese – is meandering and poetic, dotted with some lovely passages but can be overwrought. In its finest moments, Ishizawa's novel captures the surreal feeling of a world abruptly transformed in utterly unfathomable ways: by a natural disaster, by a global pandemic, by death. – **Bryn Stole**

Curious and Curiouser

Cabinet magazine has landed in Berlin after 25 years.

Cabinet is one of the world's best and most beloved small magazines. Founded in 2000 by the editor and curator Sina Najafi, the Brooklyn-based nonprofit began with the publication of a quarterly print magazine that brought together visual art, design, literature, history of science and intellectual history in an ambitious and irreverent style. *Cabinet* also became known for its legendary exhibitions, events and art projects. (They have, for instance: put themselves on trial for a lack of political commitment, bought and begun documenting a half-acre of land in New Mexico named 'Cabinetlandia', and made headlines with a self-declared "absurdist multimedia spectacle of competitive, real-time art making" named Iron Artist.) In recent years, *Cabinet* has shifted its magazine arm online while diving further into book publishing, releasing both standalone titles and series. They have also opened an office in Berlin, which is where Najafi works along with managing editor Hunter Dukes and a small editorial team.

So, 25 years of publishing *Cabinet*! Does the anniversary make you reflect on past triumphs?

Sina Najafi: Yes and no. We're a very un-nostalgic organisation, and we try not to think about our successes so much – but our failures do obsess us (laughs). When we do that retroactive glance, it's usually to look at things that have changed for the worse, as opposed to things that have changed for the better. The magazine has changed a lot since Issue One. The first few issues were more feral, more ram-bunctious, maybe funnier. Less – what's the word we want here? – less well-edited, that's for sure. But it had a kind of energy to it, which came out of ignorance and not caring. There weren't many readers, and that liberated us.



Hunter Dukes and Sina Najafi

Hunter Dukes: There is still a big throughline, though. I first started reading the magazine a decade ago, when I was in graduate school – and *Cabinet* was the first place where I saw the kind of scholarship that I found interesting being presented in a journalistic, highly-fact-checked style. And I think we're still doing that very well.

How would you describe the magazine's mission?

HD: *Cabinet* has always had a way of finding unusual points of entry into certain issues. Editorially, one of the principles we hold is that curiosity can be a form of ethics – and that paying close attention to smaller phenomena often yields insights, points of entry and portals into things that we didn't know would be revealed.

Is that what the name is from – as in *Wunderkammer*?

SN: The cabinet of curiosities is certainly one of the references. As is the kind of cabinet that you just see in someone's house and you open it and there's all kinds of shit in there, you know? As a graduate student, I read an interview with Michel Foucault where he talks about curiosity as a political tool, curiosity as something that disregards all the lines that police the world and that make it come into being the way it is. Curiosity would be the thing that, if unbound, would completely disregard those lines, and make you understand that the world was *made* to come into being this way – so it can also be *unmade*. The world doesn't have to be this way. So curiosity, to us, is not just dabbling or diletantism, but an ethical practice that can undo our certainties about the world.

How did the move to Berlin come about?

SN: It started because I personally wanted to leave the United States. I didn't

know Berlin well, but I had some friends here who told me about what was happening, and the city seemed interesting. My wife and I moved here in 2017. Some of the artists we knew were still in Berlin here then – but it was also that, because of the Arab Spring, there were a lot of Arab intellectuals, filmmakers and artists coming here as well. And that seemed very, very exciting to see and to learn from. We had an event space and office for five years, plus a little team. And now this is sort of our major office, because there are more people working here than [in the US]. Berlin has been illuminating in lots of ways – some of it negatively, as well. The international scene here is incredible. But what's happened in the last year and a half, since October 2023, has been crushing.

What are your goals this year?

HD: We're going to be collaborating more with other smaller Berlin magazines – like *The Diasporist*, which just launched. We're hoping to start an event series with them moving forward. I like that about Berlin. It seems, compared to other cities, that collaborations like this can happen with relatively low friction. You can will them into existence a bit more. And we had a book fair last year called Too Hot to Read, a joint project with the publisher K. Verlag. We're going to do another one this summer, I believe.

SN: We are also looking for an event space, at the moment, possibly to share. In Berlin – especially in the past year and a half since the assault on Gaza, the funding issues, and the way those funding issues have been directed at certain kinds of organisations – it means that a lot of spaces you thought were open really cannot discuss a whole bunch of very important political and cultural issues now. So a big project for this year is to start thinking about an event space, a dedicated space, that we can really make active. As Hunter said, collaboration is such an important part of the Berlin scene. It can be a pain in the ass, but it's also a wonderful thing. Working at a magazine is very monastic, you know, sitting there and every so often grunting some words to each other. Having events is the way that all that work, and all those connections, get actualised in an interesting way.

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