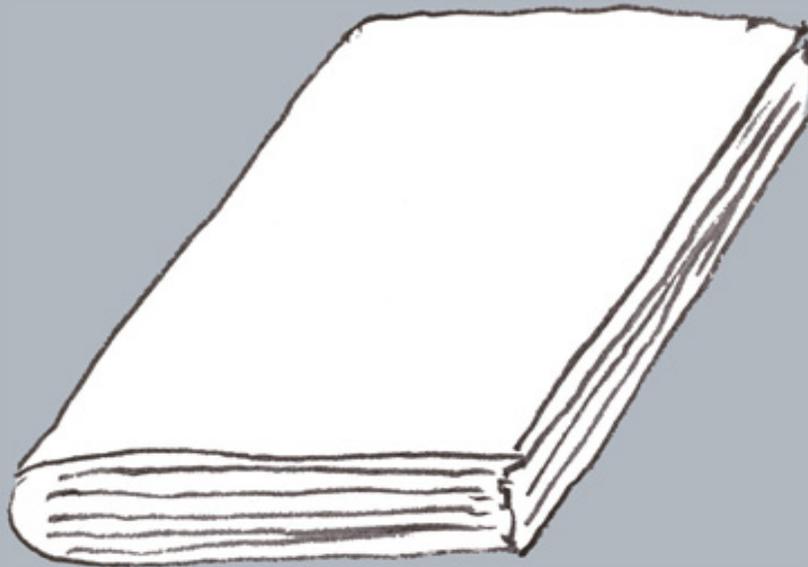


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**The Smallest Gallery
in the World**



Short Stories

Photographs

Translated from the German by Katharina Debney.

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How Everything Began

It was not as if I had been born writing. Although it is an appealing image how I, shortly after my birth, strengthened by my first meal from my mother's breast, started to describe my journey through life so far: the nine months in the belly of my mother, swimming in this increasingly shrinking ocean, the sudden earth quakes, the flood waves, the suction, the sliding, being pressed, emerging, gasping for air, screaming.

As I lay in my crib, seemingly fast asleep, I could hardly wait for my mother to leave the room. I opened my eyes, grabbed the little notebook and the pencil stub, which I had both skillfully hidden at the edge of my tiny mattress - and began to work. I described how I felt, my relationship to my mother, who provided me with milk, smiled at me, talked to me, sang lullabies to me, cleaned my bum. But, unfortunately, I cannot find the «Book of the First Weeks» anymore. Maybe my mother, horrified, made it disappear. Who would want a precocious baby. If I ask her about it today, she says I am dreaming, that I had always had a vivid imagination.

I do remember the leaves on the tree swinging in the wind in front of our house very clearly, though. My mother had put me outside in the pram. I lay on my back and looked up to the swaying roof of leaves, behind which the sun flashed into view time and again. But did I know anything about trees, let alone maples, did I know what leaves are, what the sun is? Did I know what colors were, to what they belong, what they mean? Did I have a notion of photosynthesis, of sun and moon phases, did I recognize the

woodpecker by its knock, the dog by its bark, the horse by its neighing? I could not talk yet, could not name to these things, just watched the spectacle in front of me impartially. And when my mother returned to fetch me, the things around me changed during my short trip in the pram back to the house. Other shapes appeared, it grew darker and then lighter again. And at night, when I lay in my little bed, a bright ray, a beam of light, darted through my room ever so often, grew and shrank, accompanied by a rattling noise. It came from the tractors of the farmers who took the fresh cans of milk to the dairy. But did I know what farmers or even tractors are?

When I think about my early childhood, the smell of cow dung and hay, of motor oil and sawdust, of white coffee and lard comes into my nose.

I hear the snorting of Max and Moritz, our two chestnut horses, whose nearly white manes used to fascinate me. Like billowing sails. But did I know what a sailing ship was, had I ever seen one? I suspect not even my father, who had never been to the sea until then, could have explained to me what comprised a windjammer, schooner or clipper, let alone what topmasts, yards, shrouds or rigging are. Our farm was not at the waterfront, was not bordered by shores, but lay deep in land, embedded in gentle hills. Here, the wind did not blow up waves as high as houses, but turned to the woods, which it transformed into a terribly raging sea during the autumn storms.

During the summer, the two horses were often restless, stamping their feet and swishing their tails, annoyed with the horse flies. To keep away these creatures, my father had hung a small bucket with a black liquid around their necks, which had a disgusting smell. Sometimes, my father lifted me onto the back of one of the horses, which he then led by the halter in a circle in the area in front of the barn. I actually sat on the broad and warm back of a horse, a proud rider. From up there, the world looked completely different.

Whilst my older siblings already went across the woods on their way to the school in the village, the woods became my home. I knew the clayey slope down to the stream, the smell of stagnant water, I knew the shallow places where large yellow flowers with huge leaves grew. There, I could cross the stream without problems. I also knew the dry places, such as the one under the ancient fir tree, whose branches reached down to the ground. There, I could not be seen, nobody could find me. When I strode through the woods and a deer came into view, when the sun conjured a playful dance of light and shadow through the twigs and leaves of the beeches onto the forest floor or when the rain produced a quiet melody, I was in a space where my innermost being and my surroundings had become strangely permeable, as if there were no real boundaries.

The Gallerist

Twenty-five years later. A cup of green tea steamed in front of me, when the phone rang.

«Would you like to exhibit your work in my gallery?» the gallerist, who was not entirely unknown to me, inquired. I hesitated. «I'm an author. You should know that.»

«But your last novels included quite a number of photos.»

«Oh, those. Sometimes I take snaps. When something catches my attention. They're just sketches, miniatures, like ink drawings.»

«And it is exactly these that I would very much like to present in my gallery. What size are the prints?»

«The prints?»

«The enlargements. You know what I mean?»

«There aren't any. The photographs only exist in the books. That is all there is.»

The gallerist persisted. «You should definitely have them enlarged, frame them to make them more impressive.»

«No, thank you very much», I responded, «I already have a gallery.»

«How come?» he inquired skeptically.

«Just a gallery».

I could sense through the phone that he was growing impatient.

«And might it have a name?»

«A name? No, not really. It is very new. But if you insist: Let's just call it Gallery Nameless.»

«Gallery Nameless? Aha. You are trying to take the mickey, aren't you?»

«That was not my intention.»

«I have never heard of such a gallery.»

«That is not surprising. It is rather small.»

«Big or small, that is not the issue. I definitely know all galleries in Eastern Switzerland. And probably most galleries in the whole of Switzerland from my own experience. And I have never heard of a Gallery Nameless.»

«And if this gallery was not in Switzerland?»

«Really? Well, I mean, if you already have a gallery abroad, it is high time to present your work here in Switzerland too. It would be ideal in my gallery.

«You don't quite understand. I didn't say I had a gallery abroad. Neither did I say it was in Switzerland. It is - how can I explain - rather mobile.»

«In a train, a car or an airplane?» he asked curiously.

«No, no. You have to look at it from a different perspective. My gallery can be everywhere. In Zurich, in Paris, in New York. If you like, even in La Chaux-de-Fonds, in Siberia, in Timbuktu. Or in the deepest jungle in Africa, in the middle of the Sahara, on Mount Everest, in Space in a space station or in a submarine deep down in the ocean or ...»

«That has just the ring of Jules Verne. In my opinion a little too unrealistic», the gallerist interrupted.

«No, not at all», I replied. «If it is more to your liking, my gallery could even be in the apple tree in your garden directly in front of your gallery. You are looking too far away. It is all much closer than you think.»

«Now please hold on. You are pulling my leg?»

«As I said. That is not my intention», I tried again to reassure him.

I could hear him taking a deep breath.

«Ok. Let's try again. What is this gallery of yours?»

«Very simple. The book is my gallery.»

«The book is your gallery?» he repeated, amused. «You can't be serious!»

«I am absolutely serious», I affirmed.

«And is this gallery not a little too cramped?»

«Not at all», I gave back, «if you take the pages as walls, it has more walls than any gallery I can imagine.»

«But a book is just a book and nothing else.»

«That might be so for you.»

«But, apart from the text, a book just has illustrations, reproductions, no original photos, vintage prints, if you see what I mean. I think you are mistaken», he tried to instruct me.

«Not at all. When contemplating pictures, what happens is mainly in your head, right?» I explained. «The image itself is just the trigger».

«Of course, but you can see far more details in an oil painting than in the copy. The quality of the color, the sheen, brushstrokes. Not to mention sculptures and installations. The same goes for photographs.»

«In my book gallery, though, you can get very close to the picture. You can even look at it with a magnifying glass. Furthermore - in contrast to customary galleries and museums - there is no one blocking your view. No one smells of wine, garlic, sweat, no one is lecturing loudly about art. You also don't have to listen to conversations about emergency operations, cooking recipes, child education, different kinds of Belgian beer, high- and low-pressure areas, suicide rates, bestselling authors, erection problems, price of oil for heating, national defense, incontinence, make-up sets, mothers-in-law, football games, women's underwear, rose-growing and such like. No one is fidgeting in front of you with their smartphone. What's more: once you are in my gallery, you can make yourself comfortable, you can loll around in your armchair, listen to music and, if you enjoy it, sip some whisky, single malt if you prefer, nibble some nuts, whatever you want. Or you can smoke: cigarettes, cigars, hooka, hashish, opium.»

«So you're encouraging me to take drugs.»

«That was just an example of what the visitors to my gallery can do. Of course, I am not responsible for any legal issues.»

I could sense it through the phone. Words failed the gallerist.

«After all, that is the great advantage of my private gallery», I continued.

«And who do you present in such a small space? Fleas and ants?» he asked amused.

«Up until now I have presented Michael Bodmer, Anna Derungs, Lucia Derungs, Gregor Martin, Silk Mc Thompson, Anselm Kahn, Juan Ramón Silva de Cervantes, amongst others. But in future, I would like to concentrate on my own work.»

«Which you will exhibit exclusively in your own book gallery? That's not right. You should present your work in a different, official gallery and not in your own.»

«To be honest, the book is not my gallery but that of my publisher.»

«And does he know of this fine difference?»

«Not really. I should talk to him about it some time.»

«But, between you and me. How do you want to sell one single photograph if it is wedged between book covers? Will you cut it out with a pair of scissors?»

«Sell one picture? Whatever are you thinking of? I won't even start to let such trivialities hold me up. From me, you can have everything right from the start, the entire exhibition, including the whole gallery, I mean, the book. You see, it is a complete package. And all that for less than the price of a good meal.»

«But, where is your profit, may I ask?»

«I get a couple of franks for every copy sold. It is not much, I must admit, but it does mount up with the number of books sold. – There is no profit for you in this, though.»

Quite obviously, I was a hopeless case in the eyes of the gallerist.