

Zine Verschenken

#8 | january 2023 | winter spirit

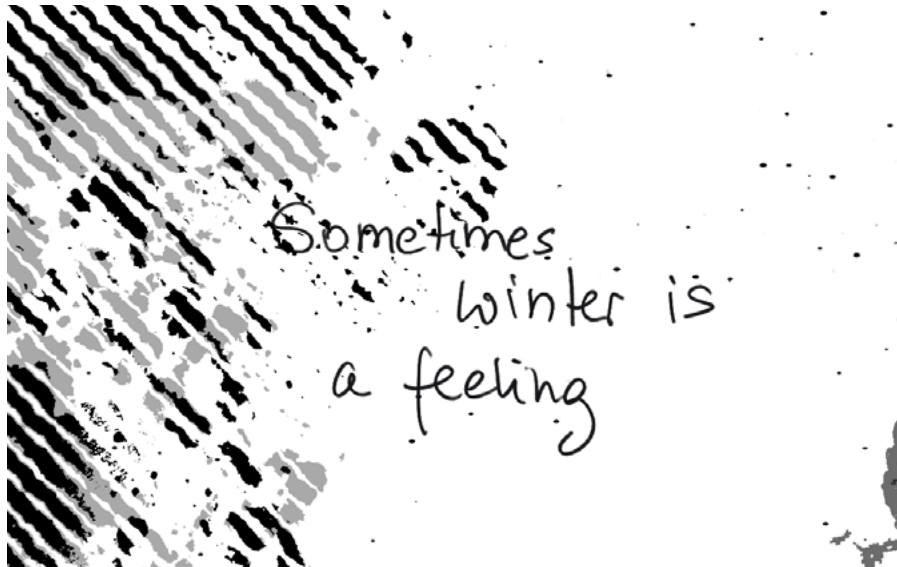


Editorial

The spirit of winter is upon us! For some it glitters at the top of a Christmas tree. For others it's the magic of a swirling blizzard in a snow globe, the whiff of a scented candle, a cosy fireside, a warm Scandinavian 'hygge'. In our imagination, it may take the ethereal form of a ghost of our past, present and future - the hopes and fears of all our years rolled into one; or that of a starry-eyed snow queen clad in frost-fringed evergreen and a holly berry crown, clutching a lucky sprig of mistletoe. Maybe it's a jolly, rosy-cheeked dwarf in a fur-trimmed red suit and Nordic socks and scarf with a bulging sack on his back; or again, a sugar plum fairy bringing us sweetness, spice and all things nice. Perhaps it's the advent of a snow child on your doorstep, a wish come true, an unexpected blessing, representing the fragility of the season, or an everyman embodying our precarious humanity... Whatever form the spirit takes, winter is a time when many of us curl up to hibernate and dream, meditate on thoughts that settle silently like snowflakes all around us. We feel we must rest, restore and repair ourselves, wrapped in a tartan blanket, peering through clouds of steam rising from a comforting mug of cocoa. The truth is, we live through thousands of 'winterings', long and short, harsh and kind: personal winters where the spirits sing our songs and dance with us like no one is watching. Times of solitude, slumber and contemplation offset by quiet moments of sharpened clarity, a crystal clear memory, cutting edge inspiration... Although winter is the dark season, we welcome its soulful spirit, knowing that the light of spring will surely follow: the promise of another year, a different rhythm and melody, a new beginning.

The Fir Tree

I could smell the pine-scented stillness as soon as I came through the door. A magical presence on the other side of the velvet curtain that separated the kitchen from the sitting room. Of course, I wouldn't have dared to take a peek; that was strictly 'verboden'. But I knew it had come out of the cold woods, all a-shiver, having probably been passed through the window so as not to spoil its pretty shape. Now it stood in its moss-covered bucket, ready and waiting; still cushioned by the black soil it had grown from, its needles as green and glossy as the day it was born. I daresay a fine dusting of snow still lay on its upturned branches, and perhaps a few fir cones were dangling from their stems here and there. Sap was doubtless oozing from its wounded trunk. I knew because I'd heard the axe fall in the woods just yesterday, and smelled the tang of juniper on Papa's hands as he sat down at the table. No, of one thing I was absolutely certain: that a little fir tree had taken root in our cottage. For the moment no fire would be lit in the grate, out of respect for its preference for cool, crisp air, at least until it could be properly dressed for the coming occasion. But that had nothing to do with me. As usual, it would be clothed in the holiness of utmost secrecy, when I least expected it. I fancied I could hear the tree tremble in anticipation on the other side of the curtain...



View from an Advent Calendar Window

I woke up one morning, as a soft, white light was seeping through the curtains of my bedroom window. Outside it was strangely hushed and still; not even the blackbirds were singing their favourite song.

"Come quick!", called Mama, drawing back the curtains. "Look at what happened in the night!"

We jumped out of our beds and raced to her side. Throwing the little advent calendar window wide open on its frosty hinges, we gasped as the crisp air nipped our noses and a brand new world sparkled before our eyes.

"Ooh!" we cried in delight: the garden was covered in a thick blanket of snow. Bird prints criss-crossed the white lawn, edged with bunny hops and foxtrots that disappeared under the hedges. The roundel had turned into an ice rink, the yew trees standing stiffly to attention at its 4 corners: upturned ice-cream cornets dipped in dessicated coconut. Frozen dewdrops hung from the tilted washing line, like the strings of a pearl necklace. And, next to the well, the sugar-coated crab-apple stood as still as a statue under a wintry spell.

"I think we should take the sledge out to the field today," said Mama.

"Hurray!" we chorused, running down the stairs as fast as we could.

Outside, you could see your breath hang in the air. The milk had frozen in the bottles on the doorstep, pushing up their silver tops. Papa had already wrapped the pipes in flannels and old jumpers to keep them snug and frost-free, and ashes from the fire had been spread on the ground so we wouldn't slip.

We broke the ice in the bird bath with our sticks and hung bacon rinds from the roofed table. Then, pulling the sledge behind us, we tramped over to the field with its promising slope that dropped steeply all the way down to the stream at the bottom.

The Cold and the Fear

It's Tuesday 8th of January and I walk the main street of a provincial city, a fake street not longer than one kilometer. There's a homeless man with a hat and a placard stating "for food". In Berlin he would be dirty and toothless, the placard with state with big irregular letters the words "für Drogen". Or instead of begging, he would search for bottles in the bottom of a garbage can or sell newspapers -written and edited by homeless for homeless people - like *Motz*, or my favorite one *Arts of the Working Class*, with nice bold fonts and its titled translated to Chinese, Spanish, German, Farsi, Turkish, to languages I cannot decipher. Their hats would be drilled by the cold and their cheeks like the meat of a school canteen. Their smell would be the underground.

But there he's in this lonely, frozen city, sitting on the floor, with no dog and gentle eyes. He doesn't bother, doesn't smell like wine. He smiles at the children on their way to school, politely greets the morning ladies taking off his hat like in the last century. It's a unique piece. The first one I saw since I came here.

Crossing paths with a homeless in this city has always been a cosmic experience, one woven by chance. A miracle, a miracle, a scene of a poorly staged theater play. In its way, it 's an honorable casualty to share this wet cobblestones with him. And while magic would be routine in any capital city, I wonder why there only seem to be homeless in big cities. I wonder about their absence here, if in Berlin they plague the bridges and shout at the platform edge, leave the blankets lying in the park a target you - with your rental flat and a job you would like to like - to claim some coins, with white gums and hunger breathe shaking gnawed papercups.

There's no place for everyone in Berlin, they say. Saturated grids and unsustainable growth leaving people out in the rain ruthless. Sounds feasible. Drugs wreak havoc in the city. Another assumption, fallacious and bigot this time. Their absence doesn't imply non-existence, but rather a secret. It's not that there aren't homeless people in the province, but that they hide them. They bring them to the outskirts, to the nights stuck at the train stations, to the streets with no streetlights. Neighborhoods you've never walked with gardens full of washing machines, and mixers and other broken electric appliances, filthy rooms with bunk beds and plastic.

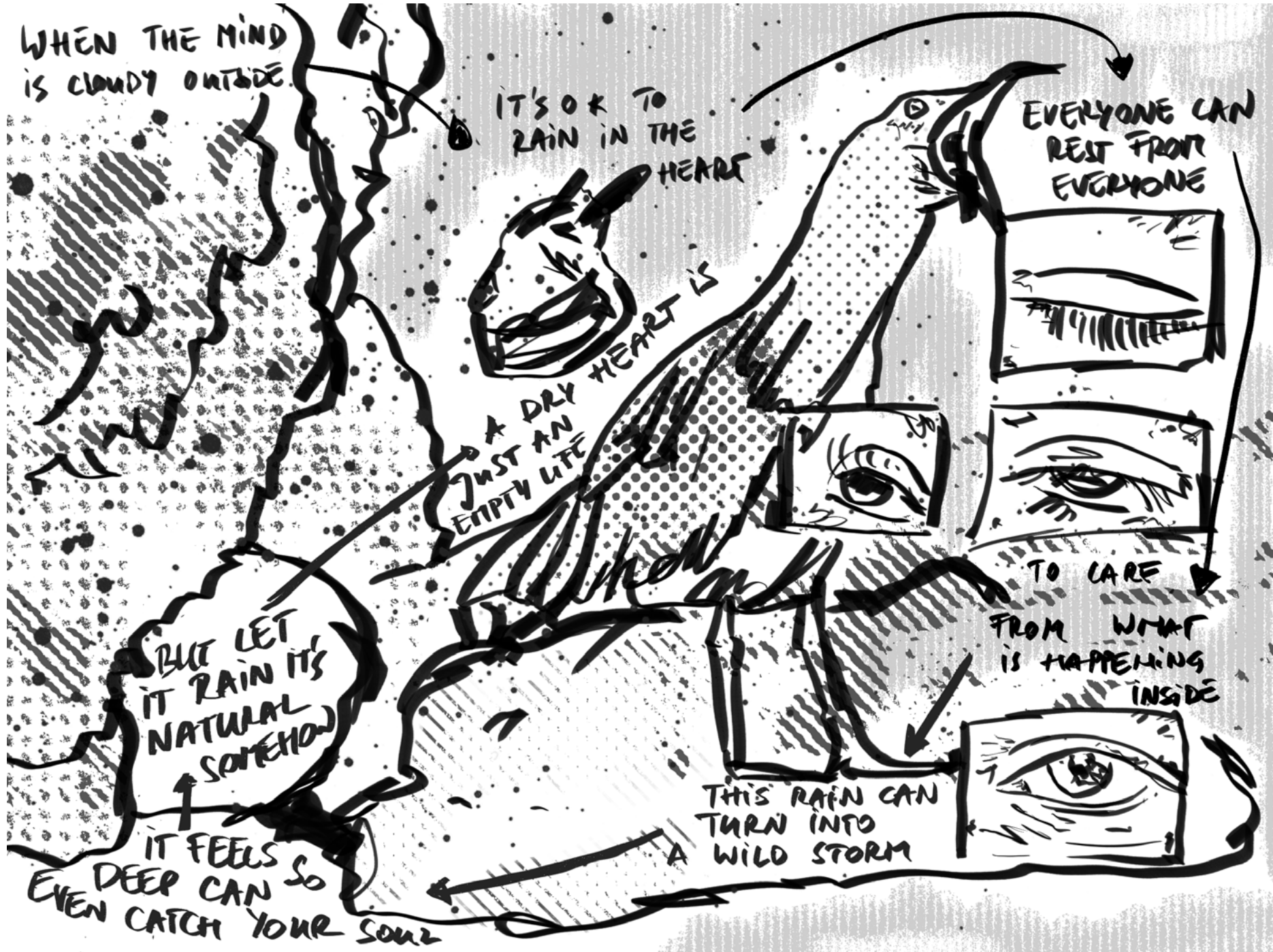
They called them Blackfeet decades ago and forced them to shower - one thing is being lawless and a worse one is being unhygienic. People chased them with fire hoses, they cried while jets crushed their bodies. They cleaned the streets from scum until there was only waste. The survivors, those left over, are put in a van every morning with the first ray of light, chirpy mouths and moldy hands, and taken

to the outskirts. They walk back during the day, stepping slowly, mumbling with frozen eyes, in silence they claim corroded flags to mark their territories. They arrive when the sun goes down and the next day, before the alarm rings, the garbage truck goes back to start.

But this one managed to stay, this man I'm staring at. He must have been the quickest, the smallest, the smartest, the subtlest one. Or he acts as a messenger, as a warning. In fact, it's not his presence that's threatening, but his loneliness. His meek acceptance of failure and solitude. The street's still almost empty and his hands are hard and rough like the hands of a bricomaniac. It's in these places where the sense of class, for its absence, becomes unbearable. Being just in oneself, in the street, in the duty, in the emptiness. I look at him again and I want to hug him. Him and every other. Hug every one of them and squeeze them tightly in my wiry arms until I get one with their scent or get arrested by the police.

In spite of the cold, the air is stifling. It's almost daylight and I hear a siren. "Won't let them take me" and I run away.







Christmas Eve - a childhood memory

The cottage door flew open and suddenly the wintry air was filled with the sound of merry bells. It wasn't the ding-dong-ding of the village belfry. No, the ringing came from as far away as Cologne Cathedral, the dome of Leipzig, the snowy spires of Vienna and Salzburg... and, in our imagination, the steeple of the Mariendom in Hildesheim. So loud, we clapped our hands over our ears, dizzy with delight. So clear and bright, it filled the room to bursting and we had to throw open a window to let some of it out! The family Christmas record, sent by Opa and Oma, spun slowly on the turntable as a choir of angels sang "Von Himmel hoch da komm ich her" to the golden sound of trumpets. Christmas had come to Pax Cottage and, to cap it all, it was snowing! We sang "Schneeflöckchen, Weißbröckchen" and "Kling, Glöckchen, klingelingeling" as the flakes fell more thickly now, and listened to a small, spellbound voice recite "Der Traum", a dreamlike poem about a child's first noel. Our lips formed the words that had become second nature over the years. If we couldn't be in Hildesheim, the next best thing was to bring Hildesheim home to us.

As the snow made a blanket outside, in came the cheeseboard, the sliced sausage, potato salad and cucumbers. In came the pumpernickle party rounds heaped high with sour cream and dill, as well as the rollmop herrings that had been pickling in the pantry for the last fortnight.

Mama left the room to fetch baby Simon from his cot upstairs when all of a sudden sleighbells jingled around the garden, and hooves clip-clopped to a standstill outside the front door. We heard it all from behind the dining room curtains.

"No, don't look," said Papa, "it's bad luck!"

Suddenly there was a crash next door as the sitting room window must have blown open, and a thump as something heavy dropped to the floor.

"I hope Mama doesn't run into him, he doesn't like to be disturbed," said Papa, mysteriously.

We stood, ears glued to the partition wall. Rustles, squeaks and tinkling could be heard, interspersed with thuds, stomping and heavy breathing. Then the window slammed shut and the sound of sleigh bells disappeared around the corner.

- Silence -

Slowly, the latch lifted and in came Mama, her face flushed, holding a startled Simon in her arms.

"Oh, she said, "you won't believe who I've just seen..."

"Who? Who?" we cried.

"Father Christmas of course! He didn't see us as we were hiding behind the curtain. But he's gone now so you can come out from under the table." She blew

out the lamp and opened the door. "Quietly now, and cover your eyes..."

So we crept in, blinked and there it was in all its glory: the tree shimmering in its lametta dress, silvery baubles and a forest of white candles aglow in the flickering firelight. And beneath its boughs a heap of parcels, big and small, lay scattered with fragrant fir and pine cones. There were tangerines, dates and figs in the fruit bowl, candied citrus slices, chocolate pennies in their golden sacks, spiced gingerbread and a cake crowned with snowy peaks and skating figurines.

We all held hands around the tree and sang "O Tannenbaum" at the top of our voices.



The Christmas Parcel

The most eagerly awaited event of the year was the arrival of the Christmas parcel from Germany.

All through November we would hear about how Oma would trudge back and forth to the post office on her bad legs, poor thing; forced to pack and repack it many times over before its size, weight and content passed border restrictions. (No one worked harder in the festive season than Oma, not even Father Christmas!) Once we knew it was finally on its way, for most of December we imagined its journey over land and sea: how it would be tossed from sorting table to sack in the post office; how it would rattle around, clackety-clack, clackety-clack, on the night train; how it would bounce up and down on the stormy waves of the North Sea...

The telephone lines between Hildesheim and Wadhurst would crackle with real and imagined calamities on either side: “Did you remember to put in the sugared almonds?”, “I had to take it out because it was too heavy”, “I forgot to write Kolnisch Wasser on the packing form, do you think it will matter?”, “I expect it’s been held up in Customs”, “How many days left now till Christmas Eve?” etc, etc.

“When is it coming?”, “When will it be here?” we would ask over and over again.

Then, one day, when least expected, it would turn up. A miracle!

As soon as we arrived home from school at 4 o’clock, Mama took us straight into the sitting room, where it sat in all its glory.

As I grew up a bit I came to realise that what was in the box wasn’t the whole story. Oh no, some things had already been squirreled away to turn up under the tree or in our stockings when the time came. But for now, we dipped our hands into the straw joyfully, rummaging for hidden treasures, listening for telltale sounds, guessing what lay inside the wrapping paper, then pulling them out, hey presto!, to see if we were right.

One thing was for sure - it was bursting with all sorts of wonderful surprises...

First, a twist of crinkly lametta to dress the tree, jinglebells on ribbons, a toy trumpet, a straw angel or a painted babushka to hang from its branches, 3 golden sacks of chocolate coins (one for each of us), 6 pink and white sugar mice wriggling their string tails and twitching their whiskers, a pair of red wax lanterns rimmed in ‘snow’.

Then came food for the table: a jar of Sauerkirschen (the kind that made your tongue tingle), a wheel of candied lemon slices (“Can I have the cherry in the middle?”, “No, it’s my turn!”), a Marzipan log, spiced Lebkuchen moons and

stars, fairytale cake decorations, a crusty Roggenbrot (double-baked), Pumpernickle party rounds, a silver tin of the finest Grebenschmalz, and the king of sausages: a bumper Harte Mettwurst!

There were a few casualties over the years... The time when only 2 chocolate Santa’s arrived, not 3 (“Perhaps the customs officer was hungry,” Mama said). A stale loaf on account of how long it had taken to get there. The odd broken bauble, and a prize cigar that never made it at all! Mama said not to tell Oma or she would be sad, so we never did.

That parcel was Germany in a box, a cure for homesickness, an offering of rare luxuries - gold, frankincense and myrrh rolled into one; all the more precious to think how each gift had been carefully chosen and saved for, how lovingly it had been packaged, how far it had come.



Zine Verschenken

#8 | january 2023 | winter spirit

Artists Bianca Cheung
Elena Marcos
Erin Johnson
Karen Foster
matallxallando
NINANIÑA

Do you want to contribute to the zine?
Have any questions?
Send us an email:

zine.verschenken@gmail.com or
scan the QR code to access our website:



zineverschenken.de

