

The background of the book cover features a large, light-colored feather with a fine, grid-like pattern overlaid on it. The feather's barbs are clearly visible, and the grid consists of thin, intersecting lines. The overall color palette is a mix of light blues, greys, and off-whites, creating a textured and ethereal feel.

Berit Glanz

Pixel Dancers

A Novel

>> Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Literary Prize
>> HOTLIST 2019 of Independent Publishers

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Elisabeth, known to everyone as Beta, works at a start-up: her everyday life is a whirl of pitches and teambuilding exercises, while in her scant free time she develops models of animals on 3D printers and eats her way through Berlin's various ice-cream parlours. When a stranger with the alias Toboggan contacts her via a peculiar app, it changes her life. His profile picture arouses her curiosity, but instead of an answer he sends her on a hunt for virtual clues. It leads Beta to the story of two artists, Lavinia and Walter, a couple in the 1920s who performed expressionist dance theatre wearing whole-body masks and broke with bourgeois convention. Instead of liberating them from social pressures, however, the story ends in tragedy – and Lavinia reaching for a weapon.

The more Beta learns about Lavinia, the more she comes to identify with her devotion to art and explores possible ways out, the more she longs to break free of her own superficial existence. A trip to Barcelona offers her and her team the unforeseen opportunity to transform technology into the absurd or even into art – and Beta seizes her chance.

Berit Glanz

Berit Glanz, born in 1982, studied in Munich, Stockholm and Reykjavik, and is a research fellow in the department of New Scandinavian Literature at the University of Greifswald. She was a finalist at the 24th »open mike« poetry-reading competition. In 2017 she was awarded the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Literary Prize and Audience Prize for an extract from her debut novel *Pixel Dancers*.



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Berit Glanz on »Pixel Dancers«

How did you come across the story of Lavinia Schulz and Walter Holdt and their masks?

A few years ago, the Hamburg Museum for Art and Industry (Hamburger Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe) began posting various photographs online. Among them were photos of Lavinia Schulz and Walter Holdt taken by Minya Diez-Dührkoop in the 1920s. People started sharing the images of the bizarre costumes; I first saw them on the social network site Pinterest and was immediately fascinated.

I started to look into it and came across a feature on the mask dancers, which led me to do much more extensive research. My work does therefore have a solid historical foundation, but it is important to me that my novel is fiction and that this interplay between fact and fiction creates the same tension that grips Beta herself.

Beta, the protagonist in »Pixel Dancers«, tests software for a start-up, and her work there has a huge impact on her everyday life. What attracted you to this world?

Beta's job blurs the boundaries between her professional and private lives, and I asked myself what impact a job like this can have on someone's creativity. This is a topic that has interested me for a long time now, and I've been watching this world with fascination for many years. I thought a lot about Beta's character and about how someone who is part of such a strong group dynamic can be creative.

I was also interested in Beta's ambivalence; after all, this is not an entirely negative working environment – it is also dynamic and exciting. I wanted to show that this professional world has advantages and disadvantages, that it can be pompous and superficial at times, but that technology can also give way to whole new forms of creativity.

You draw clear parallels throughout to the world of the mask dancer Lavinia. Playfulness and creativity also play important roles in Beta's life: she secretly creates animal figures using her 3D printer. In her professional life, however, this potential can never fully be separated from economic exploitation.

I was fascinated by the fact that Lavinia and Walter never chose the easy path. The decisions they made involved great existential risks. And dancing in those masks must have been utterly exhausting too! On the other hand, Beta's life is characterised by a culture that can often be seen as being easy and a bit playful, and that doesn't always have great existential consequences. I was intrigued by this contradiction.

However, both protagonists try to develop a relationship with their environment, to create space for their own kind of creativity and self-expression. Beta eventually finds a social group in which she can develop her creative ideas, while Lavinia leaves the expressionist theatre and eventually fails in her private relationship too.

I was also keen to explore how society has evolved as a framework for creative ambition over the last hundred years. It is not quite so easy to cross borders now as it was in the 1920s, and that's a limitation clearly experienced by Beta too. Both characters must figure out how they fit into the economic conditions of their own society.

Within this context, Lavinia and Beta both experience failure too. Does this mean we will never be able to escape from these economic dynamics?

Personally, I think our world has been so entirely subjected to the logic of economics that we will never escape from it. (There are many interesting thoughts on this subject, from Eva Illouz to Mark Fisher.) However, I must say that I didn't set out to write a fatalistic text. It is of course possible to try and pull us out of this logic, and that is exactly what my text is about: trying and failing and trying again to create some freedom for ourselves within the existing structures.

English Sample Translation

by Alyson Coombes

((pp 5-9))

NOP (1) – No Operation

```
// Train-Observation-Statement
  if (TrainIsAccelerating) {
    currentSpeed++;
  } else {
    System.out.println("The woman stands at the
window.");
  }
```

The Ringbahn trains run right past my window. In summer, suitcases clatter along the pavements as holidaymakers arrive for their city breaks, and in the early mornings the tourists, drunk on beer, sing songs in French or English. I like working at night. The windowpane is dark and reflects my monitor, which has a row of tiny white plastic birds sitting along the top. I don't need blinds; only the passengers on the train can see in, and the train always goes past so quickly that my window is just one flash among many. Sometimes I stand in the window naked, smoking. Johannes always says that smoking is passé now that you can vape, but I don't think the smoke is quite as opaque as that of a cigarette, which drifts slowly through the room. When I hear the train rumbling towards me, I blow against the glass and am lost in a smoky haze.

I imagine a man sitting in the train, staring out into the night. The carriage smells of vomit and old chips; the man had been planning on going by bike but it got stolen. He has long stopped thinking about the strange pattern on the seat fabric – instead his gaze wanders, just like his thoughts, and he looks out of the train window. The yellow streetlight outside bounces off the fingerprints left behind on the glass after a busy day. His eyes pass over the facades of the old buildings, which have all been restored and repainted, and spot a brightly lit window on the third floor. Behind it: a naked woman.

The outline of her body is blurred by the cigarette smoke. Her hair curls

around her shoulders and her expression is empty. As he sits up and tries to focus his gaze, to fix his eyes on the woman, the Ringbahn speeds up and continues on its loop. But the image of the woman behind the double-glazing sticks in his mind and inspires him to do something awfully analogue that leaves a tangible trace on the world. I love that thought.

```
public static Life one(){ return null; }
```

```
/*We don't have tasks, we have missions. After work we meet on the roof terrace for a barbecue, while the sun sets behind the blocks of flats. We are code magicians, PHP ninjas, hacktivists and data gurus, we are binary evangelists and the team is the only thing that counts. We eat and drink together, beer from small breweries and artisanal burgers, and that's not part of our job but an expression of our love for the team. We are a big family, and our logo is yellow and red.*/
```

I sit at my desk and play with my Rubik's Cube. The blue side is done. I'm happy; yesterday I finished the yellow. I had to mess yellow up again to do blue. White, yellow, blue, red, green, orange. Six colours, five working days. On Fridays I do green in the morning and orange in the afternoon, then it's the weekend. If I've got a deadline coming up, I do orange on Saturdays and get irritated on Fridays. While I twist the cube, I drink coffee and eat chocolate from the snack bar. When I've done each of the colours in turn, I start from the beginning again.

As I'm working on my Rubik's Cube, someone from Development almost inevitably pipes up: Don't you know trying to finish one side at a time doesn't work? You need to make a cross. Did you know that Speedcubers rub Vaseline onto the cube? That way you can turn it faster. The best way to solve the cube is using an algorithm developed by a Czech mathematician. Did you know that computers never need more than 20 moves to solve the cube? All developers are secretly obsessed with picking locks and solving Rubik's Cubes. I never answer and simply keep turning my cube. I want one perfect side, which I will then turn to face me.

My office has a panoramic window that looks out over the Spree. Beautiful, beautiful, the investors always say as they walk through the open-plan office into the conference room with its frosted-glass divider wall. Smart suits – tech, not banking – and ultra-slim ties. If the ties are red, I imagine that someone has slit open the investors with a Samurai sword and it's only a matter of time before their intestines spill out onto the grey concrete floor.

The floor is cold and hard. In the corner we play pinball and table football, and get together with our colleagues from Marketing. We sit on lounge chairs in bright colours reminiscent of a vintage circus poster. The Marketing team is always better dressed, which is why their desks are closer to the entrance. There are drinks on the bar counter – Club-Mate, Kombucha and a cold brew coffee machine, which drips brown sludge into a glass beaker all day long like a broken tap.

On Mondays, we have a stand-up meeting by the windows. Our project manager Martin moderates the session, grinning as though Saturday's cocaine is still stuck in his jaw. No one is allowed to sit down; everyone remains standing while they present their pitches for the week. I'm a Junior Quality Assurance Tester, and in my last appraisal behind the frosted glass I was told I have a can-do attitude. During the stand-up, I shift from one foot to the other and dig my fingernails into my palms, while Martin sticks Post-it notes with tasks written on them onto the glass. Throughout the week, we go back and forth to the glass wall, taking down the Post-its with the tasks that we've completed, scrunching them up and throwing them into a white metal bucket. Martin then cheers loudly – 'whoop whoop' – and gives out high-fives like a seal at a Sea Life Centre.

There's another room too, with an aquarium, where you can sit and watch the fish to calm down. The noise-cancelling headphones block out any sound from next door. That's where the arcade machines are, the company's pride and joy. But you can escape all that noise in here. The fish swim back and forth in the aquarium; they are mostly goldfish, yellowy-red, the colours of our company logo.

It's Monday, and I'm just about to tackle the white side of the Rubik's Cube when Martin calls our team together. He has received a memo from Alex, our CEO, Martin tells us excitedly. Alex always wears a silvery-grey cashmere jumper and has a big black beard. Martin reads out the memo. Alex has decided that from now on, all employees will be divided into two sub-teams: yellow and red. We are now part of the red team. Martin is all worked up; from now on, he will use only red Post-its in order to get us on board with the change.

(...)

((pp 46–55))

MOV (1) – Move

Monkey testing:

It is said that a single monkey bashing away at the keyboard aimlessly for all eternity could write all tweets composed to date – intelligible character sequences hidden in amongst the endless jumble of letters. In monkey testing, the tester imagines the software user is this monkey. The monkey can be either clever or stupid. The stupid monkey does not know the system it is using. It keeps pounding the Start button, for example, without thinking about its purpose. The clever monkey, on the other hand, knows a great deal about the system, its past and planned future, and uses this knowledge to try and crash the system. The clever monkey collects the errors it finds during the test, while the stupid monkey does not know what errors are.

The poison-dart frog model is not ready yet, so I've decided to stay at home tonight rather than going to the party at Dot.Factory, a huge incubator that is home to dozens of new tech start-ups. Whenever a start-up leaves the incubator, they throw a massive party. When the companies reach certain milestones, such as exceeding a specific number of employees or making too much profit, they are ejected from the safety of the warm incubator and must make their own way in the world without the beloved open-plan office with its high-speed internet. Incubators are like the student flats of the start-up scene – lots of enthusiasm, little sleep, parties, and empty Mate bottles strewn over the desks. Whereas inside the incubator, it's the school-trip atmosphere that motivates people to spend whole nights together at their computers, after moving out, it's the prospect of ever-increasing share values and the hope of a not-too-distant sale that keep the employees going more than anything. The parties are full of cocky former residents with success stories under their belts, who keep the gold fever burning among the wide-eyed new company founders who keep repeating their motto – 'work hard, play hard' – while knocking back bottled beer.

At the last party, Martin convinced two young guys to shove food from the buffet through the flap of one of the gaudy vending machines that line the wall of the canteen, offering an impressive range of snacks and sweet treats. While we ate, they raved to us about their app, which would

revolutionise the relationship between employees and managers using gift vouchers and other rewards, and which they had called PavlApp. A nod to Ivan Pavlov, they said with a wink. Then they were lying on the floor, giggling drunkenly. Under Martin's direction, they used a piece of wire to manoeuvre a half-eaten chicken drumstick through the flap into the hollow belly of one of the machines, sliding it into an empty slot between the chocolate bars and bags of wine gums. We spent the rest of the evening watching the machine in the hope that someone would buy the drumstick. Unfortunately, the chicken leg wasn't eaten or even noticed, and we never found out who had to clean the vending machine in the end either. My phone beeps and I see a picture of Martin raising his glass cheerfully. 'Not in the mood for chicken drumsticks?' he asks, but I don't feel like answering.

While I wait for the software to render my frog, I think about my phone call with Toboggan and once again start pondering the name and the strange profile picture. The image has popped into my head several times over the last few days – a fascinating mix of human and animal and something else, something slightly threatening somehow. Google tells me that in English the word 'toboggan' refers to a runnerless sledge made of curved wood, invented by the indigenous North American people. An image search yields countless photos of children and adults sliding down the mountain together on enormous toboggans, looking extremely happy. Why has a developer in California named himself after a North American sledge and how is it connected to the strange profile picture? *Dawntastic* does not let me contact people who have previously called me. Statistically, it's very unlikely that he will give me another wake-up call, so I probably won't be able to ask him myself.

I keep searching online for 'Toboggan'. Google searches (including image searches) for 'Toboggan', 'Toboggan, California', 'Dawntastic, Toboggan', 'Toboggan, Silicon Valley' and 'Toboggan, Atari' don't come up with much, and I nearly give up. I discover that the Drupal content management system has a component called Toboggan. Maybe that's why he calls himself Toboggan, maybe he works as a developer for Drupal in Silicon Valley? Somehow, I doubt that's the connection. That explanation seems too mundane. Johannes would laugh at me and say that I'm looking for a new mission. I remember that Toboggan told me he was from Hamburg. Search: 'Toboggan, Hamburg'.

The image search is filled with the same picture of a person in costume – Toboggan’s profile picture. Finally I get a better look at the image that so fascinated me when I first saw it on the *Dawntastic* app. I look closely at the photos: the figure is dressed in a tight, dark-grey linen suit, which gives their thin arms and legs a fragile appearance, in contrast to the powerful presence of the costume as a whole. The arms and legs are a washed-out rusty red, while the torso has been painted with diagonal stripes, white and greyish purple. Other colours are dotted across the costume. The large brush strokes and seemingly random blotches of colour create an uneven impression that I find very thought-provoking. The creators of the costume probably didn’t have quite enough materials to paint the whole thing with bright colours. Or perhaps the unevenness and seeming irregularity of the colouring is meant to make the figure look more realistic, with signs of everyday wear and tear – although I wonder if the creators of this anthropomorphic phantom would really have been interested in something as banal as realism. There are white cuffs wrapped around the elbows, and smudged bright stripes run down the inside of the arms. The figure is wearing red gloves and funnel-shaped white, blue and yellow boots, which remind me of a ceremonial uniform worn in a fairy-tale land. I don’t know if I should find the costume funny or intimidating, and am not quite sure what to make of it. At first glance it is rather ugly, but the closer you look, the more intriguing it becomes – in that way, it reminds me of the microscopic images of insects that hung in my father’s office. What would you discover if you put this costume under the microscope?

The colourful photos of this full-body costume take me to the collection of the Hamburg Museum of Art and Industry, where it is evidently on display. Some close-up photos show more details of the costume called Toboggan. The artists are named as Lavinia Schulz and Walter Holdt, and the images in the Google search include various sepia images from the twenties. In all the images, the figure’s hands are balled into fists, and the arms are often stretched into the air, making it look like a shabby superhero who has fallen through a wormhole from another planet onto the Hamburg stage.

The superhero feel of the costume is undermined by lengths of white wire that stick out of a belt like an absurd raffia tutu or a whisk that’s been chopped in half. The figure is also wearing a head mask, from which more wire feelers hang down over the angular red planes that make up the back of the head. The mask’s face is painted with large blocks of colour – green, yellow and lilac. The mouth is a perfect black circle; together with the painted black eyes it creates an insect-like appearance. The suit fascinates

me – the combination of the sloppy, makeshift quality and the loving detail, and the strange appearance of the mask: a humanoid extra-terrestrial fly with superpowers, which was trapped during battle in half a whisk.

I think about Toboggan. In my head, he's walking through San Francisco wearing a giant fly mask, humming the Pitfall theme tune.

I wonder if Toboggan was thinking of the costume in the Hamburg exhibition when he chose his name? He said he was from Hamburg; I'm a firm believer in chance, but there does seem to be a connection here. The costume can be found in the museum near Hamburg's central railway station, among various other masks that, going by the image searches, look similarly extra-terrestrial and have evocative names: Skirnir, Jumping Beast, Bibo, Technique and Insect Dancer. I scroll through the images of the costumes. Another mask looks like a close relative of the Toboggan costume and is called Toboggan Man, though I find Toboggan Woman more impressive. There are also photos from the pre-war period of the dancers wearing their masks, but when I look for pictures of the artists without their costumes, I hardly find anything at all. Only a picture of a young woman with a watering can and soft facial features comes up, a grainy angel in a short white dress, and then a picture of a couple, he with a happy face and a dimpled smile that is slightly blurred, she in a striped dress, sitting on his lap. There are also many images of the masks in different contexts. It seems as though Lavinia Schulz and Walter Holdt have been almost entirely absorbed by their fantasy creatures and the only traces of them left online are in the form of Toboggan and other figures.

public static Life four(){ return null; }

*/*We want our innovative app solutions to change your everyday life. We are young, we are hungry, we are the workplace of the future. Come and join our team to develop a platform with a vision!*/*

The aquarium has been in the relaxation room ever since we moved into our new offices. A three-metre-long tank is set into a white wall unit which extends out into the room, forming a dividing wall that people can see into from both sides. A hidden sliding hatch above the fish tank is used to feed the fish and clean the tank, though it's the cleaners who are responsible for that. Red and orange goldfish swim between the green leaves of the water plants. Goldfish in the colours of the company logo. Johannes suggested

changing the decoration in the aquarium to match the underwater level from Super Mario, but Alex thought that would destroy the calming effect of the fish. The fish don't seem to have a particularly calming effect anyway, though; just a few weeks after their arrival they were joined in the tank by an LED goldfish, which flashed at regular intervals from red to blue. The cleaners removed the foreign object, but shortly afterwards a yellow plastic submarine appeared at the bottom of the tank. Alex called us together. We all stood around the large aquarium, in which the goldfish were swimming in circles, unperturbed, and he showed us a flatscreen that had been fixed to the opposite wall and was glowing white. With a grand gesture, Martin handed him a white box, inside which was a goldfish; Alex proudly held it aloft, like Mufasa when he shows the little Simba his kingdom in *The Lion King*. A deceptively realistic robot fish with a black dot between his eyes, through which a camera inside the fish's body would make recordings that could then be uploaded. We clapped as though we were launching a ship as the artificial fish was carefully placed in the tank and the first images from the fish cam appeared on the screen.

I'm sitting on a cushion in front of the aquarium. The robot fish moves in regular circles in the tank; the other fish swim around without paying attention to the spy in their midst. For a moment it seems like the robot fish is turning towards me, but he is just trying to get around a water plant. When I turn to look at the screen, I see my blurred body through the eye of the fish, the glass pane between us. The transmission has a slight time delay, and I watch myself turn towards the screen. I look at the door.

It's late afternoon; it's unlikely that anyone else will come in here. I climb onto the chair next to the aquarium, slide open the hatch and look down at the water. Some of the fish swim up to the surface and snap their mouths greedily, hoping for food. The robot fish keeps making his nauseatingly regular circles, and I realise I'll need to take my jumper off if I don't want it to get completely drenched.

As I lower my arm into the tank and try to catch the robot fish, for a moment I think I'm going to fall in. After a brief wobble I regain my balance, grab the fish and jump back onto the floor. My wet arm smells of the aquarium. I wipe it on my trousers and pull my jumper back on. The robot fish lies on the chair, projecting a view of the outside of the aquarium onto the screen behind it. I take the fish and put it in my rucksack.

The office is already very quiet; most people go home early on Wednesday afternoons. Only a handful of screens are still glowing blue,

and the quiet hum of typing drifts through the air. On the way out I jump down the stairs and hope that no one else will go into the relaxation room today. The rush-hour traffic is in full flow: honking delivery vans and flashy company cars. Wearing a silver helmet, I weave through the traffic on my bike until I reach the Oberbaum Bridge.

The evening sun is glowing over the Spree, and bathes me and the orange fish in golden light. I stand in front of the wrought-iron railings with the repeating semi-circular patterns, like half-suns whose rays stretch towards the river. I'm holding the fish in my hand. It still feels a bit damp and smells of algae, just like my arm. I can see my reflection in the dark camera lens between its eyes. I wonder if my face is showing on the screen in the relaxation room and scaring the cleaners. I hurl the fish over the railings and into the Spree. For a moment I see its orange shape bob on the surface, and then it sinks.

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