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Translator's Preface

Zaia Alexander

Born 1974 in Bad Saarow, Julia Schoch studied Romance Languages and German Literature in Potsdam, Paris and Bucharest. An author and translator, her publications include the short story collection *Der Körper des Salamanders/Body of the Salamander* (Piper, 2001) and the novella *Verabredungen mit Mattok/Appointments with Mattok* (Piper, 2004). Her short stories have been anthologized widely. She is the recipient of numerous literary awards, including the Jury Prize at the Ingeborg Bachmann Competition in Klagenfurt (2005); the Stefan George Prize for translating French Literature (2004); the Droste Prize, Meersburg (2003); the Friedrich Hölderlin Prize, Bad Homburg (2002); and the Brandenburg State Literature Prize (2001). "Capturing in Passing" / *Schlagen im vorübergehen* first appeared in the volume *Beste deutsche Erzähler* (DVA: München, 2002).

To the generation of East Germans born and raised in the 1970s, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 meant an abrupt end to their childhood. Having lived through the rupture of a social system and a country that suddenly disappeared, a new generation of authors observe the East-West friction through a unique perspective. Though they have not coalesced into a group phenomenon as such, writers like Julia Schoch and Antje Rávic Strubel (1974) share a collective identity and culture, and a distrust of systems that can shatter overnight. While older East German authors continue to "come to terms" with their past, these younger authors from the East find the German Democratic Republic (GDR) a bizarre world they experienced only as children. Too young to be destroyed by the system, yet old enough to be aware of how deadly it was, they hadn't reached an age where they had to make hard decisions whether to go into "inner-exile" or play along, be perpetrators or dissidents, escape or be forced into exile. Ironically, as Julia Schoch puts it, "it was their country that left them."

In "Capturing in Passing," Schoch evokes memories of a system and place that no longer exists: the GDR. The vanished cultural past she excavates however, is not only particular to East Germany during the Communist era, but to the specific items and rites of childhood itself. Fittingly, the story is set in a socialist summer camp for adolescents which doubles as a military training ground, and it is narrated by a model GDR Young Pioneer, who describes in minutely observed detail the final days of a young soldier, called "the loser," as he begins to unravel under the daily pressures and humiliations of camp life. Through the girl's studied indifference to the soldier, who we later discover is her brother, and her attempt to hide their connection, we viscerally experience her repressed panic and insecurity, and the interplay between conformist and misfit that reflects (and reflects on) the barbarous cruelty that underlies the system.

But, Schoch isn't interested in merely creating a historically accurate account for the archives. Her story is too abstract for that, too artfully stylized, too skewed. Instead, she is interested in showing the mechanisms that make such a camp possible anywhere at any time, and how universal opposites like domination and subjection, victory and defeat are inscribed onto the psyche. It's no coincidence that Schoch chose a term from chess for her title. She builds the chess game into the story: the soldier becomes the chess figure in a game that's beyond his control.

Though it would appear that Julia Schoch is writing about a specific society, the GDR, her topic is much broader than that. Having witnessed the demise of a system that had defined her life and identity, she learned early on to distrust the arbitrary rules that define all societies, not just those of the failed socialist regime. As Antje Rávic Strubel aptly puts it, "when the social system you grew up in suddenly disappears, then you can continually reinvent yourself. Anything that has been constructed, like society or the self, can be deconstructed—just like that." For Schoch there is no such thing as destiny, or moral, or ethical values; there is only the arbitrariness of a game and figures dragged across a chess field.

Translating the vocabulary and rituals particular to the social system Schoch is describing presented certain challenges, which necessitated a clear understanding of the socio-cultural circumstances of the time and place, and the help of an "informant." I was fortunate in that I had both Julia Schoch and Antje Rávic Strubel to consult with while translating the story. Given that German speakers from the West consider much in this literature foreign or exotic, both in language and in content, the translation strategy seeks to preserve the foreign without overburdening the text or making it unreadable.

"Capturing in Passing" by Julia Schoch

Translated by Zaia Alexander

Opinions were divided in the camp. Some said it was sea water that had transformed the cat's body into a pig; others claimed they saw the animal's swollen abdomen between the barracks the night before: that it retched and writhed as it crawled down to the water on shaking legs. Rat poison, somebody said, turns cats' bellies into enormous balloons. They end up like buoys drifting with the tide and washing back ashore.

The camp custodian shoveled the cat's body off the beach and onto the platform of the pick-up. That's how it returned to the camp. When they saw him driving by, some of the smaller kids ran behind the cart and hung onto the rear where the bloated animal lay. They examined it, distorting their faces, and later they couldn't stop talking about it in gory detail.

A week later, the soldier was found belly-down on the beach. His lips were blue and his abnormally bloated face was turned sideways. This time the camp custodian wasn't able to lift the body with his shovel. A committee was appointed. In the morning, as always, the camp was marched in a long column down to the beach; it was there the dead person had been found wrapped in what was left of his uniform. We stayed back; only the group leaders approached the dark bundle. One of the women held both hands to her mouth; another grabbed a stick and poked at the wet body. We waited at a distance, quietly. The storm ball hung at half-mast which meant we could go swimming. Yet nobody went into the water that day. Nor on the following ones. The beach remained off-limits until we left. We stayed in the camp, or were sent on excursions around the area. We visited a dockyard, two fish factories and, yes, we even saw a sea-bunker from a war that had happened before our time.

The committee chief interviewed us very briefly, yet long enough to grab each one of us under the chin and make us look him in the eye. Everybody told the same story. I could have said more, but didn't. I said what everybody had seen every day inside the camp: a game, a quiet soldier, the camp director. They demanded we sign a blank piece of paper that ensured we'd forget the beach and the body. Nobody would be interested in hearing such stories when we returned home. They placed an index finger to their lips: now we were the bearers of a state secret. If it ever came out, we'd bring the country and the camp in danger. We nodded and kept quiet, acted as if we'd forgotten about the beach and the body. During the inquiry they treated me like everybody else; nobody suspected there was a connection between the soldier and me.

I tried as best I could not to look at the camp director's game. She usually left headquarters around noon, and headed over to the chess court inside the camp. We walked towards her in the opposite direction. In orderly rows, we marched past her to the dining hall where they served the food. Since I was in charge of the group, I walked ahead. She almost always stopped for us, very briefly, to acknowledge our presence. She nodded, smiled, and this made us lift our knees even higher on the next step. When we returned from the dining hall, in the same ordered rows, she still was seated at the game. The large black and white stone blocks on the field stayed cool even in the noon sun. The camp director tied a scarf around her head. The soldier, who was with her, wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. There were no trees or shrubs on the field that could shade him as he pushed the chess pieces. The gravel surface surrounding the field glowed red. Only the front area of the barracks had some shrubs stuck in narrow strips of sand. They were the only plants on the path surrounding the chess court. The camp cat was lying under the bench and jumped out when we got closer. It was so close to the ground, the dust must have penetrated all its orifices. I didn't look at the two of them. They played wordlessly, except when the director called out the next position. The other girls laughed briefly, because they were used to laughing whenever they caught a glimpse of the soldier, who, from day one, was called the loser. The laughter always had to be provoked to get it started again. And every troop that passed kept it going.

My brother was smaller than the others, and when I arrived I noticed him right away. He was leaving with some other soldiers for a change of guard, just as we were being driven into camp. They checked off our names at the long tables by the entry and we were divided into groups. Outside, I saw him following commands in front of the fence. He moved his arms and legs as if he were having trouble getting everything into synch. Even though he lived in the area for a year now, his body still seemed all tangled up. The weapon, a long clumsy stick that somebody attached to his back against his will. He walked up and down the fence at an even distance from the others. Even from afar I saw the sweat running from under his steel helmet and into his eyes, and it seemed to me he was the only one who it happened to. He wiped his face with the palm of his hand. His uncoordinated limbs flopped all over the place as if it weren't an honor to be doing his duty here. The group leader called out our names over the dusty square. He turned around when he heard mine. I saw him look at me from behind the wire fence; he looked at me from between the bars as if I should protect him, and not the other way around. The gate was wide-open, the fence not insurmountable;and yet he kept looking at me as if we'd never meet again. Maybe he could tell what I was thinking. I refused to greet him because one of the girls started laughing suddenly. Her outstretched finger pointed at my brother; his nose was dripping blood all over the metal struts of the fence. Before he could remove a handkerchief from his pocket, the others also mustered the courage to laugh at his disorder. They formed a huge communal finger pointing at the soldier behind the fence, who was bobbing back and forth in a manner unbefitting a soldier. I saw him try to force his bodily fluid back into the orifice. The others continued walking. He walked too, holding the handkerchief pressed to his nose. I laughed briefly, and then walked away with the others.

I had expected to see my brother; I knew he was doing duty here. But I didn't understand why he wouldn't make any effort to do anything for his country. That's why it horrified me when I ran into my brother in the camp, and why I looked away in embarrassment. The bloody nose suited him. I imagined the others soaring over meter-high-walls in a single bound, while my brother could barely pull himself over the ledge with his weak arms; how during crawl maneuvers, he'd just lie there in the dust behind the others, and by the time he returned to the tent, his face sticky with mud, the others were already getting their second wind. Everybody fought for the chance to do these duties in the camp; he was the only one who acted as if walking up and down the surrounding fence was a punishment.

We slept peacefully because somebody was keeping guard down by the fence. Nobody would climb over the chain link fence, across the rain gutter, and into our room. Nobody would walk around the five bunk beds, deciding which of the checkered covers to toss back. No hand would wrap around our child throats and squeeze; we didn't have to wake up choking and waving our arms to alert everyone to the fatal situation. Our feet didn't have to kick against the metal frame for the others to wake up. Nor did we have to jolt out of bed because the camp was being attacked by a convoy of vehicles loaded with men armed to the teeth, We also didn't have to go down to the basement of the barracks in our bare feet, the heavy iron doors sealed shut until the attack was over. The cotton-filled stocking mask that was supposed to protect us from dust and radiation wouldn't be utilized, nor would the provisional toilet—a yellow plastic bucket that was used for emergencies. We slept peacefully.

Apparently, I must have silently asked to be put in charge of the group. I didn't say anything when I was appointed to the position a couple of days after we arrived. Maybe I'd inadvertently taken a step forward, or merely made a movement of my hand, like when you chase a fly away; maybe that made me seem suited for the job in the group leader's eyes. She looked at me, nodded, and pointed her finger at me. The group acted as if they were looking at some amazing landscape just below the window, and then suddenly they crowded into the back of the room, near the empty flowerbox. They moved even further into the background to increase the space between us, and then one after another, they opened their lockers. Their heads disappeared behind opened doors, made of imitation wood. I stuck a duty sheet onto the naked wall; the room was silent, except for the rummaging and banging of hands in the cabinets.

Every morning, the girls open the doors to their rooms; the leader sticks her head inside and checks it out. Sweeping and dusting duty, bed duty, laundry duty, picture coloring duty at the table in the center of the room. I give them points for their duties in a book. All counted they add up to an excursion to a canning factory at the end of the stay. I stand next to the director as she runs her finger along the upper edge of the cabinets and then holds it up to the light.

The horrific encounters with my brother seemed never-ending. One of the first days after the noon roll-call, we scattered onto the camp grounds. Somebody brought bows and arrows, toy grenades and tires that were supposed to occupy us. After he placed everything on the dusty floor, he just stood there staring at us defiantly. When the first person stooped to pick up the equipment, he opened his eyes wide, spittle covering his mouth, and blurted what he'd heard the others saying about him. The loser, he said, has done it again. As he spoke, I saw how he basked in our gaze.

People in the camp talked about how the soldier had broken into a sweat on the way to a drill tour. He suddenly couldn't take the sickeningly cramped space inside the halted bus, water started flowing from his forehead and armpits; he had to take off his cap and loosen his collar as he sat there. He jumped up before the bus had even reached the gate, squeezed between the packed rows, climbed over several bundles of combat gear to the front, and then jumped outside through the folding door. He leaned against the hot bus. He didn't walk upright when the others in the bus rolled down their windows and started laughing over his head. A little later, the director came out of the camp headquarters and hit the bus once with her fist. The heads withdrew inside. She waited a few seconds before she took away the man glued to the metal.

From that day onward, he moved the chess pieces for her. He still wore his uniform; he was still officially a soldier.

The director kept the soldier for herself. In the morning, he swept the squares of the game board, tore tufts of grass at the edge, or chopped off single stems from the cement. We exercised and jogged in place, following orders over the loudspeakers; the soldier hacked around the field with the hoe. He always kept his jacket on, even though they allowed these kinds of duties to be executed with a bare torso—the custodian only wore a yellow undershirt over his uniform trousers, sometimes nothing at all; green spots glowed on his arms from the bushes on the beach.

When the director felt like playing, she'd sit on the bench in front of the field; the soldier would immediately put aside his tools. Or he was seated already, but then stood up very quickly. He always remained standing, even though across the way there was another bench cemented to the ground. The director began; the soldier took his place behind the indicated piece, grabbed it with both arms under the wooden coils, secured his footing, and dragged it across the court to the desired square, as though he were carrying an unconscious body. He took less time for his own moves. He often started by shoving the knight between the pawns. They teetered and swayed. If one of the pieces tipped over with a dull thud onto the stone slab, the director looked away until the soldier picked it back up. The bishops made things difficult. They didn't have a rough surface like the other pieces, nor did they have a collar that he could have grabbed onto beneath the smooth ball. The smooth head sat on a narrow neck that widened at the bottom into a thick trunk. The soldier tipped it over and rolled it across the surface to the appropriate square. If the director lost, she'd look at her watch and go back to headquarters. If she won, she'd watch him carry the pieces back to their places. After supper, she said, and then walked away. The soldier nodded to the camp director's back. Only once did my brother not set the piece down immediately. I was walking past the edge of the playing field with a message for house 5 under my arm. He put the rook back down and looked at me. I kept walking without looking back. I didn't greet the director either.

I have to look at him longer during the biweekly maneuvers. At how he runs between the pieces, lifts them, sets them down, and then waits for the camp director's orders. She smiles at him nicely and with a slight hand movement makes him move her rook vertically to capture his knight. He makes a sign of being surprised with his hand, but takes the knight away immediately. He puts the captured pieces at the edge of the playing field sorted according to size. They stand there like a wooden legion while the field clears. The camp director fans the air with a folded newspaper. If one of us comes close to them, she nods at us encouragingly. The maneuver field is located between the barracks close to the chess court. We estimate distances according to self-drawn maps, run around the area with a compass, and register values in tables. We squat behind invisible barriers, throw ourselves in ditches, and tag metal balls in a circle. Sometimes we transport the wounded on our backs, or we take them by the arms and legs and put them onto a mat which serves as the hospital ward.

Every maneuver ends with a game that has each team wearing colorful bands on their arm which have to be captured by their opponent. We run across the field and edge along the walls of the barracks as best we can. Nobody is allowed inside the houses. Some of the children run to the camp director: she doesn't jump up and scream when they disturb her. She lets the refugees come to her, but doesn't look at them. They realize quickly they aren't allowed to break rules in her presence either. The camp director orders a pawn to move one square ahead before glancing briefly to the side. Who won? she asks, and turns around again. I tear the plastic band from somebody's arm. Bravo, she calls, and shakes her fist in the air.

Now that the loser was released from guard duty, I went to the window with the others again. It was unbearable for me to see him wandering like a restless animal around the strip between the fence and the barracks. While the other two soldiers waved or made other signs, he looked at me through the wire fence and said nothing. The older girls shouted at him, threw crumpled paper, or zwieback at him. He looked up and the girls saw that the paper and zwieback only hit his outer jacket.

The other two placed their feet on hooks near the concrete fence posts and smiled up at them. The girls above wrapped themselves around the window sills. They'd often whistle when they saw the relief squad coming from behind the house. My brother was as scared as the other two, except there was no reason for him to be. He wore his uniform according to the rules and he kept his weapon shouldered from the first minute of duty. We watched them walk past each other in opposite directions. They marched in step from the narrow strip between the house and fence. After a few minutes, the new guards took off their metal helmets so they could be drawn into the girls' room on clotheslines. They carried letters in them, entire books, or simply locks of soldier hair.

In any case, it was easy to hide the relationship to him. He bore a mark on his forehead like a stamp; a red ornament on his skin. By contrast, my body was spotless, clear. Even if somebody had tried to draw a connection between us, my hair and eyes were dark, but he looked like the color had been drained out of him. His transparent limbs stuck out of his uniform. That's how he walked through the camp. When I saw his milky shape approach our house, I stared into the barrack's ledger. He stood in front of the window of my guard room, tapped on it with a fingernail as if he had to first make himself noticeable. I knew he wanted to fetch the equipment, which had been stowed away in the basement of our barracks. The equipment? I asked, and he nodded. I shoved the ledger through the narrow crack between the glass for his signature. He held the pen so tightly, his fingers turned even whiter. Instead of writing, he waited, holding the tip of the pen over the sheet as though he had to remember his name. When I looked up, I saw he had been hoping for this look. I slid my jaw back and forth, a demand. He signed the ledger with a circle and line;

I gave him the key to the room. He stood in front of my window, the key fastened to a metal hook in his hand. I turned on the radio on the empty table in front of me. The opened ledger lay next to it.

In front of my window, I saw the girls sneaking up on him. When he stood alone on the chess field, they clapped their hands or screamed at him from behind. It took a few seconds until he opened his eyes again and turned around. He jabbed at the air a couple of times with his arm as if fighting the shrubs with a sword. The girls jumped to the side, laughed.

The sand we're sitting on has been smoothed over from the day before. We've been waiting an hour for the loudspeakers to announce we have permission to go swimming. We watch the others hobble with bowed feet across the stony seashore; only three groups are allowed in the water at the same time. They throw themselves into the waves between the boundary markers. Their bathing caps glow in the group colors like enemy signals. I dig a hole in the sand big enough for my fist as my brother takes a step towards me from behind. Some girls near the water stick their fingers into the algae-covered silt looking for amber. Every so often, they lift their arms in the air and then sink them again; they're disappointed at finding only glass splinters from dark beer bottles. They concentrate on the portion of beach that reaches the fence and then back down again. Behind the fence the beach is empty. They built the fence into the water so nobody could reach us. It disappears beneath the surface, behind the designated swimming area. None of us are interested in finding out precisely where it ends. My brother and the custodian come out from behind the bushes while we're waiting for the order to swim. I turn around briefly and immediately gaze in the opposite direction. My brother carries a bundle of twigs under his arm, the custodian, a large pair of hedge shears. They walk, one behind the other, to the pick-up on the road by the beach. Without turning my head, I can see the camp custodian moving through the grainy sand wearing crude shoes. Once they've passed me, my brother suddenly drops the clippings. He bends over for them, and I notice he glances at me. The custodian just scratches his upper arm at the sight of the fallen twigs, but keeps walking. My brother is still busy collecting them when I hastily reach behind and place two or three twigs on the heap. I look at him wordlessly. He takes this look as an invitation and says he has a vacation coming in October. I don't answer, and he says: maybe. I shrug my shoulders. He keeps looking at me, demanding a reaction from the news. I throw a clump of sand at a girl, who sits a few meters ahead of me. She screams and knocks the sand away from her hip. No: first she knocks the sand from her hip, and then she begins to scream. The director looks in our direction, and my brother finally gathers the wood in a bundle and stands. He follows the custodian who bangs a tree stump with the shears up the road. He doesn't hurry, nor does he purposely go slowly. He lays the deadwood onto the bed of the small truck like a sick infant, carefully pulling his arms out from under the pile. He looks at me. I jump up because the loudspeaker shouts out our number over the beach. Once I'm in the water, I look back. He is still standing there. The custodian beside him kicks the tires of the vehicle to loosen the sand from the soles of his shoes. I push the head of a fidgety girl under water. On the beach, the director makes a gesture with her head for me. When I don't react, she gives me a warning sign, pointing to my towel. She puts her hands on her hips and nods. I swim to the permitted buoy. Alone.

I had walked past him the night before they had found him on the beach. He was sweeping the chessboard. There was a pail with a rag hanging over the edge next to him. It was the first time he didn't notice me, and I stood still. I opened the barracks ledger in the middle of the path and looked over the pages at him. The spotlights in front of the barracks were turned on. He looked up for a few seconds and with steady movements began to wipe the heads of the individual pieces. He held them by their throats with one hand, and ran the other over the smoothly polished curves and edges. I saw how he cleaned each protuberance of the king's crown. When he finished, he threw water over it. When we marched by in the morning, the wood pieces were dry again.

Most of the horror passed quickly in the final days. The bigger girls started imitating how the dead person used to move. They waved their arms in the air, walked back and forth in front of each other with half-closed lids, or stood with tortured faces between the chess pieces that nobody touched anymore. Another girl shoved the corner of a handkerchief in her nose, bent her head all the way back, and then hobbled clumsily across the field with the white flag hanging in front of her face. The others started to laugh when I broke away from them, ran up to her, and ripped away the cloth. I hit her in the temple with my forearm. The girl immediately grabbed me with both hands and dragged me by the hair back to the group, which had jumped up and formed a circle around us. They tore at me; they called out their suspicions from every direction; everyone thought I couldn't be indifferent to the dead person. They were so surprised by their discovery that they didn't want to let me go anymore. For a while we formed a clutching sticky mass. Through the crowd of arms and heads, I saw the camp director exiting headquarters from the far end of the field. I realized immediately, she was looking for me in the court, the gravel paths, the playing field. Surely somebody had informed her of the connection between us, the ties and bonds that appeared if you looked at a dead person closely. A look in the files would have sufficed. A telephone call. She didn't stop looking at me as she walked towards us. She walked quickly, her torso bent forward. The girls pushed me from all sides. The biggest one still clawed at my hair with her hand. Beneath the pain, I thought I had to do something for the loser. But then I realized how ridiculous it was to treat a dead person as if he were alive.