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Vibration Background

By Selim Özdoğan

Translated by Kristin Dickinson

Like most children have probably done, I too have understood words, as they had not been said. For a long time I thought there was a word “civil garage,” and imagined a garage full of police without uniforms.

My daughter Şiir heard a word in school that she couldn't visualize. Papa, she said, the teacher says we have a vibration background, what is that?

I told her she had misheard, and tried to explain what the teacher had meant to say with the word. While I was at it, I also gave a lecture on civil garage. When Şiir became impatient with my many words, I sent her to do her homework and gave some thought to our vibration background.

It's a good word, much better than civil garage. Migrants and vibrators have more in common than it may seem at first glance. Vibrators are usually hidden from the public eye, in drawers, in the back corner of a closet, in the secret compartment of a makeup case. Migrants also often live hidden lives, in areas with cheap rent, in the corners of big cities that we are rarely aware of. That is, until something happens. When a migrant becomes visible for criminal reasons in the ghetto, then the same words always come into play: honor killings, macho-society, forced marriage, lack of integration.

When the vibrator becomes visible, whether the customs officer lays it on the table, or a mother or husband discovers it, there are also specific words in play, even if they're not always spoken: perversion, debauchery, unfaithfulness, nymphomania.

We take out a vibrator to satisfy a desire. We take out migrants when we want a satisfying explanation for social evils without having to recognize ourselves as part of the cause.

As soon as we're satisfied, each disappears into the drawer or into the ghetto—until the next time. Morals, religion or sexual hostility don't change the forces that lead to vibration. Xenophobia, marginalization, or even violence don't change the forces that lead to migration.

That evening I sat with Şiir on the terrace of our family home, which we were able to buy with the money I made from publishing comics critical of Islam. They wove suicide bombers with explosive belts into these comics with long bearded men who have no respect for women.

And the sun set slowly in our vibration background.

Translator's Note

In this brief piece, Selim Özdoğan reveals the power of the official census term “*Personen mit Migrationshintergrund*” (persons with a migration background) to both mark and categorize migrants in a way similar to dominant stereotypes. Using his own childhood misinterpretation of the German word “*Zivilcourage*” (civil courage) as a springboard to pointedly reflect on his daughter's questions regarding the family's “vibration background,” Özdoğan alludes to the contested nature of the actual term: Adopted by the Federal Bureau of Statistics in 2005, “*Migrationshintergrund*” denotes persons without German citizenship, *or* persons who have migrated to

Germany since 1949 as well as their children. While the term refers to a broad spectrum of persons, including ethnic German immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, it has often been used in public discourse as a politically correct euphemism for more openly discriminatory terms such as “*Ausländer*” (foreigner). This has provided a way to categorize migrants as such, even after they have chosen to take German citizenship, or received it upon birth (approximately one third—or 4.9 million out of a total 15.3 million persons—with a migration background during the 2005 microcensus were born in Germany).