



Auf Wiedersehen

Christa Holder Ocker

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Nobody really wins a war; victorious countries only lose a little bit less than the defeated. War itself is the only true conqueror, gulping down bodies and lives with ferocious appetite, rendering towns and villages bare, rubbled reflections of their one-time prosperous, communal selves. War especially likes the sound of goodbye.

Christa Holder Ocker, her sister Rosel, and her mother say goodbye, *auf wiedersehen*, over and over during the fall of the Third Reich. Once to their long-time family home in Gorlitz when they evacuate to avoid the encroaching Russian army. Goodbye again to the Apolda boarding house where they lived with many other refugees and where Christa's father found them when he returned from the war. And finally, goodbye to their make-shift home at the iron works in Osterode—part of the American Zone—where they lived in a tiny apartment squeezed between the horses' stall and a room full of displaced Romanians.

Saying goodbye to the geography of a place is the easiest part of leaving; saying goodbye to people is the hardest. "My father did have a mustache. I had seen it on the photograph Mutti kept in a locket between her breasts, the one she pulled out whenever he threatened to become faceless again." Her father; her best friend, Gunter; another friend, Klaus; Otto the stableboy—Christa's friends and family helped her play, laugh, dream, and survive, and leaving them behind is not a task from which she ever actually recovers.

Ocker, who has contributed stories and poems to best-selling anthologies, is a whimsical memoirist who deftly captures the perspective of the child she once was. Her mother and sister are animated through brief, luminous descriptions that reveal volumes in a short space; even relatives who only exist in stories are granted charming details, like her grandmother, the "scientific miracle who had lived without a stomach for quite a while before she died."

Though *auf Wiedersehen* is a sad book, it does not languish in despair but celebrates the strength of Christa and her family and their escape to American shores. Ocker brings much-needed attention to those innocent citizens stuck in a country waging a bloody war, a country conducting genocide. "Caught in a battle between good and evil, we children of the Nazi generation...played and laughed and formed a strong bond. A bond broken the day we said *auf Wiedersehen*."

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