

★ **Sweetlust****Asja Baki****Jennifer Zoble, Translator**

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In the daring, imaginative short stories of Asja Baki's *Sweetlust*, strong-minded women fight for survival and search for meaning in disturbing dystopian worlds.

Set in the Balkans and mostly in the near future, these stories explore climate change, media manipulation, artificial intelligence, and sexual identity. In "Gretel," a woman schemes against bizarre, manipulative AI at an erotic amusement park; she sees them as "the crown jewel" in the final stage of men's lunacy. In another story, a cynical physicist writes a program for a time travel machine to escape catastrophic flooding due to climate change. She wryly observes, "if I were to spend all day making a list of what's survivable, I'd probably die from sheer agony." In another tale, a woman looks for a connection in a world wherein marriage has become contractual.

Several pieces have the shadowy, unsettling quality of fairy tales. In a chilling twist on the Persephone myth, a woman buries her husband in a gully where he becomes god of the underworld, living for three months each year in the "possessive embrace" of his mother and her suffocating love. In another story, an amateur ornithologist discovers the haunting reasons why his predecessor quit her job counting bird species. In an account of an arduous pilgrimage to restore her sight, a blind botany student reflects on her favorite species, the *Primula kitaibeliana*, which can thrive in meager conditions on craggy limestone cliffs. Throughout this wide-ranging collection, sly humor accents the penetrating observations.

The dystopian stories collected in *Sweetlust* raise piercing, inventive questions that transcend place and time, leading to reflections on contemporary experiences. Here, intelligent, resourceful heroines learn to endure and even rise above their grim circumstances—whether or not survival is enough.

KRISTEN RABE (January / February 2023)

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