



The Interim

Wolfgang Hilbig

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An East German expat drinks his way through a neverending identity crisis in Wolfgang Hilbig's historical novel *The Interim*.

C. is a man of contradictions. He is a writer who cannot write. He was granted permission to leave struggling East Germany and visit Western Europe's most beautiful cities, but he spends all of his time there in train stations and hotel rooms. He loves his girlfriend, but he cannot acknowledge this until she leaves him. Because no one can live in limbo forever, sooner or later, C. will have to decide what he wants—or have outside forces decide for him.

C.'s detachment is palpable. He can't commit to anything or anyone, even when he wants to (which isn't often). Unable to express himself in words, his frustration takes the form of addiction, neglect, guilt, and bursts of rage. The narrative reinforces his isolation, berating him as a self-pitying liar who can only self-tolerate through an alcoholic haze. It even refuses to give him the dignity of context or an identity: he is known only by an initial, and almost none of the other characters are ever addressed by their real names.

East and West Germany, despite their many differences, are both uninhabitable in C.'s eyes. Earthy descriptions relay the bad weather and overabundance of people that plague both sides of the border. C.'s incurable misanthropy colors everything he sees, though there is no obvious reason for his malaise. And yet he stumbles on, vacillating between sobriety and drunkenness, East and West, bachelorhood and serious relationships, unable to find happiness anywhere—and sure to be just as unhappy at his journey's end as he was at its start.

Set in the 1980s, *The Interim* is a portrait of a man and a nation in the midst of transition.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (November / December 2021)

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