

Simona Ryser

Mary's Ghosts

Novel

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Snowfall

Novel

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Extracts

Translated by Donal McLaughlin, Scotland

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About the book:

Marie is derailed by her mother's death. Consumed by conflicting feelings of separation and relief, she tackles each day hand over hand, has her admirers pay her keep, sometimes looks for a job. She loves Wolf, uses Manfred's credit card to shop, goes out with Hans. Above all, she roams around town aimlessly, and on the bus, at the station, or in the delicatessen section, her mother can suddenly appear before her. With to-do lists to highlight what is most important, Marie attempts to address the inner and outer muddle in her life, to create some order.

The lean, musical style of *Marie's Ghosts* revolves around a tale of loss and recovery, of absence and desire, of trauma and language. Like in a roundelay, fairytale devices and literary references and motifs feature again and again, and join to form a vivid book about great mourning – and the search, subsequently, for a life.

«With this debut, Simona Ryser offers a piece of contemporary literature that, superficially, seems unprepossessing, but – in terms of its content – is all the tighter for that. She achieves this by ably combining consistency and playfulness» *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*

«Simona Ryser has written a virtuoso debut novel, clever, and light-as-a-feather. A modern fairytale about loss: sad, cunning, at times funny, and in the best sense: stubborn.» Sabine Peters, *Basler Zeitung*

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Marie was brushing through the undergrowth. She was bent over, her hands not far from the ground, her breathing clearing her path. The dry branches and dead leaves flew out of the way; beneath the brown floor of the winter forest, the fragrant floor of the spring forest was emerging. There were flashes of green beneath Marie's feet. In the distance, a wild animal howled. Above her, the wind was blowing in the treetops, they bowed deep down, touched her hair, shot up into the air again. Then a night owl, maybe. The forest was a sea, rising and falling; Marie could feel the wind in her face; around her, the water was rising. She lost any sense of traction and drifted, weightlessly, and without direction, the forest floor now sinking into the depths. Marie opened her eyes. The sheet was sticking to her body. Her breathing was rising and falling. Her legs – one crossed over the other – were feeling heavy. An alarm clock was maybe ticking in the floor below her. The darkness had a pattern to it: dull and bright stripes. Outside, she couldn't hear any buses. Any voices. Inside, no taps were dripping. Downstairs, an alarm clock was bleeping. *Same time tomorrow. Good morning. Goodnight.* Marie stretched her legs, shifted her weight, turned onto her other side. Closing her eyes, she went on *Standby*.

Marie lived with a piece of mirror on *Großmauer-Straße*. Today was a day when everything was still possible. Wolf hadn't dropped by last night. Sometimes, they went weeks without any contact. Wolf raced around like an open blade. But that's another story. Marie wanted to begin anew today. She looked at her face in the piece of mirror. She was sitting at the window, stirring her coffee. She ticked off the man with the cellphone. In front of her sat her laptop, folded closed. Marie wanted to begin anew today. She looked at her face in the piece of mirror. She was sitting at the window, stirring her coffee. She ticked off the vehicle cleaning the pavements, the lady with the dog was still a blank. Downstairs, the newspaper was in one of the mailboxes or lying on the half-landing, the radio was playing morning stuff. Marie squinted into the sunlight. Soon, she would get ready, she'd flank the fitted kitchen and go through the black shaft, would go down the stairs and leave the house. She'd walk through the town, would follow the bus route, would take the turn-off towards the river and walk along the swath through the town, she'd buy a newspaper at a kiosk or look at one in a café perhaps, maybe also speak a little. Marie wrote, then mirrored her face in the piece of glass. The coffee tasted bitter. She ticked off the lady with the dog. Wolf hadn't dropped by the previous night either. She'd wait here another while, Wolf could phone, perhaps he was still asleep somewhere. Wolf was far away. Marie was too.

It had rained here during the night. The puddles were splashing beneath Marie's shoes. It was no longer raining. Marie allowed herself to be splashed by a passing car and listened to the rude noises her shoes were making. Another fifty paces, and then she'd the choice: the crescendos of waves of traffic in her left ear, more and more fragments of voices and bits of words from the shops that were gradually opening, in her right. Or the sound of traffic, compressed, suddenly, and gently rumbling in the background, and the clacking of footsteps on the pavement in the foreground, with a few presumably primarily female voices from the boutiques that opened for the early birds.

Marie opted for the clacking – that sounded, mind you, more like subdued quarter notes, thanks to the wet ground. Every four steps equaled one exhalation. Blinds were pulled up, someone sneezed at the early spring, a shop was receiving a delivery. Clack, clack, clack. She had no business here. The air smelled good. Marie was walking *alla breve*.

Her hair was fluttering in the breeze she created – a pleasant, refreshing feeling on the back of her neck. The morning wateriness was leaving her eyes, she could now see clearly.

When she ran into Wolf, it was more *unexpected*. Marie had been walking for a few hours, probably – her feet were hurting, at least. He was sitting over a book. Mysterious symbols were laid out before him, scribbles and numbers, formulae, they were, syntactic series, data or results. A standard language, in any case.

Things have been happening again, he said.

I dreamt about wolves last night, Marie answered. Wolf was immediately taken by the face that mirrored itself in the glass. He wanted to kiss it. Marie leaned back a bit.

I'd like a coffee first. Today's the beginning of a new day.

That's always the case.

Today's special. Everything's starting all over again.

Today's coming from a south-northerly direction, Wolf said, and his eyes shone in the sunlight. Marie sat down beside him and smiled, she ordered a coffee, and Wolf growled gently. A bin lorry drove past. We can dispose of your Christmas tree for you, it said, along the side. Maybe the lorry has been stolen, and the message is out-of-date, Marie thought, then said, I'm on my way to the delicatessen section, and Wolf asked, When will we see each other again?

Marie wrote: *asap* and set off.

Wolf had asked Marie could he let himself go, and though she hadn't understood the question, actually, she'd nodded quietly, at which point he'd left his form and metamorphosed, as it seemed to her, into a gentle animal, and as his body slid over her, he touched her so softly so often that she herself started to move, and as his smile spread all over her and flowed into her orifices, she felt as if they were setting out on a long flight through the night, and in that infinitely slow and constant motion she discovered a whole body-scape of little bays and mountains and caves she could sink her mouth into, and breathe along, and his expert hands triggered such a gentle warmth on her breasts that they turned pink and jutted out between the folds in the duvet like two marzipan hills. To Marie, the endlessness of this night seemed so unique that her smile melted into the bed-sheet and mingled with the other body fluids, and collected in the creases in their bodies and the bedlinen that, due to the blue light this night was giving off, were casting little shadows, and when Marie later opened her eyes – after surrendering completely to the intoxication and the tender sleep that followed, just as she'd previously surrendered to those infinitely slow motions, that long flight, and the bodies that, without her having a hand in the matter, had made love as if they'd always known each other, and as if they always would – she discovered Wolf, the way he was breathing, unconsciously, in the glow of the green light of the digital display of the alarm clock, the numbers on which she simply couldn't read, even if she screwed her eyes, and so she closed them and opened them a few times, trying to recognise a number, maybe, after all, amid the image somewhere, something that remained beyond her, though. What did emerge was a green line-drawing she liked, an unreadable symbol capturing her desire and lust, at which point, time – tonight – again collapsed, making her fall asleep.

Simona Ryser

Snowfall (working title)

Extract from a novel

Publication: August 2011

Translated by Donal McLaughlin (Scotland)

About the book:

Hanna, a trustee suffering from burn-out syndrome, sits as if paralysed at her computer, escapes into the city, steals things from department stores, tries to meet men. Sabine, her young secretary, puts many a date her way and, more and more, takes on her dossiers. Her mother would like her finally to have a steady boyfriend. Georg, a game designer on paid leave, fights dragons and rides or runs or cycles through the city, has something indefinable breathing down his neck. He ends up ghosting his way through the personal ads on the screens of Hanna and Sabine in the multi-storey on *Helenenplatz*.

Three modern city-types – guided by the city itself, its streets, department stores, office towers and computer screens; and by their dreams of love that lasts more than a few nights – meet and/or miss each other.

In wonderfully musical fashion, Simona Ryser tells a tale of the city, of work, and of love. *Snowfall* is a modern fairytale in the age of web portals where lonely singles are in (virtual) search of the one true date: at the edge of the town, beneath the chestnut beyond the cornfield.

In the city proper, the light culminates, façades and palaces, churches and public buildings, window displays, publicity and advertising, are all lit. A few rows of houses further out, already, the city falls into semi-darkness, dim street-light, two lampposts per pavement. Beyond *Helenenplatz*, a residential area. No grand villas, museums, no churches, no monuments, no landmarks illuminated in the darkness. In one case, maybe, a weak blue light in a window, behind which a woman is watching late-night television; or maybe a shadow, divided into strips by half-closed shutters, a man who can't sleep.

Tonight, when she has left the multi-storey on *Helenenplatz* after all, and sets off for home late, Hanna won't notice the semi-darkness surrounding her. Her gaze is distracted by the city centre lights. Maybe, behind the lights, Hanna will notice the dark background, the outer town on the other side, and think of Sabine who is in a deep sleep there somewhere, out for the count. For a moment, Hanna thinks of Sabine's salary, the salary she should long since ... She then continues, past Georg's apartment, not knowing a restless man who can't sleep is lying there, tossing and turning.

Once home, Hanna kicks her shoes off and gets under the hot shower. Three yellow post-its are on the floor. They must have fallen from her coat pocket: Attractive radiologist, M, GSOH, beautiful laughter lines. Pleasant personality, bright, well-groomed, close to nature, seeks natural, cheerful F. 095/parnet.com. Also: hillwalking, good food, books on architecture, urban planning. 087/parnet.com. And: knight seeks fair damsel at the edge of town. This post-it she pins to the wall; the other two she deposits in the drawer of her bedside table. She then lies down in bed and listens to the sound in her head.

When Hanna, about to order another coffee, saw the knight coming through the glass door fifteen minutes before the agreed time, it made her jump. The blue scarf to help her recognise him wasn't necessary, it

was the eyes. The thin slits, agile, quick, were scanning the room. His body turned slightly to the left, slightly to the right. Hanna reacted, quick as a flash. She slipped her green leather gloves into her handbag, wrapped her head in her extra-large mohair scarf, put the money for her coffee on the table, and left by the other door. Outside, she paused. Breathing like a hounded animal, she was. For a moment, she could feel the knight's gaze on her back. His eyes were burning two warm holes in it. She let the warmth spread through her body – like some gentle tenderness, it felt – and remained still. She was turning into a tree, she was taking root, her feet, like knotted wood, were piercing the icy asphalt, were growing deep down into the ground, and holding her there. She closed her eyes and, for a moment, felt sun and a blazing light on her face.

Opening her eyes again, she tried to turn round. She tried to open her handbag, to put on the green gloves, to re-enter Café Claire, to go there, take a deep breath and set off, to look him in the eye, say hello, then utter a few words.

It was the wrong meeting place. Knight seeks fair damsel at the edge of town. Of course: she should meet him somewhere else. Café Claire was in the centre of town, how were they to find each other there?

Hanna couldn't move. She stood there, motionless, and was freezing. Any warmth had left her body, no knight and no love-play. No minne, no song, either. Nothing was holding her back. Hanna thought of Sabine. Why had she put this ad on her desk? Knight seeks fair damsel at the edge of town. Hanna was no fair damsel. Who *was* the fair damsel here? The cold was giving Hanna a headache. The pain was moving across her skull from the left. Hanna walked in the direction of the pain, to the left. The wind was blowing and making her eyes water. After about 50 yards, she stopped in a house entrance and waited.

Some time later, she saw a middle-aged knight leaving Café Claire and, with fast, supple movements, heading for the city centre. For a while,

Hanna tried to match his speed, and followed him. She couldn't tell where he was heading, what it was he wanted. The path he was taking was all over the place, he walked quickly, with no goal in mind, it seemed. Hanna followed him, from some distance behind, and for a while it was as if the two were dancing a strange dance, a great distance apart, two bodies in pointless, parallel motion, falling into step, they were walking, as it were, together. At some point, though, the distance grew, the movement of one got faster and faster, taking corners and turns quickly, zigging and zagging, hare-like, whereas the other body became heavy in its movements, slow and sluggish, irresolute, until the distance between the two was too great and, finally, they lost each other.

And then Hanna was standing on *Helenenplatz*, she closed her eyes, pointed her chin to the sky, and allowed the snowdrops – ever heavier with the wet – to fall on her face. Please, she called, please, and in her pleading and lamentation love was audible, and you, Miserella, pray join in, join in as she laments, and she's standing there, the lamentations flowing through her, like a tree, she is, a bending plant, fixed to the ground, roots or adhesive, she can't take another step, there she stands on this square where, at this time of year, no one would ever stop, and her lament is spreading across the damp asphalt, the notes trickle down her like a brooklet, a thread, a rivulet, it runs down her legs, heaven and earth, tears, melted snow, a wet trace spreads across the square, a shallow, narrow lake, full of lament, of trembling and pleading. *Amor, Amor, dov' è, dov' è la fe, ch'el traditor giurò?* Which deceiver, and whose heart is speaking, Miserella, and Hanna, who has been cheated by love and by herself and yet longs so much still for a forever and ever, and still she's standing there, as if her legs have taken root, she bends in the winter wind, no leaves on the branches, the notes rising, the notes falling, Miserella, it's from her closed mouth that the words are coming: *Fa' che ritorni il mio amor com'ei pur fu, o tu m'ancidi ch'io non mi tormenti più.* Tell him to come

back, *il mio amor*, tell love to come back. *Amor. Taci, taci.*

But Hanna's heart is cold, it lies like a piece of red meat in her breast that is rising and falling, and no décolleté can give love enough love. No love. No admirer, no deceiver, no lover, no love.

Even the song was merely going through her head, Hanna wouldn't have been able to sing even the melody, a silent music, to which only her looking up into the falling snow bore witness. A few steps further, she could have acquired the lament, for not a lot of money, depending on the edition, in the music shop at the entrance to the arcade, all the recordings were in that window, a winter offer, Monteverdi in the background, on a laminated poster, velvet and brocade on the CDs, blurred landscapes, the singers looking into the distance, women and men alike, one woman looking at the camera, cloth and light draped round it. But Hanna was familiar with the display, her Miserella faded away in the cold evening air that made her gasp, almost, and gave her a cold that, for months, she couldn't cure.

That night, as the night itself was coming to an end, about two kilometres from Hanna's apartment, and maybe twenty from Sabine's, Georg was lying, exhausted, in bed. He'd been running round the city until late in the evening, working his disappointment off, this way, then that way, up and down. No one had come to Café Claire, he'd waited a long time and no one had been sitting there, waiting for him, with green leather gloves, no damsel and no lady. He'd ended up running off, with no goal in mind, his desire crushed, he'd allowed himself to drift. At first, Georg had thought, still, someone was behind him, someone was following him, a distinguished lady, the fair damsel perhaps, back and forth he went, with burning cheeks, excited steps, at some point he'd lost that feeling, though. There was no one there, no one who would have seen him, and he soon had that restless feeling in his legs yet again.

He was shivering. No, the window was closed. He felt beside the bed for a woollen blanket or piece of clothing. He got hold of the pullover he'd taken off quickly earlier, pulled it under the duvet, and tried to wrap it round his body. The shutter was down, but light was getting in, through the cracks. Georg shut his eyes, a tier of yellowy-grey settled on his eyelids. No, it's no longer night-time.

Now someone's at my window. I heard the footsteps, them slowing down, and if I open my eyes, I'll be able to see a shadow behind the shutter. The distinguished lady is coming to visit. Maybe I was followed after all. I'll see a hand, tampering with the window. I'll not open my eyes.

Later, the phone rang, and Georg didn't answer it. He got up and turned the light on. He checked the in-box on his cellphone, then the one in the bedroom and the one in the living room. Potency pills, casino sites, new software. No new contacts. No message. Nothing. In the kitchen, he turned the coffee machine on. The milk was off. He spread jam on some crackers and drank the coffee black. Georg felt sick. He was alone. He had to think of something. *Input: restart.*

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