

Beschreibung Laura Lichtblau, „Schwarzpulver“

In her debut novel "Black Powder", Laura Lichtblau imagines a dystopian world in the not-so-distant future.

Berlin. It is the time of the so-called „Rauhnächte“, the days between Christmas and Epiphany. The capital city is in a state of frenzy that threatens to escalate every second.

"Black Powder" tells the story of three characters: Burschi, whose real name is Elisa, Charlotte and Charlie. All three of them are pushed to their limits in a society that is becoming increasingly radicalised and where right-wing nationalists are on the rise. Burschi, openly homosexual, suffers the consequences of a homophobic state; Charlotte, co-founder of a conservative (and armed!) vigilante group close to the state's right-wing ideology, turns her back on the party and is pushed to her psychological limits as a dissenter; and Charlie, Charlotte's son, unpaid intern and part of the millennial generation, struggles to escape his overprotective mother and experiences his coming of age in Berlin's left-wing music scene. Until everything escalates on New Year's Eve...

In the end, a large counter-demonstration fails at a right-wing rally, but one thing soon becomes clear: the characters will continue to revolt, if only in their own small systems. The smell of gunpowder and rebellion is in the air...

### 1. *Burschi*

The winter sun shines brightly over the garden, covering everything with neon light; the rain barrel, the pavilion in the far corner, the garden globes that rise from the flowerbeds like brightly colored children's heads.

I leave a trail in the snow, bringing the house closer to the street. Behind the plane trees and pines, the house crouches into the icy cold, into the past. The cellar reaches down into the earth, the roof rises far into the sky, *scratching the firmament*, as Traudl said, exaggerating

I put the key in the lock, push the door open with both hands. A very small notebook lies on the worn kilim carpet in the hallway, I pick it up, it almost falls apart as I turn the pages. It is an old farmer's almanac, in four colours; the burgundy red flows over the edges of the black printed lines, the tan green and carrot red colors seem to bleed into each other. Moons, ears of corn, depictions of saints. Traudl probably wanted to do something with this. I take the almanac and then climb the stairs as quietly as possible, come to standstill at the top. The travel photographs climb up the walls like wild ivy, black and white shots of sunlit petrol stations, Traudl, dangling above a mountain stream with one arm, Johann kissing a small, hairy pig, watercolour paintings, clay masks, mountain ranges, drawn with black fineliner.

When I tell friends what I am doing here, they almost always pull a face. I tell them *I am the companion of Mr and Mrs. März*, what else should I call it? I read to them. I tell them what is going on outside, fights and other incidents, like the lady in the fur coat who recently saved a homeless person during ticket control on the train by pulling the protective hood of her monthly ticket over him. I water the plants that protrude from every corner, climb along the walls, stretch out their thin tentacles, and thus cover the plaster with green ornaments; the winter garden has become an anarchic greenhouse where the cucumber plants and myrtle bushes are tangled together, winding around each other, where hibiscus enters into symbiosis

with pepper plants, where coral vine and hemp palms almost seem to devour each other. The light is soft here, green, as if deep under water; it divides the space into fragile fragments. When mum prepared the hay pillows for our holiday guests it always smelled just like this winter garden, and sometimes I get terribly homesick from the green smell.

Most of the time I bring Mrs. März old mementos, she inspects the desert rose, the ping-pong bats, the little wooden figure of a hussar rider. When Mrs. März orders me to go looking for something, I rely entirely on my intuition, on that soft voice somewhere deep within myself; then I push down the door handle to one of the rooms full of dust and whispers. To the monkey room, the egg timer salon, the matchbox room. Oh, Mr. and Mrs. März were very, very big collectors. Now Mrs. März doesn't walk anymore. And Mr. März doesn't speak anymore. And they are both lying in a big room, breathing the same air and spores and they just won't die. Their nephew Ludwig is slowly growing restless, *This is hard cash!* he once said to me when I had just started to work for him and he was having a long and far too honest day. Because the house has already been sold, the owner expects to tear it down or move in within the next two years. *And what Traudl and Johann are doing can hardly be called living anymore*, Ludwig told me even more honestly, *it's more like two vegetables rotting*. But how is he supposed to know how much is still going on in Traudl's head and in Johann's as well; surely it is enough to cling to life. Sometimes Mrs. März does get out of bed, pulls the stiff blanket aside and sets off on her own to look for the object she wants, but she doesn't find it, never finds it, can't find her way back, or only rarely. She cocoons herself in one of the rooms, lies there and hopes for a good while that someone will find her, that Johann will find her, that is what she really hopes. But he can't, and usually it's me who discovers Traudl, or the nurse. Sometimes she is in a bad state when I find her, grumpy, cold, and then I lead her back to her room and she shakes her head, at herself and Johann's failed rescue, who lies calmly in his bed, his eyes turned to the ceiling and his pyjamas half unbuttoned. He has no idea of her efforts. And Mrs. März buttons his pyjamas back up, perhaps a little more tightly than necessary. Then she lies down in her bed, she looks at me and says something like *I knew some people didn't know anything about arm swinging* Mrs. März has clear and not-so-clear moments, she knows she is nothing but a well-liked guest in her own house anymore. On one of her clear days she told me that that was *a really dumb feeling*.

And now I'm standing outside her room again, I open the door, very quietly, and see Johann lying in bed, he's breathing heavily, pressing a small bag with red tassels against his chest, and his eyelids flutter open and shut again. I say hello to Johann and look at Mrs. März, who is sitting on a windowsill and looking out the window. Her crooked spine is visible under the fabric of her pyjamas, small bony humps in a sea of fabric. Mrs. März looks like she is concentrating very hard, as if she is trying to catch something with her gaze that is jumping through the cold garden. The sun shines on her lap, I gently place the farmer's almanac on her knee. *At 12 o'clock you can see into the sky. It's when the ghosts appear*, she says. *If you drag a feeding trough around the house, the devil will appear. Then you can ask him where the treasure is hidden*. I leave the room quietly, Mrs März continues speaking, her voice sounds urgent. And then I start with the secret part of my work, I collect things that might be useful to me, because that is how it is: I am secretly selling off their belongings one by one. *They are so old that they won't even notice anything*, Ludwig reassured me when I looked at him sceptically, *You help them and me by clearing out the house, get a good feeling, a free spirit and money – it's a win-win situation, don't you understand?* It's a deal and I make the most of it whenever I can, I almost always take something, but it sometimes seems to me as if I'm

slowly destroying Mr. Mrs. März's lives, as if I might accidentally pull out the wrong stone from the wobbling construct of their existence, so that everything will collapse. As if everything might fall apart if those small brass fish, wall decorations for the kitchen that are covered with verdigris, went missing. But I do it anyway. I have started a small internet business, it is flourishing because the customers like the patina, the dark smell that sticks to the objects from the house. And so my business flourishes into colorful blossoms on my bank account, but, unfortunately, they never last: the blossoms wither and fade as quickly as they've bloomed.

Before I leave, I check on Mrs März one more time. On Traudl. The name doesn't roll off my tongue easily, it feels as uncomfortable as hugging a stranger in your pyjamas. Mrs. März is now standing at the window and writing a note on her arm, she's been doing that for quite a while now, *because I end up losing everything else*, she says. Mrs. März lets her arm sink. I walk up to her and read the word *Rauhnächte* on her dry skin, the blue letters are large and loose.

*Hello, Traudl*, I say. She turns around and says *Hello, Burschi*. She never calls me Elisa.

## 2. Charlie

Charlotte says I'll always stay the same age in her mind. And I know only one thing: I want to get out of that mind because the view in here is not good at all, too much fear, too much red hair, no fresh air, never. Today is Boxing Day, so we're going to *Lon Men* for dinner, we're there every week anyway, it's become a kind of habit. I used to think that I wouldn't be doing these things anymore by the time I turned 19, but I also used to think that, once I became an adult, a grown man and so on, I'd be living in another apartment, in another neighbourhood, maybe even in another climate zone. Nope, none of that happened, we're still living together at 23 Waldkrugallee, no change in sight.

Because Charlotte has to get on a plane at dawn tomorrow in order to glide over fat clouds to Vienna and give a lecture on the topic of *safety procedures in trams*, we meet quite early today. The big question is, what condition will she be in when she arrives, did she like my present, a voucher for a yoga course, I think she only went there in order not to hurt me, well prepared in her lilac two-piece suit. I'm hoping to meet a deeply and thoroughly relaxed Charlotte, but that seems like too much to ask.

I open the drawer of my natural wood wardrobe, I notice that she has put two new wool sweaters in there again, the price tag still attached, and also a pile of underpants in a few different, neutral tones, uncommented intruders in my wardrobe. I look out at our neighbor's snow-covered flowerbed, I look over to our other neighbour, who is knocking out invisible opponents with his fists behind the frosted glass pane and I suddenly get the urge to do the same thing with my mother. Then I reach for one of the sweaters. Charlotte means well, rituals are important to her, they give her a sense of stability and are supposed to do the same thing for me, she says. We have a lot of rituals, they slowly pile up as high as the mountain of returnable bottles under our sink, and nobody takes them away. Why not?

When we go to the big All-You-Can-Eat-Evening at *Lon Men*, we always meet early, we know that if we get there early, we can sit next to the buffet, which has some advantages,

better overview, shorter distances, if we get there early, the food in the big tin vats still smells fresh. *Look at them, the guests are devouring the food from the buffet, just like wild animals*, Charlotte says, watching them makes her lose all her appetite, so we get there earlier than the others - who eats dinner at 5pm? We do. Charlotte has a favourite picture of me, where I'm four years old and standing on the summer terrace of *Lon Men*. I'm wearing a blue dress, she has curled my hair, and pinched my cheeks to make them even rosier, I look like a girl and the orange-yellow awning is bulging in the warm summer wind above my head. I am holding a large cone of ice cream in my hand, I look happy and seem to have no idea that Charlotte is passing me off as a girl to everyone today. At every family party Charlotte takes out the picture and shows it around, she laughs, everybody laughs and says *Charlie has become such a cute girl!* And that's why the boss of the restaurant, Mrs. Zhou, still calls me Xiao Nuren, which means *little lady*, I don't know what to think of that either.

When aunt Liese was there for my birthday last year, along with Uncle Gabriel of course, and when Charlotte jumped up to get the photo again, I screamed at her if she had nothing else to do but to embarrass me, if this was really the only damn fun in her sad civil servant life. I got very loud and unfair, after all, she doesn't exactly lead a monotonous life as a precision shooter, even though she has told me often enough how monotonous it can be to observe public squares and shopping malls for hours on end without anything happening. And Charlotte was very quiet when she came back without the photo and it looked as if her curls had lost all their strength, they hung around her face like thin paper streamers. It was a sad sight and I immediately felt terribly guilty. Charlotte asked in a paper-thin voice if anyone else wanted sugar-free plum cake, but no one did. Uncle Gabriel quickly made a joke, *What happens if two hunters meet in the forest? They're both dead*, nobody laughed. Later, Charlotte cried and Aunt Liese held her a little awkwardly in her round, heavy arms and pressed her against her shirt printed with silver ivy. I don't know if Charlotte would have preferred a girl and I don't know why she gave me that name, Charlie, Charlotte, maybe it's better not to think about it too much. Anyway, the current state of things is this: I live at home, I'm doing an internship at a music label, Charlotte and I maintain a sort of cease-fire, our apartment has three rooms and our pepper shaker is shaped like a gorilla. If it ever gets too much for one of us, we go out on the balcony with the glass porch and scream into an empty flower pot.

But tomorrow, once she has closed her plastic suitcase and put on her fur cap, the fur cap she always wears and that I find really embarrassing, because all the people from the music label would find it just impossible, and because I feel ashamed of a lot of things anyway, of things she does, of things I do; anyways, once the door shuts close behind her and a refreshing breeze blows from the street through the staircase and through the letter slot, then I'll turn up *Kraftausdruck's* new single as loud as I can and scream along to the song, every line, *Nothing is dirtier than money - so I turn up my collar and do a line with Ronny*. And then I'll buy the street music equipment from that woman on the internet, we made a deal and I don't know exactly what belongs to the set, but definitely a mic, and I hope this first step will trigger a chain reaction of extraordinary, unheard-of events, fame for example, moving out from home, something like that, anyway.

3. charlotte

I'm lying on a rubber mat. It's sticky. It smells like incense. Next to me, a woman stretches her hips, she rolls over, she moans. There's gentle music playing, bells, sitar, but I don't feel gentle. People put their mats on the floor so softly, as if they were in danger. But they're not. They lay down their cork blocks and their belts and water bottles, and if someone even makes the slightest effort to find a place for his mat, everyone immediately moves to the side and welcomes him into their circle. I suspect that it was a rather stupid idea to come here. I should have accepted the slight damage to my relationship with Charlie, I should have told him diplomatically but firmly that this hippie stuff is not for me, only for wimps. I guess it's too late now.

I'm lying in the back corner, the light is getting dim and I close my eyes. I try to breathe deeply and loudly and to keep a clear, open consciousness. But the others' feet are patting around my head, the hooks clang, crash to the ground, I can smell who is wearing which deodorant and who hasn't washed their hair. I don't like that at all. Then everyone lies there flat as a pancake. We breathe deeply and loudly. We don't talk. We continue breathing until our teacher in the front says, *Welcome all, I'm so happy that you have decided to clear out your bodies and souls with me today.*

I nod to myself, I congratulate myself. The New Year is still a few days away, but I will be in top shape to welcome it. And now I lie in this room with thirty other townspeople, not knowing any of them and I breathe. Breathe deeper. Everyone else sits up. I stay down and notice that I am hungry, hopefully that is not a problem. The teacher says, *I want to get to know you.* I don't want to get to know anybody and I don't want anyone to get to know me. If the others knew what I spend my days doing, they wouldn't want to, guaranteed.

The woman behind me is crying. Already? I sit up, turn around and give her a cold look. *Pull yourself together*, my look tells her, and I know it can intimidate people and make them cry. Even my comrades.

Only now do I see what the teacher really looks like. He's a big, tough, tanned pile of muscle. His eyes are rimmed with black liner. He's wearing a top with thin straps and a white turban. I'm not. A woman in the front row is. Her neighbour raises her hand, she says, *I was lying on the bed yesterday, I looked up at the ceiling where the cobwebs grow and the mould sometimes blooms, and suddenly spirals grew out of my forehead, they floated upwards and shone in many colours.* She turns to us, shrugs her shoulders. *That's really how it was.*

The teacher claps his hands. *I thank you*, he says, *for sharing this experience with us. You had a vision, and that is quite incredible.*

The woman behind me sobs. When are we finally going to start exercising? A lot of other people start talking about themselves. One man says he couldn't stop crying last night. Not when he went climbing at the gym, hanging from colourful plastic blocks. Not when he watched a series on the internet about a walnut vendor in Lebanon whose greatest wish was to have a vegan wedding. Not when he kissed his son good night. His son looked at him in fear and cried even more. And I'm starting to get impatient. So impatient, that I've started to breathe fast and hard. I only notice this once I start feeling dizzy. Once my arms become slightly numb. But I focus as best I can. I visualize my hopes and wishes. Energy for my journey. Strength. After all, I will be presenting a radical and incredibly well thought-out security concept that will certainly shake the audience. I am expecting strong reactions. I'm not making it easy for myself.

*Let us begin in a sitting position*, says the teacher. We row with our arms, we breathe, we box the air, we hold absurd positions for nine minutes, singing confusing stuff. In between, the teacher shouts something like *You are close, so close, so close!* Close to what?, I ask my neighbour, but he only looks forward, focused.

We jump into the air with our arms outstretched, we bounce up and down and hit the ground three times rhythmically, we scream *har, har, har*, and *hari* when we jump into the air again. The teacher says, *let it out, let it go, let it go!* Some people are moaning. I don't think letting go is going to help if it means losing control. For a precision shooter, there's nothing worse. I imagine myself standing on the hotel roof and losing control, shooting in the wrong direction, at the wrong target, the wrong body parts, I bounce up and down once more, and when I scream *Hari*, I really hope that I can shout those mental images away, but I can't. With every breath I watch myself again as I make another, unforgivable mistake.

Later on, we are told to run around like elephants. We are supposed to grab our ankles with our legs straight and trample through the room. It is exhausting and humiliating, people pay money for this kind of thing, it's unbelievable. I can see almost nothing, just rubber mats, the parquet flooring, sweaty feet. The air is thick. People bump into me several times, one time I almost burn myself on the round metal stove in the corner. There's a yellow fire burning inside, I can see it through the window and wonder how the fire safety is in here and if I should report these hippies soon. After that we sit on our mats, completely exhausted, and are told to breathe into our third eye. This is slowly getting too much for me.

In the front, a woman has taken off her T-shirt, she sits in front of the teacher in her red bra and howls at him. Totally uninhibited! Uncle Gabriel would not like it here at all, that's for sure. *I have something very special planned for you*, says the teacher. *It's only possible because there are more than twelve of us here today.* We are told to form a circle and hold hands. The teacher says that the so-called 'Rauhnächte', the nights between Christmas and Epiphany, are a special time. And those nights are now and they are, supposedly, mysterious and unknowable. *On those nights, the spirits knock on the doors of this world*, says the teacher, *they hover over our streets. On those nights everything is changeable. Use their energy.* He lights a piece of wood, it must be a special one, because I feel even more confused than before. The man next to me grabs my hand tightly, as if he had a right to do so. I see the teacher hugging a crying woman and I think that all of this will surely come to a bad end. And then I just keel over.