

SCENES FROM AN EXECUTION

Michel Faber

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It's not until 25 pages into *Guantánamo* that the trussed-up, abused body with whose agonies and discomforts we've become intimately familiar is finally granted the dignity of a name. »He falls on his side, knees free, his head in the gravel. He is here. He's arrived at last. Somewhere on earth, a prisoner, I, Rashid.«

In a former life, Rashid, a young man from Hamburg, set off to visit his grandmother in Delhi, armed only with a Lonely Planet guide. By the time Dorothea Dieckmann's extraordinary novel locates him, he's been seized by the American military, transported to Camp X-Ray on Guantánamo Bay, bound, hooded, caged and systematically humiliated. His grip on his old identity weakens with frightening speed as his new life is dominated by physical distress, stimulus deprivation and the urgent need to somehow please his captors. »He doesn't dare move. He must wait, breathe, wait, breathe. His weight is poorly distributed, and from weight comes pain, meaning the pain is poorly distributed, as well. There's too much pain in his knees, too little in his feet. Just don't move. His feet hurt, but his knees hurt more ... It's a decisive struggle: shift the weight, yes or no, distribute the pain, yes or no. The battle intensifies but neither side is winning.« This desperate, ineffectual accommodation with enforced frailty is just one of many lessons Rashid will learn, all of them underscoring the same conclusion: nothing you do or say can help you.

Guantánamo has received unanimous praise overseas, although the language of that praise is unlikely to inspire the average reader with puppyish enthusiasm: »an unforgiving read«, »harrowing«, »scouringly brutal«, »devastating«, »lacerating«, »excruciating« and (my favourite) »a blow to the head«. Without meaning to, such phrases imply that *Guantánamo* is the epitome of the Grimly Serious Literary Novel, an infliction of unbearable suffering in the cause of truth. While Dieckmann admittedly disdains any imperative to provide entertainment (and so she should – Lord preserve us from any kooky, heartwarming *Guantánamo*-inspired fictions that American or British authors may have in store), it would be unfair to conclude that she doesn't care about her readers. The book's structure – six episodes at different stages of Rashid's imprisonment – is designed to allow us precisely the sense of forward momentum the camp's inmates are denied. We

live in Rashid's skin and appreciate that his torment drags on unremittingly, but, in the spaces between chapters, we snatch a breath of relief. A mere 150 pages in length, the book is a finely judged balance of art and anguish: we learn what it's like to be trapped in mind-numbing detention, without feeling we are being detained by a mind-numbing novel.

Dieckmann understands the impulsive vagueness of young men's adventures, the way a 20-year-old can end up lying face-down in the mud after an anti-American demonstration near the Afghanistan border, and it's nothing to do with politics, but rather with climbing the Himalayas, male bonding, keeping one's leisure options open, enjoying one's final vacation day in exotic Peshawar. Or so it seems. As Rashid's interrogators torment him more and more, the hazy naivety of his agenda in Pakistan seems less and less credible to him; his story disintegrates, reassembles, incorporates feeble lies, half-remembered impressions, guilty dreams. At no stage is the outside world permitted to restore some semblance of an objective perspective: we are trapped inside Rashid's increasingly diminished consciousness. One of Dieckmann's masterstrokes is that we don't hear the questions Rashid's interrogators fire at him, only his responses, sometimes befuddled, sometimes clear, but always ignored. After many months in Guantánamo, Rashid realises that »it wasn't anybody's job to release prisoners – that there was no plan, not even a secret one«.

Dieckmann is an essayist and critic of high standing in Germany, and has also written prize-winning fiction which has not yet been translated into English. No surprise there: a mere 3% of books published in English are translations and most of those are non-literary enterprises. Guantánamo has just won the aptly named Three Percent prize for translated foreign fiction, thanks to the midwifery of Soft Skull Press, a small New York publishing house specialising in controversial subjects, and Tim Mohr, staff editor at Playboy magazine. Mohr, previously known for pop reviews and parodies of Star Trek, seems an odd choice of translator, but he has excelled himself, rendering the prose pitch-perfect, poetically sprung, psychologically nuanced yet natural.

In the UK, Guantánamo is issued by Duckworth, a venerable 19th-century house that went bust in 2003 and was bought by a former Penguin chief executive. The relaunched 21st-century Duckworth, downscaled to Soft Skull Press dimensions, is to be commended for publishing a book as powerful as this, but the fact that one of the pages is mistakenly printed twice, and that a characteristically American spelling error (»breath« for »breathe«) repeatedly eluded correction, suggest that the company should invest in an old-fashioned copyeditor.

Discussing a subject as important as institutionalised torture, it seems trivial to mention typesetting glitches and lapsed editorial standards. But one of

the wisest insights in Guantánamo is how ill-equipped the human mind is to focus on big questions and ideological abstracts. Rashid's world is not one of Islamic extremism versus the west, but defined by small things: his water bucket, his toilet bucket, his washcloth, his blue plastic blanket, his soap and so on. The US army chaplain even gives him a Qur'an to read, a belated, lamentably misguided concession to what his oppressors imagine constitutes human rights. Dieckmann's potently empathetic novel shows more clearly than any amount of CNN footage that the battle continues, but neither side is winning.

Guantánamo: A Novel by Dorothea Dieckmann, translated by Tim Mohr.
151pp, Duckworth Overlook, £8.99