

The Milkman

Peter Bichsel

Peter Bichsel (b. 1935) is a Swiss author from Luzerne who is best known as a writer of short stories and columns. The selection that appears here was originally published in 1964 in a collection of short stories entitled *Eigentlich möchte Frau Blum den Milchmann kennenlernen*. As evident in “Der Milchmann,” Bichsel’s literature foregrounds the mundane aspects of daily existence, such as our simultaneous desire—but inability—to create deep, meaningful human connections. Much of his work aligns closely with the goals of the erstwhile *Gruppe Olten* and *Gruppe 47*, which attempted to reconceptualize the use of the German language post-Nazism. His works are archived in the Swiss Literary Archives in Bern, and he is a member of the Academy of the Arts in Berlin, Germany.

The Milkman wrote on a little slip of paper: “Unfortunately, there is no more butter today.” Mrs. Blum read the slip and added the items together, shook her head, and added once again. Then she wrote: “Two liters, one-hundred grams of butter. You didn’t have butter yesterday and still charged me for it.”

On another day the Milkman wrote, “I’m sorry.” The Milkman comes in the morning at four o’clock. Mrs. Blum didn’t know him. “A person ought to know him,” she oftentimes thought. “A person ought to get up at four o’clock just to get to know him.”

Mrs. Blum is afraid that the Milkman thinks poorly of her. The Milkman could think poorly of her because her jar is dented.

The Milkman knows the dented jar: It belongs to Mrs. Blum. She gets at most two liters of milk and one-hundred grams of butter. The Milkman knew Mrs. Blum. If someone asked him about her, he would say, “Mrs. Blum gets two liters and one-hundred grams. She has a dented jar and very legible writing.”

The Milkman does not give it any thought. Mrs. Blum does not feel guilty. And if it happens—it could, indeed, happen—that she is ten Rappen short, then he will write on a slip of paper, “Ten Rappen too few.” He would get the ten Rappen on another day without question and would see “I’m sorry” on the slip. He would think, “That’s not worth saying” or “No trouble,” and would write it on the slip, but that would be an exchange of words—so, he did not write it.

The Milkman is not interested in knowing which floor Mrs. Blum lives on, as the jar is downstairs on the steps. He does not give it any thought when he isn’t there. The Milkman knew a “Blum” who played on the first team and had big ears. Perhaps Mrs. Blum had big ears.

Milkmen have uncomfortably clean hands, pink in color, plump, and faded. Mrs. Blum thought about it when she saw his note. Hopefully he found the ten Rappen. Mrs. Blum did not want the Milkman to think ill of her, but she also didn’t want him to engage in conversation with the neighbors. But nobody knew the Milkman, nobody in our building. He comes to our building in

the morning at four o'clock. The Milkman is one of those people who simply does his duty. He who brings the milk at four o'clock does his daily duty—Sundays and weekdays. Milkmen are probably not paid well and probably frequently cheated out on the bills. The Milkmen aren't guilty for milk becoming more expensive.

And Mrs. Blum would truly like to get to know the Milkman.

The Milkman knows Mrs. Blum: She gets two liters and one-hundred grams, and she has a dented jar.

About the Translator: Troy E. Spier is Lecturer of English at Middle Georgia State University in Cochran, Georgia and Invited Professor of Linguistics at Universidad San Francisco de Quito in Ecuador. Most recently, he was a Visiting Ph.D. Scholar at the Freie Universität Berlin. He earned his MA and Ph.D. in Linguistics at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana, and a B.S.Ed. in English/Secondary Education at Kutztown University in Kutztown, Pennsylvania. He specializes in language documentation and description in East and East-Central Africa (particularly in Zambia, Tanzania, and the DRC), linguistic landscapes, and critical discourse analytic approaches to intersections of language, power, ideology, and religion.

A Farewell

Ernst Kein

Ernst Kein (1928-1985) was an Austrian author most often recognized for his novels, essays, and poetry, though he also served for a time as a columnist at the *Kronen Zeitung*. The selection that appears here was originally published in 1959 and broadly reflects the banality of typical conversations, the seeming emptiness of life, and generalized uncertainty about the future. He studied theatre, journalism, and psychology in his native Vienna but ultimately did not formally finish his degree. His initial foray into the artistic world was through his experimentation with literary dialect, viz. in *weana schbrüch*, *Herr Strudl*, and *Harbe Sprüch*. His works are archived in the Austrian National Library, and he was the recipient of the Austrian State Prize for Literature.

They were sitting in front of the *trattoria*, and he looked down toward the beach—right at the spot where the ocean darkened the sand—as he thought of all the beautiful moments they had spent together but which had now come to pass. She was wearing a white blouse and looked quite pretty with her freshly cut, short, black hair. She gazed silently into her cup of coffee, and he felt a rush of discomfort.

“It’s going to be hot again today,” he said.

She looked up. “Yes,” she said quietly.

“It’s going to be hot as hell in the bus.”

“Yes.”

He glanced toward the beaded curtain in front of the door that led to the restaurant, and she continued looking into her cup.

“What are you thinking about?”

“*Non importa*,” she said.

“But maybe it is important...”

“Nothing is important anymore—not for me, at least.” She placed her hands on her cup—she had very pretty hands—and he observed her. Then he drank his glass completely and called out, “Hello, *signora!*” And then, when the chubby woman appeared from behind the curtain, he said, “Another *grappa*.”

“*Si, signore*.” The chubby woman disappeared and came back after a short time with his schnapps, which she placed in front of him on the table.

“Why aren’t you drinking your coffee?” he asked.

“I am not in the mood for coffee.”

“Do you want something different?”

She shook her head no, and he drank his schnapps. He started feeling much better and thought, “I have to take a bottle of this with me. It hits just the spot.”

“We should drink something in honor of our parting,” he said. “How would you feel about a glass of *Vino Santo*?”

She didn’t answer and simply continued looking toward the water below where she could just barely make out one of the fishing boats.

“A small bottle of Santo, *signora*,” he called out toward the beaded curtain. Then the chubby woman appeared with a bottle and two glasses. She filled them both and placed the bottle on the table before leaving.

Once she left, he raised his glass to the girl and said, “*Salute!*”

Then he drank a large gulp while the girl watched him but still did not have even a drop.

“Why aren’t you drinking it?” he asked.

“I am not in the mood for *Vino Santo*.”

“Then what?”

“For death,” she said. She didn’t cry, but he could recognize in her voice that she was being honest.

“Don’t say such a thing,” he said.

“But it’s true.”

“Cut it out now, please.”

“If it is over between the two of us, then everything else should be, too.”

“Nothing’s over.”

“I know that it is!” she said. “You’re leaving, and it’s through.” She saw that the fishing boat had now moved out of sight, and she thought to herself, “If the boat returns, he will already be gone.” She felt truly unhappy.

“Should I stay here and become a fisherman?” he asked.

“No, of course not.”

He finished his glass. The wine was sweet, but it left a bad aftertaste in his mouth. “You have known since the beginning that I would have to leave. After all, I am a foreigner.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Go home and forget everything.”

There was a young boy in a pink jersey that was embroidered with the words, “*La Gazzetta dello Sport*.” He came over to the table and asked, “Would you like a newspaper? It has the latest updates from the *Tour de France*.”

“Yeah, give it here.” The man reached inside his pocket and pulled out a 50 Lira coin.

“Do you want the change?” the boy asked as he put the coin away.

“No.”

“*Grazie*,” said the boy as he pulled one of the newspapers from his bag and placed it on the table.

The girl continued looking the entire time at the coast below where the man and a girl were opening up a beach umbrella, and she thought about how many times she had lain down there, how happy she was. She tried to imagine what happiness looked like again.

Once the newspaper boy had left, the man said, “You know that I won’t forget. I will write every week, and I will return next year.”

“You’re never coming back,” she said.

“Of course, I will,” he said. “Without a doubt.”

“No, you will not come back.”

He still had that stale aftertaste of wine in his mouth as he longed for the taste of the *grappa*, which was strong yet neat. He looked at the clock and said, “Well, the time has come.”

She remained silent, and he stood up and walked through the beaded curtain. He paid the bill and bought himself a bottle of *grappa*, which he placed inside his coat pocket. Then he walked back to the table, but he did not sit down.

“I think it’s better if you don’t come with me to the bus,” he said.

“*Va bene*,” she said, and her voice sounded strange.

“Don’t I get a goodbye kiss?”

She stood up and he hugged her. And while he kissed her, he was worried that she would start crying—but she didn't cry, and he was pleased about that.

"You almost ruined everything," he told her.

"*Scusi*," she replied.

He grabbed his heavy suitcase from beside the table and said, "I will write you soon."

"Yeah."

"*Arrivederci*."

"*Arrivederci*," she responded.

He walked alongside the street, and she stood there with her arms at her side as she watched him until he disappeared behind the mulberry trees. Then she looked down toward the beach where the man and the girl were lying together underneath the umbrella. Then she realized that he forgot the newspaper on the table, and tears immediately ran down her face.

He walked alongside the street, and, since he knew that she could not see him again, he stood still, placed his suitcase down, and pulled out the bottle of *grappa* from his coat pocket. He removed the cork and took a large gulp. Then he felt much better.

About the Translator: Troy E. Spier is Assistant Professor of English and Linguistics at Florida A & M University in Tallahassee, Florida and Invited Professor of Linguistics at Universidad San Francisco de Quito in Ecuador. Most recently, he was a Visiting Ph.D. Scholar at the Freie Universität Berlin. He earned his MA and Ph.D. in Linguistics at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana, and a B.S.Ed. in English/Secondary Education at Kutztown University in Kutztown, Pennsylvania. He specializes in language documentation and description in East and East-Central Africa (particularly in Zambia, Tanzania, and the DRC), linguistic landscapes, and critical discourse analytic approaches to intersections of language, power, ideology, and religion.