

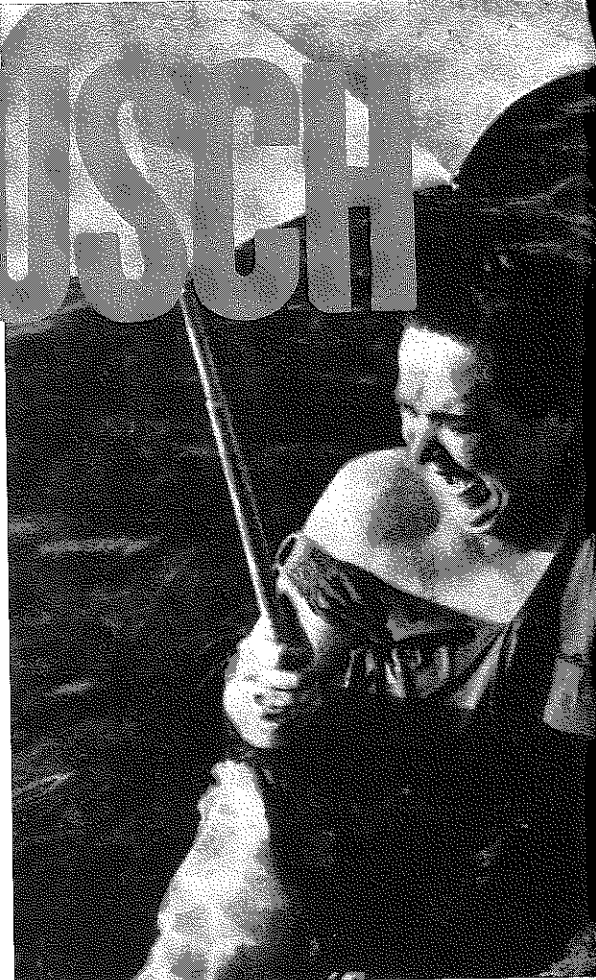
TIEFENRAUSCH

Excerpts from

(RAPTURE OF THE DEPTHS)

BY Bettina Klix

Rapture of the Depths (published in Berlin, 1986; translation, 1995, by Eric Miller) is a book of elliptical and elegant micro-fictions or micro-essays.



It's often a simple matter to please people whose arrogance is furtive or insecure: give them an opportunity to arrive too late. Anyone who can stand it, therefore, should simply arrive a few minutes early at the appointed place, granting such people a triumph that, today, they were perhaps for once going to deny themselves. In this way, they may blamelessly assume the longed-for condition, reveling in the satisfaction of comparing watches, breathlessly protesting. Sometimes they merely break off their gaze by way of apology while their body persists in the tremor that vouches innocently for the fact they did indeed make haste. The spectacle of the person awaiting them accelerates their last steps from a twinge of guilt or an impulse of coquetry. When even this sight actually leaves them a tranquil pace, then they are dissimulating nothing. No; then they enjoy themselves to the full.

In the course of a sedate conversation, you find a place sometimes for a second, interior conversation. Not a monologue—nothing disruptive. It's a fairly reasonable response to the other conversation or it provides a sly gloss on the situation, but it would sound decidedly unreasonable if it happened to become audible. It's really enunciated in defiance of the text, of the other person, of the whole scene—not inimically but with an impulse to seclusion. While you listen passively, you still retain the energy to realize: "Her eyes are much closer together than I had thought." Yes, you're cautious; you don't address the interlocutor in this silent commentary. Yet all the same you wish that he would become suspicious. You're staring and you're dissatisfied with that; you have to put it into a sentence. "He is so beautiful, so beautiful."

To speak badly of people not present often amounts to nothing more than an awkward gesture of friendliness toward those present. He doesn't want to hear anything about himself: he has already communicated that through his brusqueness, gaucherie. I want to be suave now because I have an obligation be friendly to him. I allow him analogies; I put him in flattering relations; I shut out other people with my descriptions. For my audience, I summon up the distasteful elements of anecdotes; this tactic permits him indirectly to feel himself respected. I've never really thought this way at all about those who are absent when they were actually beside me, or when I was alone with their absence.

"Can I pose reasonable questions at all? Don't I ask only what I myself want to be asked? The question touches on something I'd like to talk about right after. The genre of the question is inherently egotistic: it serves first and foremost to give myself expression. It certainly doesn't strain to elicit the best from the other person, because the need to be entertained or informed isn't so powerful as the need to be entertained or informed isn't so powerful as the need to entertain and to inform.

"Sometimes I pay such paralyzing attention to the form of the question that I wholly forget to concentrate on the answer. Sometimes, in fact, a person feels so surprised by his own style of inquiry that he stops to ponder and admire it (if he has any luck, his interlocutor will join him in this exercise). Sometimes he will raise objections against his own question—and see it directed menacingly against himself."

At least they dare to consult their mirror image when they can be observed at it. If this really has to be done, they focus on some isolated detail with cursory discontent. They dissimulate their relationship to the image through grim-faced staring, irritable adjustments, nit-picking, smoothing. The gaze appears to be wholly taken up by the outward occasion; self-love collects itself together into a single point. "I'm not looking for myself, I'm just improving something." And this passes for honest work so far as other people are concerned. Only with a show of this attitude can dialogue with the mirror be made public, bearable for everybody else.

There are people who go everywhere too early. They can't bear to see something in a state of general irresolution. Through this precocity, they believe the will can be developed. But all they are doing is holding something back for themselves and acquiring besides a bleak pleasure: the power to determine divisions.

They can't restrain themselves from altering other people's hopes with a glance at a watch. When a congenial circle becomes a discontented round, in the moment of unspoken decision-making, they withdraw from the common space as if the conversation dissatisfied only them—as if nobody else had the remotest feeling for timeliness. They get bored remarkably fast because they can wilfully bring on this state of mind. The others persist in efforts of improvement, of salvage. But these people abbreviate the whole game in one fell swoop.

How pleasant it must be to sense in your wake three baffled people whose fellow-player has abandoned them. To desert a pair of apprehensive and undeclared lovers in the midst of their blundering, or to leave a couple of gauche people (who know each other only through the lost intermediary) to yield to their embarrassment! Such connoisseurs gradually perfect themselves in a means of absolute gratification.

If you can no longer stroll, but it still isn't late enough to necessitate breaking into a run, you jog. Right then you suddenly sense an impediment in space, in the zones that appear otherwise unoccupied, between the visible obstacles. The air itself feels unmanageable. It contains and hides an infinite profusion that for the first time, as if dumbfounded, offers opposition to your flustered and distracted eye. What usually yields itself by imperceptible degrees must now abruptly deliver its information. It can't behave as your companion; therefore, it gathers itself together into a counterforce.

When you can't vacate the space in which another person is making a telephone call, a common concession to the circumstance is a politely oblique gaze, if there's no other means of occupying yourself. You fixate on details in the room that no one has ever before so attentively observed—so judiciously observed, so devotedly, so amazedly, so curiously. Every form of involvement is possible. As you make such a survey, your sudden interest doesn't feel remotely courteous.

At first, you hadn't any desire to be so penetrating, didn't want even to look at the other person, especially because you couldn't avert your ears. But eventually you felt yourself simply drawn into the room, away and out of the noise. If you can't discover any more new sights, an amiable sort of dereliction comes into play—you just stare in front of yourself.