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Starting again

A window to the barren beauty of Arizona



MARTIN R. DEAN:
Ein Stück Himmel.
Novel. Atlantis Verlag,
Zurich, 2022

One moment of inattention. An unfortunate accident. Then life is changed forever. Artist Samuel Butt, a man in the rudest of health, experiences that moment himself. Waking up tied to an operating table, he learns that he is partially paralysed. Standing there is friend Florian Füssli, who was one of the surgeons who operated on him.

Extreme circumstances put a friendship to the test in Martin R. Dean's latest novel "Ein Stück Himmel" (A piece of heaven). Sam and Florian have lost touch in the preceding three years. Their unexpected reunion brings back memories, but also highlights how different the two essentially are. Freedom-loving Sam finds it hard to come to terms with his paralysis. Dependable Florian tries to help in any way he can. Both have been like that since they were at school together.

Using interweaving narrative perspectives, Dean describes Sam's frustration at trying to get used to life in a wheelchair after his accident. Florian tries to be of assistance. In the end, he and Sam travel together to Portugal in the hope of reviving their old companionship. Easier said than done. Failed artist Sam is still as bolshy as ever, whereas Dr Florian sees himself as a subservient cog in the healthcare industry. You need to hurt in order to heal, he likes to say. Sam rebels against this notion, because complete freedom means everything to him.

Both share an inner disquiet. Shy and retiring Florian envies his friend's vitality, while past failures eat away at Sam. His artistic career has never really taken off, and all that he has left is freedom – and love.

"Ein Stück Himmel" subtly explores and puts this difficult interaction deliberately into a somewhat uneasy context. A moment of inattention can turn a life upside down. Dean expands adroitly on this message, forcing us to confront an experience that could happen to any one of us at any time. How would you cope? Would you resist, as Sam does? Or would you follow Florian's advice and humbly reconcile yourself to your new life? We keep revisiting these questions to the bitter end. The story's comforting showdown merely serves as a flashback to a time when things were better.

BEAT MAZENAUER



INEZONA:
"A Self Portrait".
Czar of Crickets,
2022

The name Inezona evokes the bone-dry state of Arizona – a desert of head-high cacti under a bright sun. It also speaks of a melting pot of US and Mexican cultural influences. Arizona is home to country, Americana and roots music on the one hand, and mariachi on the other. Where English and Spanish vocals intertwine, often in the same song.

It is in this part of the world, or the city of Tucson to be precise, that Ines Brodbeck has spent a lot of time in recent years. The singer from Basel has taken considerable inspiration from her adopted home and made recordings with musicians from Tucson. Her style is reminiscent of internationally acclaimed act Calexico. This is no coincidence, given that her musical partner, guitarist and producer Gabriel Sullivan, has played in said band, as have other members of her ensemble.

Brodbeck's love of Arizona also shines through in her latest album "A Self Portrait" – a work of both tender and mystical beauty. Guitars, banjos and ukuleles reverberate, along with percussive elements that include kitchen utensils.

The LP is a harmonious, authentic marriage of Arizona and central Europe, representing the world in which the singer feels most at ease. Brodbeck opens the door to Inezona and lets us in. But she has no stories to tell this time. This a departure from previous efforts. "A Self Portrait" is a purely instrumental record without words, which Brodbeck – also for the first time – recorded single-handedly at home in Switzerland. The 39 minutes of playing time feature only minimal voices. Vocals rather than singing as such, they add an extra dash of colour to ten compositions that speak for themselves – acoustic expressions of longing, remembrance and hope. The music exudes an intuitive, intimate, almost cinematic urgency.

In keeping with the Arizonan spirit, "A Self Portrait" has no need of words.

MARKO LEHTINEN