

[The Corpse In Question: A Review of The Weight of Things by Marianne Fritz](#)

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The Weight of Things by Marianne Fritz

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When reading *The Weight of Things* by Marianne Fritz, I found myself continually recalling a scene from Antonioni's *Red Desert*. The film follows the perspective of Monica Vitti's character, Guiliana, who has experienced a mental breakdown after a recent automobile accident. She wanders around with a visiting businessman named Corrado, moving through cold industrial compounds, foggy shipyards, and featureless buildings, which mimic her interior landscape. One night, in a moment of desperation, Guiliana visits Corrado, hoping that he can provide some insight into her condition. She looks toward him, past him, through him, pleading aimlessly. "What do people expect me to do with my eyes?" she asks. She looks down guiltily. How can she cure her mind if she cannot control her gaze? What can she know if no one knows what should be done with one's eyes?

A similar question resonates throughout *The Weight of Things*, the question of what one is expected to do with one's body. Fritz's characters struggle to comport their corporeal selves, brushing "winding, wending" curls into "restful" straightened hair, training shaky, uneasy emotions to settle into the false lines of a smile. Their bodies attempt to contain "the weight of things," a vague and faceless terror that haunts Berta Schrei (the novel's Guiliana.) Likewise, Berta's mental disintegration articulates itself through the simultaneous breakdown of bodies she yearns to protect.

The Weight of Things beautifully suggests the ineffable internal struggles of its characters through descriptions of their externally cultivated defenses. Fritz focuses in on the moments when these defenses break down, when small, uncontainable bits of "the weight of things" start to seep through. The novel begins by hinting at a strong undercurrent of tension between Wilhemine and her husband, Wilhelm, a professional chauffeur and "Come-hither-boy" the novel refers to as "Wilhelm The Smiler." Of his smile, Fritz writes:

Wilhelm's smile was cultivated. He knew just when to sneak a pinch of acquiescence into the recipe and when to leaven his stupidity with a dose of wit...He had a skeptical smile, a brooding smile, a sly smile, a moronic smile and a shrewd smile, a clear-eyed and a purblind, a dutiful smile, the smile of a deferential and devoted spirit...always ready to let one or another nuance recede, dwindle, or simply vanish.

As the two characters set off to pay a 40th birthday visit to Wilhelmine's sister, Berta, who resides in a mental institution, Wilhelmine perceives that "Wilhelm The Smiler" is crumbling under this tension. His mouth looks wrong, "his gloom [cannot] be hidden," and his defensive smile reveals he is not in control.

We learn that this tension arises from a strange event that occurred many years ago when Wilhem and Berta were married. We are led to believe Berta is unaware that Wilhem has married her sister since her institutionalization, that this 40th birthday visit functions as a reveal, in multiple ways: Wilhelmine intends to reveal their marriage, the passage of time, and thus expose the horrible event so Wilhelm's heart will come to terms. Though the circumstances of this event are not initially revealed, we experience *the weight* of its effect through Berta's bodily expression. She giggles constantly, eyelids fluttering up and down, as though they're quivering from the aftershock of what they witnessed. Her language becomes an extension of her bodily reaction, nervous shudderings of endlessly repeated phrases. "So, so," is her consistent greeting or response to anything another person says to her in conversation. When left to her own devices, Berta murmurs the same phrase like a mantra: "A man, a word, and then you're lost." Even Berta's hair is an extension of her sorrow. When Wilhelm remarks that her hair looks different, an orderly explains the change: "Our mother Fortress, the best of all mothers, has brushed Berta's hair straight. Her hair no longer knows the winding, wending, crimping, curving folds or furrows of the wound, *Life*. It has achieved a state of peace. It has come to rest."

The novel moves backward in time to the marriage of Berta and Wilhelm, reconstructing the ways that *the weight of things* slowly built up, then broke everything down. Fritz insinuates a definitive contrast between the living experiences of Berta and Wilhelm. Wilhelm's job often necessitated long journeys away from home, where he tended to the wealthy civilized family of Johannes Mueller-Rickenberg (literally translated to "rich man"). Berta, by contrast, must act as the sole caregiver for her children, whose bodies appear to prohibit their civilization. Her older son, Rudolph, behaves in an animalistic way. He constantly cries, stutters, grinds his teeth, bites his nails, wets the bed, and suffers explosive fits of diarrhea. His teachers and fellow students report that Rudolph is "an idiot," an extension of his mother, who is "not right in the head." As Berta battles against her own psychological dysfunction, she becomes obsessed with the fear that this idiocy will poison her young daughter, Little Berta. She lives in terror of *the weight of things*, the fear that her deepest anxieties permeate the air, the earth itself.

Fritz's poetic auscultation of this weight, this madness, is absolutely astounding, both in its scope and its subtlety. It is difficult to summarize her methods, as they are woven so seamlessly into the narrative: its pacing, its movement through time, coalescing into a sensory experience. She describes a palpable environment of disorientation and loss, set against a tapestry of gray skies, war-ruined structures, and dark woods into which people disappear. The text is richly embedded with symbols; almost every name is a metaphor. Berta comes from the town *Allerseelengasse*, or All Souls Day.

She lives with her children in the town of *Donaublau*, or Danube Blue, which invokes the name of a waltz a soldier once played on his fiddle when visiting her. The soldier, Private Rudolph, impregnated her with the child who became her son, Rudolph. While away on the front, Private Rudolph's friend Wilhelm agreed to take care of Berta, if he died. When Private Rudolph did die in the war, Wilhelm took his place. Likewise, when Berta goes mad, Wilhelm marries Wilhelmine. These patterns of words spin an uneasy web through the atmosphere of the novel, a sense of profound, inescapable entrapment. Fritz's language infuses her text with an air of inevitability; names and symbols repeat themselves, endless reflections of "life as such," *the weight of things*.

Berta becomes obsessed with the idea that her daughter—Little Berta—resembles the Madonna while sleeping, likening her peaceful expression to a Madonna trinket on a necklace Wilhelm gave her. Little Berta—her namesake, her own replication—is the center of all Berta's hope: the desperate belief that, with her name, a hopeless pattern will be broken. The tenuous structure of Berta's life collapses when she learns that Little Berta is not performing well in school. When Berta protests that her daughter has "always been a quick learner," the school teacher responds that intelligence is as much a matter of expression, of externalization, as it is a matter of "knowing" the right answers: "she doesn't know [them] when I ask her," the teacher explains. "And I can't know what's going on in her head...Just try and imagine, worrying constantly over forty little minds! It's impossible!" With this pronouncement, Berta realizes that Little Berta has inherited her madness, that her daughter's thoughts are also lost in some strange and unviewable territory.

Of course, this is the point where everything unravels. Where is one to look when one's perceptions are invisible? How can Berta raise her children in this world? What is to be done with these uncivilized, illiterate bodies? "What do people expect [her] to do with [her] eyes?"

Berta ponders this question through a series of disturbing dreams, the most haunting of which presents her body as a corpse. In the dream, her corpse is "delivered" to the doorstep of her apartment while her husband is away. Her children exclaim, "[T]he corpse is here!" and are overcome with absurd laughter. Of course, as a corpse, Berta finds she's unable to care for her children, to bathe them or feed them, and they descend into animalism, walking "crablike on all fours" and howling "indecipherable sounds." Upon his brief return, her husband mistakenly seals the apartment door, believing that Berta will care for the children inside. Locked in their own grave, the children dance and sing, "The weight of things, the weight of things. Did you dream it?"

Fitz writes:

The children were nailed inside the apartment with *the corpse in question*. As their tomb was quite generously proportioned, with numerous burial chambers, it didn't occur to the children at first that they'd been buried alive. With time, though, the madness of hunger began to ravage the children's brains; they began to circle the corpse; the madness of hunger tore their jaws open wide. For long days their hunger

encouraged them, before they finally wedged their spindly fingers into their mother's rotting flesh and gnawed down to her bones.

Terrified and illuminated by this vision, Berta pulls her children from school, vowing to treat them as a prince and princess in their home. She brings them breakfast in bed, tells them stories, and stages a "singing hour" which begins and ends with renditions of the song, "Danube so blue, so blue." Their already uncanny lives descend into a nightmarish fairytale, a fairytale that culminates in Bertha's execution of her "cursed creations." Having ended the lives of her children, Berta stands back and sees, to her horror and dismay, that Little Berta never looked anything like the Madonna.

In fairytale fashion, the end of Berta's story also comes full-circle, as she meets her sister and husband on her fateful 40th birthday. The novel reveals that Wilhelmine has also harbored a long-running obsession with the Madonna trinket Wilhelm gave to Berta. She sympathetically embraces Berta with the goal of procuring the Madonna necklace for herself, believing herself to be its rightful owner. Wilhelm's life with Berta was a misbegotten error, a mistake to be erased, and thus forgotten, now, forever. Berta seems to understand the necessity of this conclusion and thus surrenders the Madonna necklace to her sister. In effect, she gives up what remains of her body, her hope of living, her burden of life, as though to say: Take this weight from me. I do not know what to do with it.