

Innocence is a myth and a ceremony.ⁱ

My Berlin apartment overlooked a kindergarten. Children arrive nosily wherever they are, and their greetings to one another would tug me out of sleep. Agitated by the foreignness of their native tongue and the irregularity of their patter, I was forced from bed and into the day.

Without my own schedule to adhere to I kept time listening to the children next door.

By their mid-morning play—though German children always seem to be outside—I would be in the kitchen, working my way through the six-cup moka pot with its derelict handle, melted by the gas hob, transformed into lava stalactites.

From my preferred chair, I would look out of the window, which offered me a partial view of the playground. Three storeys up and at an angle, I could see perhaps a third of the yard. There was a sandpit somewhere out of sight, and a wooden climbing structure; the section visible to me was furthest away from the school building and was where the older children would play.

They would rush together, gathering into a formation, and then split, like marbles or dropped pick-up sticks. One girl with white-blond hair commanded the most attention and admiration; the boys in particular crowded around her as she brandished her skipping rope. A smaller, darker-haired girl would hang by the wall and rarely approach the gang. I looked away, her shyness and incompetence frustrated me.

A friend who studied child psychology once told me about a group he'd observed. These children played mummies and daddies, but in their society, they were all babies: one was Baby-Mummy, one was Baby-Daddy, and there was Baby-Brother, Baby-Sister, and Baby-Baby.

Even with better German, I was too far away from the kindergarten to glean any clues about the architecture of those specific children's games. Doubly miniaturised by my perspective and their infantile state, I knew I was watching an education: Baby-logic, Baby-law, Baby-romance. Cut and framed by my window.

During my own childhood, I had a Rolodex of exercises I would use to soothe myself to sleep. One way was to become as dead as I could, lying rigid and shooing off intruding thoughts and images as they arrived to interrupt my deadness. Another was to start by thinking of my tummy and then in

steps, and then in leaps, and then in bounds, move out from myself, my bedroom, house, street, the country, the world, the universe, into a blackness that was infinite.

Sat at the kitchen table, I thought: children are born knowing everything they ever will. They know all the wars there ever were, and how to fight them. They grow into their capacity as they grow out of their winter coats.

And nothing begins, it arrives.

Little citizens step on and off a stage shaped by my perspective, as if directed from scripts written by researchers. Each study a retroactive logic for their preordained, organic form.

— Alexandra Symons-Sutcliffe

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...Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

W. B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming', (written. 1919) in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. by Richard J. Finneran (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 211, ll. 1–8.