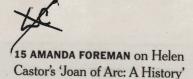
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What's Bugging Me

A woman's harrowing girlhood, as told to her analyst.

By AMY ROWLAND

THE GIRL AT THE HEART of Guadalupe Nettel's novel has a peculiar problem. She is a cockroach. At least her mother refers to her this way, as when she castigates her posture: "Cucaracha!" she yells. "Stand up straight!" Adding insult to insecthood, a birthmark on the child's right cornea limits her vision. In order to strengthen the extraocular muscles, she must wear a flesh-hued cloth over her good eye. She resists putting it on each morning, but once it is secured, she submits to being "a patched child" until 5 o'clock, when she is allowed to remove it.

This tension between resistance and resignation is central to "The Body Where I Was Born." Nettel, an awardwinning Mexican writer, has called this book "an autobiographical novel, a memoir. . . . Everything I relate therein

THE BODY WHERE I WAS BORN By Guadalupe Nettel

Translated by J.T. Lichtenstein 175 pp. Seven Stories Press. \$22.95.

is true, supposing that such a thing as truth really exists." Unlike the brooding narrators of memoiristic fiction by Karl Ove Knausgaard and Ben Lerner, Nettel creates a spare record of her unusual childhood. Through conversations with a (silent) psychoanalyst, she chronicles her parents' separation; her brief time at a commune; her "experimental education" in Mexico City and southern France; her father's imprisonment; and her fraught relationship with her mother, who moves to France to work on a doctorate, leaving Nettel in her grandmother's care.

During this "grim and confusing" time, the narrator becomes quiet and gloomy, and takes refuge in books. She reads "The Metamorphosis" and identifies with her fellow cockroach Gregor Samsa: "He had turned into one; I was one by maternal decree, if not by birth."

Not only does she identify with insects, she has visions of them. In her shoe, she finds a "hairy caterpillar of a light, bright green." Adults accuse her of lying for attention, but she begins to see creepy-crawlies all around: red spiders, praying mantises, "but never a butterfly nor cricket, only much rarer bugs that would appear suddenly and make me scream." Her exasperated grandmother locks her in a room, where she can hear family members disparage her and her mother. So at a young age, she begins to doubt her sanity. "If I couldn't count on myself, who could I count on? If the truth

AMY ROWLAND is the author of the novel "The Transcriptionist" and a former editor at the Book Review.

was something inaccessible to me, how could I accept other people's versions of it—those who branded me a liar, insolent, and churlish little-old-lady killer?"

Then something even more eerie occurs; a sort of mirror image that Nettel extends from the animal to the human. One night when standing by her bedroom window watching the street through the curtains, she sees a girl, Ximena, in the opposite apartment building doing the same thing. The girls never speak, but develop a nightly ritual: They face each other in silent companionship, in communication "so profound that it surpassed spatial and temporal limits."

One of the fascinating qualities of this book is the unsparing testimony, somewhere between religious confession and secular disclosure, that gives a sharp sense of a woman's harrowing girlhood. Nettel's candid, unaffected prose hews closely to the strictures of the thera-



py session. In this, she runs the risk of turning her story into a "case." listening to a voice tell of the speaker's childhood, often with metaphor in place of reflection. This disembodiment may be a self-protective tactic or a contrast to the novel's embodiment theme. (She's a visually impaired writer; she's a bug.) But the as-told-to device is frustrating, despite the laudable attempt at self-revelation. Still, Nettel's strategy yields rich rewards. Concealing the adult narrator disturbs the distance between reader and author; the intimacy forces the reader into the girl's vulnerable body. This vivid image of the ardent girl as revealed by a faceless woman hints at the tangled snare of the past. An effort to shed an old self may simply make a person disappear.