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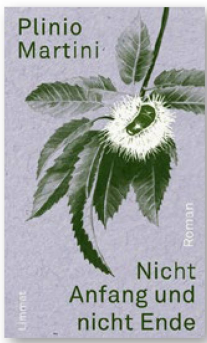
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## The tale of a valley



PLINIO MARTINI:  
 “Nicht Anfang und nicht Ende”, translated from Italian by Trude Fein. Limmat Verlag publisher, Zurich 2023, 240 pages. 32 francs.

Ticino has changed more than any other region in Switzerland over the past hundred years. Once a poor canton, it is now a tourist hotspot. Plinio Martini provides a stark reminder of this divide in “Il fondo del sacco” (1970), which has just been published in German as “Nicht Anfang und nicht Ende”. It is set at the end of the 1920s in Val Bavona, a wild and beautiful lateral valley in Vallemaggia. Few employment prospects and large families often left the young men of the area with no option but to emigrate. Many of them would sing: “America, America, America, / in America voglio andar!” However, not everyone wanted them to go. The older inhabitants were worried that their children would never return because they would be successful somewhere else, or because they would not be successful and would feel too ashamed to return. Martini’s narrator Gori Valdi is one of

the emigrants. He signed an employment contract before he and his sweetheart Maddalena could declare their love for each other. He leaves home with a heavy heart.

Eighteen years later, Gori returns. Maddalena died shortly after his departure. He made money in America but is left disillusioned. Plinio Martini, who stayed in the region all his life, uses Gori to show how poor the people are in Val Bavona. Martini pulls no punches with his vivid and precise presentation of the poverty, always framed within the context of Gori’s quiet longing to return to his roots. There were some positive sides to being poor: the strong sense of community and melancholy songs, some of the things Gori missed in America. When he returns he finds the place rather stale. One of his first observations: “I’m still cursing the train that took me away.” A deep sorrow pervades his narrative as he yearns for the old days. “I began to realise that happiness can come out of nothing, and that I had lost this nothing that makes people happy.” Martini’s novel is a wonderful tale of longing as well as a touching romantic drama. However, it is first and foremost a splendid tale of time gone by. The book is replete with marvellous characters, captivating stories and twists and turns of fate, “most of which actually happened”. It was Martini’s prerogative as the author to develop some stories as dictated by his own imagination, and he did.

BEAT MAZENAUER

## The music of a mid-life free of crisis



JAËL:  
 “Midlife”.  
 Phonag, 2023.

She can’t escape her musical past. Whenever Jaël releases a new solo album, a not insignificant portion of the public hope for a return to her musical roots – something reminiscent of the trip-hop created by Jaël’s successful band Lunik in its early days.

Lunik split up ten years ago. The band’s former lead singer, who was born in Berne, has now released her third album under her own name. It’s called “Midlife” and – as the title suggests – is about the life of a 43-year-old woman going through middle age. There is no hint of crisis in this album: the mother of two is content with her lot. She is married, has a good family life and is at peace with herself. In fact, she is doing much better than in her mid-thirties, as she has said in recent

interviews. The depression and panic attacks of yesteryear have been brought under control.

The tone of “Midlife” is thus positive and relaxed. It’s about holding on and letting go and much more besides. In “She Only Sings When She’s Drunk”, Jaël addresses alcohol abuse, and “Paralyzed” is about a sexual assault that she herself suffered. In “Only Human”, she sings again about being a mother: mothers shouldn’t be too hard on themselves. After all, they are only human.

Jaël’s voice remains as crystal-clear and high as ever, although it has a more mature edge to it now. The fragile song “Midlife” has a strong piano and acoustic guitar component, but its light, warm production is rich in depth and range.

No, “Midlife” does not sound like Lunik – despite “To Miss You”, a song Jaël wrote with her former fellow band member Luk Zimmermann and immortalised by including it on the album. And that’s alright. “Midlife” is a standalone, chilled, harmonious and mature pop album all rolled together. “liTii” is the only exception: it’s about how the singer sometimes feels like an extraterrestrial in this world. “liTii” is also Jaël’s first song in her local dialect to appear on a regular album. Moreover, “Midlife” comes in two parts. The studio production with 11 new songs is followed by live recordings from the last acoustic tour. Whether that really adds something is a matter of taste.

MARKO LEHTINEN