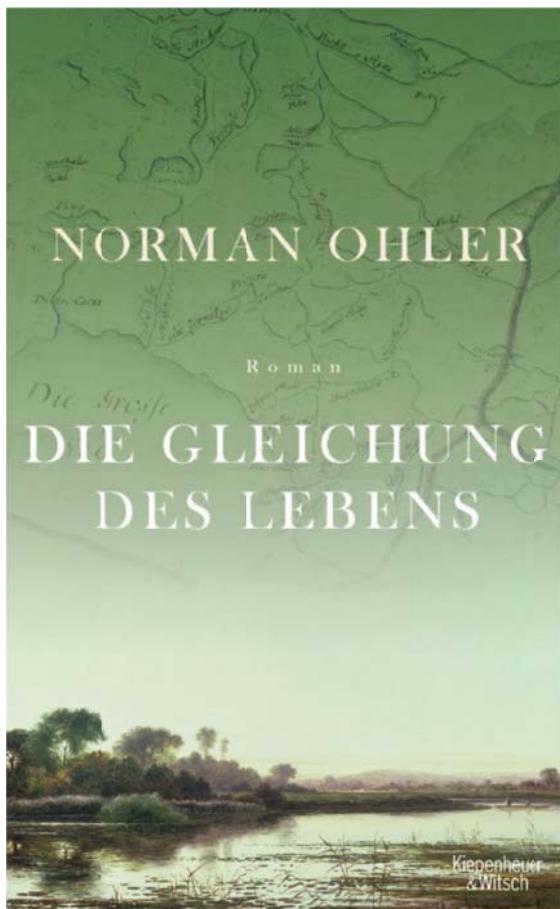


Sample Translation (pp. 13-43)

The Equation of Life **by Norman Ohler**

Translated by Jamie Bulloch

© 2017, Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG



Publication: September 2017 (Hardcover)

416 pages

ISBN: 978-3-462-04968-8

Foreign rights with: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG

Iris Brandt ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de

Aleksandra Erakovic aerakovic@kiwi-verlag.de

Part I

COUNTRY

“The map is not the territory.”

Lawrence Sterne

There was a dampness in the air, but it was already oppressively hot and the River Oder smelled of seaweed, fish, algae, earth and the sea. An early morning mist hung over the marsh. Kurtz, the supervisor of the great fish market of Wrietzen, was wise to every trick in the book. At the crack of dawn on this midsummer day – 7 July 1747 – and without yet having drunk his ‘German coffee’, Kurtz was making his routine patrol along the bank of the Rotten Lake, when he stumbled upon something quite out of the ordinary. His eyes, which usually sat so deeply in their sockets that they would vanish altogether when he laughed, popped out on stalks. They shimmered with horror and fear, even though it was normally he who struck fear in others. No, Kurtz was not one to be squeamish. In Wrietzen and across the entire marsh he was known as a man to beware of, for he would resort to practically any means to enforce the rules in his orbit of power – the fish trade up as far as Freyenwalde, Oderberg and even Schwedt. In his boot bag he always kept the correct fish rule – a metal rod the length of a forearm – and if he found pike or other edible fish *below* this size being offered for sale, he would not shy away from meting out the punishment on the spot with that same rule, as demanded of him by Wrietzen’s mayor, Fritze.

If Kurtz, blessed with a formidable rowing style and two powerful upper arms, darted around a bend in his agile barque and caught some marsh dwellers stunning illegally caught pike, he would show no mercy. For him the pillory was no obsolete apparatus from a darker bygone era, which had no place in the Age of Enlightenment, that brilliantly shining eighteenth century; on the contrary, he still regarded it as an efficient device for punishment that delivered the desired dose of terror. Moreover, Kurtz’s actions were not motivated by any gratification in violence, but merely by a sense of loyalty towards Fritze, whom he served faithfully because that was how he believed things ought to be.

Although his external appearance suggested otherwise, essentially Kurtz was a soft man, and for a few moments his drowsy consciousness even managed to ascribe what he was compelled to witness on that unusually hot morning to the realm of dreams he had left but minutes before, having woken serenely beside his wife Elska without a bad thought inside his head. Yes, for a brief time he pretended he was still lingering in that zone of unreality, and had slid into a nightmare from which he would soon wake. But upon realising he was awake already, his fear turned to sheer horror.

Kurtz bared his teeth instinctively in defence. The sight of a corpse was nothing new. But this body, consumed by eels and predatory fish, and partially covered by water fern, made him choke. It was the face he found particularly shocking; the dead man's mouth was wide open as if trying to scream. 'Swamp,' Kurtz muttered. 'Swamp.'

Then his mind began to tick. Whoever the dead man was – he must be one of the Wends from the boggy marshland – was it not Kurtz's duty to look after him? Ought he not to retrieve the body? While he was struggling with this question he caught sight of something gleaming in the brownish-green morass. Composing himself, he overcame his disgust and bent down, averting his eyes from the corpse's face. Reaching with his fingertips, he pulled the object from the squidgy substance. A gold-plated watch. Kurtz shook his head in disbelief. Surely there were no treasures like this to be had anywhere across the wretched marsh. Astonished, he used his handkerchief to wipe away the muck and the sludge. And there, engraved on the back, was a name: *F.K. Mahistre*.

The engineer for the new canal! That wild swashbuckler who had arrived from the capital on his black steed. Three days ago Kurtz had seen him quaffing away merrily in the 'Rote Lilie'. Aghast, he slipped the watch into his pocket. Then he heaved the corpse into his barque, pushed off from the side and rowed back to Wrietzen with his unnerving cargo as quickly as he could.

Heat

On that same 7 July 1747 – a Friday – it was hot in Berlin too. The ladies on their way to their afternoon reading circle were sweating and fanning themselves. The wind, ferrying Brandenburg sand, blew strips of torn newspaper along the gutter. Carts and calashes trundled through the billowing dust, the harnessed horses panting and snorting. Larks sang passionately in the trees that lined the avenue. Here and there a sheet of parched, yellowed paper sailed along the dry ground, tamped with the boots of the gentlemen from the *Academie Royale des Sciences et Belles-Lettres*, its brick buildings glowing with summer, as they marched towards their salons. These salons opened their doors at four p.m., heralding the start of the weekend, and hosted debates about the transcendence of the philosopher Wolff, who had built on Leibnitz’s ideas to develop his own sensational theory, which held that it was not rigid, indivisible atoms keeping the world together in its inmost folds, but animated, infinitely divisible energy points.

There would be no such weekend for Leonhard Euler, but he didn’t know this yet. Right now he was busy congratulating himself on his stubborn refusal ever to don one of those hair furnishings, innocuously called a ‘periwig’. Instead he wore a simple, airy garment that his wife Katharina had crafted out of light-blue silk. With this bonnet on his head, which afforded a contrast to his thick, pensively arched eyebrows, he stood by the entrance to the large new Academy building he had just left, thinking longingly of his desk, where he was always left in peace. He glanced at the clock on the tower of the French Friedrichstadtkirche and compared it with the time on his pocket watch: four hours till the dinner in Potsdam. The place was virtually that far away and he still needed to get changed. An evening engagement in Sanssouci – that was all he needed. Apart from one visit during the planning phase of the

palace he had managed to avoid going there; why, he hadn't even attended the official opening a few weeks ago. But the messenger had said emphatically that the king would accept no excuses this time. Euler had not, however, received an answer to his question about what weighty reason there might be for such an urgent invitation.

Why the need for such childish secrecy? Closing his left eye, he searched his dark-blue silk waistcoat, tapped the pockets of his black linen trousers that just ran below the knee, found his tobacco and filled his pipe, which moments later connected his mouth to the outside world. Working in the carriage was out of the question, naturally, especially as no decent road had yet been built between Berlin and Potsdam. What awaited him en route was sand, deep Brandenburg sand, which must keep jamming the wheels of any vehicle, producing a constant stopping and starting, and rendering concentration on high-level mathematics impossible. Was the great Friedrich unaware that every hour not spent in calculation equated to an indefinite number of discoveries lost? And as the years were limited and one never knew how many discoveries one might make in life... The work of Newton and the refinements of Bernouilli had substantially opened up the field of mathematics and physics; *every day* new discoveries were coming to light – oh dear, the king understood nothing of this.

Euler put away the tin of tobacco decorated with a stag, lit his pipe and tossed the glowing splint, which emitted a light-grey trail of smoke, onto the pavement. He had resolved to smoke in exceptional circumstances only – only when it was no longer possible to achieve a balanced frame of mind using his own mental powers alone. Yes, he smoked often! No, he would not go this evening; that was certain. Was he not currently working on his groundbreaking piece, the *Introductio*, which for all time would be the model and foundation of every mathematical text book and, *ergo*, he had no time for a trip to Potsdam? Yes he did. No he didn't.

Now it was so sweltering that he had to loosen the white jabot in his collar. Sweat had collected beneath his eyepatch, too, tickling him. Lifting it briefly, he wiped his eye socket with his index finger. Euler had lost his right eye a few years ago, when busy poring over a design for a map of Russia – well, it was the largest country in the world and so this was the largest map. Several weeks had been earmarked for the task, but he had completed it over the course of a single, long, sleepless Petersburg weekend, during which the sun had not set, contracting in the process exhaustion sickness in addition to a heavy fever, which led to an abscess in the right eye, as a consequence of which he lost it, leaving a mere empty hollow.

This troubled Euler only to an extent. What *did* disturb him about his conspicuous physiognomy – especially because of the somewhat rakish eye-patch – was precisely this conspicuousness. Although, in essence, he could not care less what his eyes looked like – after all, he never saw them personally – his monocular appearance, which particularly at court was a popular topic of conversation, emphasised an eccentricity which might be present in him, but he would have liked to see it less accentuated. Attention was drawn to him where he would have preferred to remain invisible. For calculation was best undertaken while out of sight.

Euler puffed on his pipe a little too hastily. His thoughts had strayed – the curse of that evening's invitation was already gnawing at his concentration. Besides, he had to hurry home now to change and set off out again immediately, and he loathed enforced haste. Despondent and shaking his head, he walked along the stone wall of the Academy and turned into Windmachergasse. After a few minutes he came to the Spree, its green water promising a touch of freshness in the unbearable heat of the day. A good dozen cargo barges, waiting to enter Mühlendamm lock, sat by the river banks lined with rope makers, weavers, inns, alehouses and brothels.

Leonhard Euler enjoyed passing by this way. Like a child he was obsessed by boats and he intended to publish an authoritative two-volume work on hydromechanics, outlining the scientific foundations of boat-building, and even developing a means of propulsion using a screw, although the energy needed to realise this was lacking. Irrefutable, he thought as so often, while he smoked his pipe placidly to the end. Irrefutable: this lock that regulated the water levels was the core around which the city evolved, unfurled itself. The rivers formed the arteries of the state, and the more one transformed them into dead-straight channels with a constant flow velocity, the quicker the currents became, which gave life a greater pulse. He relished the sights around him, refreshing himself with the progress being made. Here, business was being conducted wherever one looked: with his assistants a ropemaker was hauling a thick, coiled rope to a barge; the captain of another boat placed a coin on the table outside the Schleusenkrug inn; workers were excavating the pit for a new, considerably larger lock basin. A shadow fell over him. Startled, Euler spun around, but it was just a crane, the arm of which was being winched up by two half-naked, muscular men, to unload the cargo of a sailboat packed in linen sacks. A woman approached him with a coquettish smile. Her blouse was even more untied than her dark-brown hair. Barely a tooth was left in her mouth. 'I know exactly what the gentleman's thinking,' she said to him. 'But is he right? Or may I surprise the gentleman?'

Somewhat irritated by this disturbance, Euler nonetheless gave a friendly shake of the head, but turned away resolutely and made straight for Behrenstrasse, towards his house which was close by. He wondered whether the woman really knew what was going through his mind, for it was a thought that frequently occurred to him. Sometimes he actually felt as if his deliberations were not private, but public, almost common property.

He turned the corner and there already was the pretty façade of his house. Quite a property; the administration had splashed out, which wasn't half bad. They really had gone to

some effort. He often felt this, even though he was aware that the purpose of the house was to pacify him, an aim in which it succeeded. Yes, this solid, spacious, two-storey building allowed him to live his life most pleasantly, which is why, despite all his dissatisfaction at still not having been appointed president of the Academy, he was happy to stay in Berlin. In any other place he would have been forced to make sacrifices as far as his lifestyle was concerned, even in Petersburg. It was not a pleasant prospect, for he believed he desperately needed these external securities, seeing as he lacked the inner ones. After all he was head of a family and Swiss to boot, which meant he was rock solid. Yes, he persuaded himself, he could be perfectly content with his Berlin existence. He had a good wife, three children already and a salary of 1,200 thalers per annum. Why were there any doubts? And what did these concern?

Just as he was ringing at the door, an unwashed man around the same age as him – late thirties – walked past, stared at Euler with dead, white eyes and uttered, through rotten teeth, ‘No, you can’t help me! Nobody can help me. Listen, will you: you can’t help me!’ Euler stared at the blind man and asked what had happened to him, upon which he explained he could not distinguish day from night, because as a child he had been taken to his christening in an open sleigh for over an hour on an ice-cold day and his eyes had frozen. Euler quickly felt in his waistcoat for a coin, but either the beggar failed to notice or he refused the charity, for he was already on his way again, uttering once more his ‘Nobody can help me’ and ‘I’ve paid a high price for the privilege of being a Christian.’

Euler watched the man for a while. Instinctively he felt that the beggar was right. This made him sad and he felt sorry for the blind man. Of course he would be unable to help him, however much everyone kept claiming that this was the natural corollary of devoting oneself to progress, which could be defined as the constant improvement of each individual’s life circumstances. He, Leonhard Euler, wasn’t even sure if mathematics actually solved

problems or simply created more of them. But as a precaution he declined to tell anyone this. For was it not likely that, contrary to all expectations, the great equation – the great social equation too – would ultimately fail to work out? That there was something deeper than the day with its material phenomena that apparently functioned so well...

Enmeshed in these and other thoughts, which were a permanent torment but also an agreeable challenge, he stepped up to the door that Liliane, the Eulers' buxom Alsatian maid, had opened for him, placed his hood on the coatrack, stroked, as was his custom, his short, dark-blond hair and looked, as ever, in the mirror. His left eye looked slightly inflamed; he needed to look after himself and avoid getting so worked up about everything. Crossing the ground floor of his house, which consisted of two small tea parlours, tastefully furnished with chairs, chaises longues and mahogany tables, he climbed the curved flight of stairs and, via a hallway where the family portraits hung, entered his bedroom lain with a carpet. This room was hung with lime-green wallpaper and Liliane had changed the bedclothes. As always, he looked under the bed to check if anyone was lying there in hiding – and, as always, nobody was there. The doors of the wardrobe – opulently decorated in seventeenth-century style – which had been presented to him on his departure from Petersburg so that, as they said, his coat could continue to hang in a Russian domain, were wide open. For a while he stood in front of it, deliberating on how he should dress for the evening. Before him hung freshly ironed coats and trousers. He had his wife to thank for this order. How often did he stand by this wardrobe and gazed in astonishment at the rows of garments, marvelling at how neat everything was?

Euler went over to the study, his favourite room. Facing the window stood a simple desk made of Siberian larch, behind it a cordovan chair into which he sank. He peered outside and, as ever, felt satisfaction at what, to his mind, constituted the perfect view: nothing but a firewall barely two metres away. The external minimisation of visual stimuli: *good*. From the

outset he had regarded this wall as one of the principal attractions of his domestic study, as during the day it blocked any sight that might have distracted him from thinking. In the evenings, on the other hand, when he was trying to relax, it delivered a fascinatingly abstract picture, different each time, of the city in rapid growth around him. Although in the dark, too, the bricks prevented any direct view, the continually changing light of the torches and lamps of inns and restaurants, and from the streetlamps at the top of the wall, slanted past and into his room. They covered the walls with a restless film of flickering stripes and blobs, which he would spend hours on end absorbing from his desk, for the display offered him a particularly lively image of progress.

He couldn't help but think of the blind beggar and felt one of his attacks coming on again. Euler pulled open the bottom drawer of his desk containing the laudanum: opium-infused wine. Now it was just a question of time: would the drink take effect first, or would the melancholy be quicker to gain the upper hand? He grabbed the bottle, unscrewed the cap and took a glug. He knew that every swig would cost him around an hour of calculating time. But when he suffered a mental breakdown, it sometimes put him out of action for a whole day.

In brand-new, shining, black leather shoes, dark-red pantaloons and a white linen shirt with a blue neckerchief, his son Johann came into the room, a dark-grey cap in his hand and his lips pursed tightly.

'What do you want?' Euler asked, rather snappily, as he stowed the laudanum away in the drawer. Couldn't the boy see that he was working? Euler knew it must be important; the boy would never have dared disturb him here otherwise.

'I've decided what I'm going to do with my life.'

'I'm delighted. Not science, I hope.'

‘Precisely that.’ Johann bowed his head. Both of them knew he would burst into tears at any moment.

‘I only said that as a joke. But you have to be extremely careful.’

‘Of what?’

‘Of *whom*, is the question you ought to be asking.’

‘Well then, of whom?’ Johann looked at him with large, beautiful eyes, of which his father was most envious.

‘Of those in whose service one finds oneself, because scientists are always in someone’s service.’

‘Are there professions where you aren’t in the service of someone else?’ Johann now asked.

‘Yes: the true artist,’ Euler said.

‘Then I want to be a true artist.’

Euler smiled. He shook his head. His son would become a scientist. He knew this because now and again he was able to glimpse into the future, but also because he wielded sufficient influence to have Johann accepted into the Academy even while still young; a calling that nobody refused.

‘Go now,’ he said to his son, before standing up, stroking the back of the boy’s head and sending him on his way.

At that moment Katharina was coming out of her own, slightly smaller bedroom. She was the same age as her husband, thirty-seven, with a not unattractive, albeit somewhat doll-like face, from which she meticulously brushed and tied back her blonde hair, as this lent her more gravitas. Most importantly, however, she was pregnant again, in her sixth month. She wore a broad, sky-blue maternity skirt beneath a housecoat, also blue, open at the front,

accentuating the whalebone-reinforced bodice, with deep folds at the front and back that burst open at shoulder level. She had a slight headache and had not slept particularly well.

‘Always let the king speak,’ she said instead of a greeting. She came closer, narrowing her already narrow, light-blue eyes to sharpen her vision, grabbed Euler’s right ear and pressed the hair sticking out there behind it. At the same time, while keeping a fat book clamped in the crook of her arm, she smoothed the rest of her husband’s hair with her other hand to give it more form. Satisfied with these adjustments, she turned her attention to the open wardrobe and, after brief deliberation, took out a pair of dark-blue calico breeches and requested Euler lift up his feet in turn to step into them.

‘What book is that you’re carrying around?’ He could smell her jasmine perfume and liked it.

‘The Cervantes. Have you devoured it too?’

He shook his head. ‘And I shan’t, either. This craze for novels is escalating, but I’m not part of it. The reference works people always used to consult are now declining in importance. I cannot abide this, because those are precisely the books I create myself. People are withdrawing into worlds of fantasy just as the age of reason is dawning, and I am one of its chief protagonists.’

‘Really?’ Supporting herself on his chest, Katharina gave her husband a hard stare. ‘Seeing as this part of the world is a bit of a backwater, it’s no surprise that people flee into worlds of fantasy as you call them, is it?’

‘A backwater?’ Euler smiled. ‘I’ll have you know that this is one of the coming centres of power on the Continent. I myself am *de facto* head of the Academy of Sciences and this evening have been invited to the royal palace. Hardly a backwater.’

‘Maupertuis is head of the Academy,’ Katharina corrected him. ‘You’re just director of the mathematics class – even if you’re the one doing all the work. And I’m not impressed

by your dinner with this strange king, of whom it is said that his favourite dish is marzipan tart with chocolate and sour cherries. Besides: Prussia a centre of power? Coming from Russia I'm used to things on a different scale altogether.' Katharina fastened the top button of his breeches.

'There is every indication that this state is moving forwards and upwards,' Euler retorted impassively to himself. 'This is no longer merely a budding power; Prussia is blossoming, promising fruits on an epic scale. The king is in his best years. He will take things far, this has been obvious since his capture of Silesia. There can be no doubt that a glittering future awaits, nor that I shall have a part to play in it.' Pleased with his assertion, he gazed at himself in the crystal mirror set into the wardrobe door. There was not another like it in Berlin – an inset crystal mirror like this in a wardrobe door. He adjusted his eye patch. 'With science, at any rate, great leaps forward are being taken,' he muttered, 'from which all of society will benefit, raising it to a new level.'

'New level?' Katharina said cuttingly. 'Till now the king has been attempting to reach this level primarily by waging war.'

'I shall not argue with you any longer.' Leonhard Euler took hold of his wife's forearm affectionately. Then he lowered his head, for she was considerably shorter than him, and looked into her eyes. He kissed her on the lips. 'I think it's a pity that you haven't been invited,' he said softly. 'The king... well, he doesn't tolerate *baggages*, as he calls them, in his new country palace. Even his own wife has only been there once, and that in his absence.'

'So I've heard,' Katharina replied, looking at her husband with her intense, light-blue eyes. 'Anyway, I'm entitled to envy you. We've been in Berlin for years now and I've never seen the king in person – on this point, too, I'm used to different customs in Russia.'

'And I'm dreading actually meeting him for the first time.'

'But why?'

‘Because they just don’t like me at court. Friedrich calls me a calculating cyclops.’

‘Oh, darling,’ she said gently. ‘People are already whispering.’

‘Really? What are they whispering?’

‘That you have passed up on several opportunities to meet the king.’

‘But I...’ Euler began, but Katharina placed a finger on his lips. ‘What you think of Friedrich is irrelevant. All that counts is what people think and say about it at court. And if you wish, in spite of your bourgeois background, to take the opportunity of succeeding Maupertuis at some point in the future, as befits your ambition and ability, then you must simply be... *diplomatic*. A speciality of us Swiss, wouldn’t you say?’

‘And that’s why I’m going. Even though I have much mathematics to do. You really are a capital wife.’

‘When shall I have you back?’

‘As it’s dinner I shall have to spend the night in Potsdam, which means that even if I’m woken at six tomorrow morning and then depart an hour later, I cannot anticipate being back in Berlin before noon. Then I have to go straight to the Academy to make up for the time lost, which means you should expect me back for a late supper tomorrow night.’

Katharina sighed. ‘Remember, Leonhard. Always let the king speak,’ she said, reiterating her advice, ‘even if you believe yourself to be in the right – which you always do. Just try to be a little less truculent than usual. And, most important of all, not a word about mathematics – no one is interested in it.’ She turned to the open, yew wardrobe and looked for a suitable pair of stockings for her husband.

At the House of the Pike-Catchers

On the evening of this 7 July – the air was still warm and it would be a delightful night – the men from the marsh met in Lewin, where the pike fishing was particularly good. With its two fountains, the tavern built of erratics with malt house and brewery, the village square in the middle of which stood the pigsties, its fourteen small houses built of earth and clay for the farmhands without land of their own, and its wet meadows and cattle pastures, this ancient village lay north of the Rasche Fliess on the Wuckenitze. Sometimes it was on the Volzine, as other maps claimed – it depended on the year and the course cut by the flood. Very rarely, Lewin was even at the confluence of Mallacke and Leinengraben. Occasionally, for the sake of convenience, maps would simply disregard the names of these bodies of water that now meandered this way, now that. Travellers who would not be deterred from paying a visit to Lewin were recommended, coming from Blutiger Graben, to head south towards Unterste Ratze until they almost got to Lake Trebbin, which must not, however, be confused with the Rotten Lake. To complete the confusion, some maps insisted on calling this body of water the *Big Lake*, whereas for them the *Rotten Lake* was the bulge in the Oder above Wrietzen, fed by the Morinichen and the Bardaune. But none of this mattered, for it was clear to everybody that amidst this muddle of water, undergrowth and shrubs, in the spot where the land rose slightly, lay the village of Lewin with its half-timber farmhouses, every gable pointing towards the village square. The Maltschaus' house was the focal point of the village, displaying as it did the enormous fish kettle, a brass masterpiece which Oda, the dark-haired, green-eyed, notoriously moody daughter of stubborn old Radomeer, polished regularly.

Not far from the Maltschaus' property, its thatched roof overgrown with corn hanging so far down that you could touch it with your hands, stood the curing barn, also called the

House of the Pike-Catchers. The fishermen of the lower marsh (and pretty much every man here was a fisherman) came here to process their catch and discuss late into the night everything of importance, outside too in summer, often beneath a wonderful firmament. They would talk about the spectacular specimens that had entered their nets, possible improvements to the primitive river dykes, or perhaps the building of a larger boathouse at Lake Trebbin, where many of the eels came from. Generally the men from the marsh were in agreement. But if they were unable to reconcile their differences of opinion, the last word fell to Radomeer Maltschau, the head of the oldest family. Supposedly the Maltschaus could trace a straight line back to the *Bog*, the ancestor who had once come far from the south east and from whose loins all the marsh men were purported to have originated.

Everything about this Radomeer – who drank a glass of beer every day, but no more, ate nothing but fish and vegetables, smoked only quality tobacco, spent his life out in the fresh air and whose age nobody knew – was luxuriant, especially his thick, black beard that had just a slight touch of grey at the jawbone. Dark eyebrows sat above far-apart brown eyes, which were always fixed on the person he was talking to, and an equally dark mane of hair covered a head that had turned out too large relative to his squat, powerful physique. Above the bridge of his nose two deep lines, caused by frequent frowning, furrowed vertically upwards. Many, many floods ago Radomeer had lost his wife Wolna, but had never remarried, despite there having been no lack of opportunity, and this had earned him great respect. His marriage to Wolna had produced a pair of non-identical twins: the beautiful, stubborn Oda – otherwise called the *Pikess* – and the inconsistent Veit, whom friends (but not Radomeer) also called the *Wolf*. Veit, whom some gloomily predicted would never follow in the footsteps of his father on account of his inability to make decisions, was married to Magdalena, an earthy woman from the old bloodline of the Janys from Zäckeritz. She was on

the verge of giving birth to their first child, which put both Veit and Radomeer in a state of high excitement, especially as Oda, who tended towards melancholy, was still on her own.

Although everything about Radomeer, known as the *Catfish*, was in profusion, he generally spoke softly, for he knew that it made people listen to him more attentively. And the truth was that Radomeer spoke often. Because he had a comparatively small family, this afforded him more time to look after the welfare of the community, a task in which he immersed himself. If arguments arose, he would arbitrate. If anybody wished to recall events long in the past they came to Radomeer who, equipped with splendid intuition and a rich imagination, was responsible for telling the authentic version of the story about this or that.

For if, of an evening, Radomeer was given licence to talk about the marsh until the eyes of his listeners shone, he would recount far-fetched stories in all their detail and after a while the entire company believed itself to be in paradise. He even knew about times long past, he spoke of aurochs, woolly rhinoceroses, wisents, mammoths and forest elephants which had once lived here; he told of processes that had occurred rapidly as well as those that had evolved over thousands of years, not restricting himself to the spiciness of the air saturated with the aromas of herbs, the abundance of fish in the lakes and the varying flow of the river, nor to the delicious crabs one could shake out of the apple trees like ripe fruit once the flood had subsided. He would always talk too of that particular love that bound himself and the people here with this marsh, a love which was rare, stretching back over many generations and a period of time that could barely be calculated.

To open the meeting at the *House of the Pike-Catchers* on this particularly hot Friday, Radomeer, who was wearing a black cloth, knee-length coat with a row of silver, tightly packed buttons, rang the brass bell. It hung at the front end of the room, right beside the image, crossed through with two thick red lines, of Kurtz, the detested fishery supervisor

from Wrietzen or, as his appointment was officially called, the *Pritzstabel*. The men sat on two long oak benches. On the bare wood in front of them, where their catch would be gutted and filleted, and which had a dark, mineral shimmer from the pike blood that had seeped into it, stood the clay tankards of home brew, as each man swore by the beer from his own locality and refused to touch a drop of anything else. It was the same with the tobacco that was smoked in long, black wooden pipes.

‘Men,’ Radomeer began in his calm voice, silencing all the chatter. ‘All of us have heard what happened this morning by the bank of the Rotten Lake. A body was found, one of the king’s men, and they say he didn’t just die, but that somebody had a hand in it. We must brace ourselves and prepare for the worst: the vengeance will be terrible, whether one of us is responsible or not.’

‘What do you mean by *or not*?’ Mecki stood up angrily. He was the right-hand man of Koppek, Radomeer’s great rival from the village of Reetz. Beneath his tight leather cap Mecki’s broad-boned face, which permanently wore a slightly scornful expression, looked like that of a small child grown up too quickly. ‘Who else do you think was involved? For months now you’ve been talking about doing everything we can to scupper the king’s new plans one way or another. They’re aware of that in Wrietzen too. People there are calling us murderers. It’s a disaster for the entire marsh!’ Some of the fishermen – that is to say Koppek’s entire entourage – murmured their agreement or nodded. ‘So pray tell us, Radomeer,’ Mecki continued, ‘Who was it? Your son, perhaps? The man whom nobody knows for sure what he’s thinking and doing?’

‘Do not speak ill of Veit, who at this very moment is with his wife in labour,’ Radomeer protested. ‘My son may act without due consideration now and then, but if you call him a murderer again you’ll have me to deal with.’ He pulled his filleting knife from his belt and frowned as he brandished it slowly. ‘Doesn’t it look as if this happened to pin the

blame on us and show our righteous struggle in a bad light? No, Veit wouldn't kill anybody. Nor would any of us. The fact that nonetheless we resist those who wish to destroy our world, is something quite different.'

'Just because something is happening in our area, it doesn't mean it's going to destroy our world,' Mecki said tetchily.

'Yesterday Veit was at the Oder bend,' Radomeer said. 'Hundreds of foreigners have already settled there. They're living in tents and digging *our* earth at Friedrich's behest. All of us know what's there: the erratics from antiquity, which we know as the burial mounds of our ancestors. We're not going to put up with this, are we, men?'

Many of the fishermen raised clenched fists and bellowed their protest. But just under half of them remained still, looking impassively at Radomeer.

'What nonsense are you screeching about?' said Mecki, cutting through the silence. 'Those might be the old burial mounds of *your* ancestors. Men, we should be happy that the marsh is being developed. What is being built here, this canal, is a masterpiece. Executed by the most brilliant minds of the king, who is our king too, let us not forget that. And everything will be protected by a new dyke, which will be far superior to our walls made of cow dung. Finally we'll be able to live in safety.'

'But who is going to control this dyke?' Radomeer said, shaking his head. 'Let me tell you: those men who are building it. And as a consequence we will be delivering ourselves up to their protection, rather than looking after ourselves as in the past. Then our freedom will be swept away for good. Let us rather rely on our own strengths. We all know how utterly terrifying the current can be. A dyke can always be breached, and the foreign protection so dearly paid for can abandon us in a trice... *Then* the flood will come and we shall not be prepared. Let us continue never to take our eyes off the mountains, but always know whether a lot of snow has fallen and when it melts and streams down to us. We will deal with the

water ourselves. I shan't say any more.' As Radomeer looked around he sensed that the men understood him.

But Mecki contradicted him at once. 'Remember, men, the last time *our* dyke was breached eleven years ago and the whole marsh became one big lake, ruining the entire harvest? In despair, some even tried to sail across their farms in troughs, do you remember? But anyone who put a foot in them capsized immediately! Our houses were flooded, we had to save the livestock from the pens – do you recall how the oxen were standing up to their bellies in the water, trembling with fear?' With his sleeve Mecki wiped the sweat from his brow. What he was saying was getting him extremely worked up, and he felt as if he were reliving the experience. 'Are your ears not still tormented by the wailing, the lowing of the cattle, the panicky whinnying of the horses and the yapping of the mutts? The water birds arrived in our villages, they really took over. Do you not still hear their loud shrieking? And when we ate the dead fish that were washed up, they were not at their best but foul-smelling and rotten, and some of us developed terrible, long-lasting fevers, others nasty rashes and foetid odours. When they touched the acrid water our hands and feet turned scaly. Ulcers grew between our fingers and toes, how we were consumed by the itching. Many of us lost skin and we had nothing but tar or cart grease and mud to cover it – do you remember how revolting it was? Men, if a new canal is dug we will finally have peace of mind in all this. And more: we will be rich.'

'Rich?' Radomeer narrowed his eyes and his brows formed a double arc. With a severe expression he looked over the heads of the pike-catchers. 'Anybody who wishes to get rich at some time *in the future* is poor *now*, by which I mean poor in spirit, and that, dear men, is something we are not.' He took a large gulp of his beer. 'Let me tell you this: greed is a sin. It doesn't suit us.'

‘Oh Radomeer, ever the cautious one,’ Mecki said. ‘What’s so bad about earning a little more? With good money you can buy good things, by which I mean the things we can’t make ourselves: tools, beautiful clothes for our beautiful women, decent pots and pans, also for our beautiful women.’

‘No, that means we’ll become like *them*,’ objected Kummerowski, the old ferryman from the watermill, a close ally of the Maltschaus. He stood up gracefully and, in his dyed-blue linen coat that reached down to his feet, ran his eyes over the assembled company.

‘Radomeer is right. The foreigners are like lampreys. They latch on with their hungry mouths and suck out our blood. If we don’t watch out now we’ll be drained of all our strength. Soon our beautiful area and peaceful way of life will vanish.’ The ferryman looked around the room and shook his head. ‘It is no easy matter to speak ill of the dead, but we’ve all heard about this Frenchman. Why, he even rode over the burial mounds with his black steed, throwing money about and paying women to walk through Güstebiese without covering their heads. Blouses even came off in the bar of the *Feuchter Willi* if he paid for it. Men, have some respect.’ Kummerowski sat down again and to begin with nobody said anything, as his last assertion had shocked every last man in the *House of the Pike-Catchers*.

‘Oh for goodness’ sake, let’s not be so sanctimonious.’ Koppek – who everybody called the *Noggin* on account of his huge head that was at least as big as Radomeer’s – leaped to his powerful feet and looked around with a sparkle in his eyes. He was wearing the traditional white-and-blue striped fisherman’s frock, which was fastened simply by an undyed, coarse linen belt, even though he could have afforded a row of brass buttons. For many years now he had been regarded as one of the most influential fishermen on the marsh; he owned more than a dozen boats and he caught the most pike. While the others’ attention was focused on him, he slowly stroked the thatch of silver stubble on his head. ‘And how come you know exactly what goes on in the *Feuchter Willi*? Is it because you’re such a

frequent visitor yourself?’ Some in the room laughed. ‘No, men, let us not spoil our future just because we fear something new. Let us show courage. We in Reetz will be losing our best fields for this canal that’s planned. But are we whining? No, because we will be paid back a dozen times over in other ways.’ He sat down again and the room was filled with an approving, but also an uneasy murmur.

Radomeer stood. Once again he spoke softly, and everyone had to strain their ears to understand him. ‘I will say only one thing, men. If we don’t watch out now, we will go under. They will flood us out. I know it. And no dyke can help against this sort of danger, only conviction. Is that not true, men?’

There was silence in the room. Bartok stood up, a stocky chap who, with his wife Anna, ran the family mill at the confluence of Tremmitze and Löckeritz. He had two daughters called Alena and Hana, a son called Sten, was known as Radomeer’s best friend and a gentle soul who could flare up in an instant, but then calm down again just as quickly, which corresponded with his natural desire to create harmony. With his perpetual red face and his fiery-red beard and shock of hair he looked like a fly agaric. Generally he was known as the *Healer*, as he knew all about herbs, exorcised demons and did not shy away from straightening broken bones. This had earned him a reputation that extended beyond the confines of the marsh. For reasons nobody remembered any more, and no doubt because of his close friendship with Radomeer, he enjoyed the right to hospitality at meetings of the pike-catchers, even though he wasn’t himself a fisherman through and through, and he made regular use of this to concentrate undisturbed on the beer. ‘This death of the foreigner is just the beginning and a sign that something terrible is going to happen. And there have been other signs too,’ he said with his permanently hoarse voice that was hard to understand.

‘Really? What other signs,’ Mecki asked. ‘Do tell us, Bartok. What should stop us from earning more and feeding our families better? I know that things are all right for you and your mill up at the Löckeritz.’

Bartok glanced at Radomeer, who gave him a nod of encouragement, and so the *Healer* told them about three entangled eels that had been found that morning outside old Bowitz’s cottage at Welpische Rund. And although the eels were dead, white smoke had continued to rise from their bodies until the afternoon. And last week, a man from Quartschen had hurried over to him and spoken about purple and blue lights coming from the swamp, which had baffled and beguiled him as he went net fishing at night near Liepe. ‘What’s more,’ Bartok continued, ‘yesterday evening with my own eyes I saw two sparrows fall from the mill wheel at home. Just like that. Dead! And my Martina, she’s my dog,’ – some of the men laughed – ‘I couldn’t restrain her any more; she went absolutely crazy for these sparrows. Gobbled them up in one gulp. And afterwards she barked in a very peculiar way. Totally strange, I tell you.’

The pike-catchers fell silent. Some took a swig of beer to revitalise themselves.

‘Oh, enough of your flights of fancy. Sheer nonsense, all of it.’ Koppek’s assertive voice filled the room. ‘Really, I beg you. Trust in God. He has given us riches. Let us make use of them. He has given us neighbours we can trade with. These neighbours may well be foreign to us. But let us not be fearful of them. If they are planning a canal it is bound to be enormous. We just have to gather up the riches. Surely that’s why God gave us our mitts.’ He showed them his large hands, then continued, ‘Just think: here we live with the swamp, with the floods. And that’s why we ought to benefit from the wealth this area has to offer too. Or would you prefer to sit in your sooty cottages for the rest of time, crawling behind everything and thriftily scraping millet gruel from your bowls?’

Sedately and to the approving murmur of his supporters, the *Noggin* sat down again, not without darting a sideways glance at Radomeer who, unperturbed, let it bounce off him. For a while the *Catfish* was busy with something else anyway, as his thoughts were wandering to his son Veit and Magdalena. Although the midwife had predicted that the birth would not occur until after the flood, Radomeer sensed that something was afoot. At that very moment the wooden door to the barn opened and a little girl, the midwife's daughter, raced in. Without caring in the slightest about the attention she solicited, she ran over to Radomeer, waved his ear to her mouth and spoke something to it.

Radomeer turned away from her and towards the fishermen. 'Dear men!' he said, opening his arms to announce the news that was making him light-headed. He was swamped with happiness and his mouth was conquered by a broad smile. 'It's a son. My son Veit – well, his wife – she has had a son!'

Just as if the good news were theirs, the pike-catchers started to cheer. To a man they raised their tankards, hollering their joy and congratulations to Radomeer. Many of them stood, went over to Radomeer and shook his hand, even Mecki and the *Noggin*. Somebody hurried to fetch glass bottle in which all their names were engraved and which was normally reserved for sealing important agreements. Radomeer filled the bottle with berry schnapps and soon it was doing the rounds.

[END OF SAMPLE]