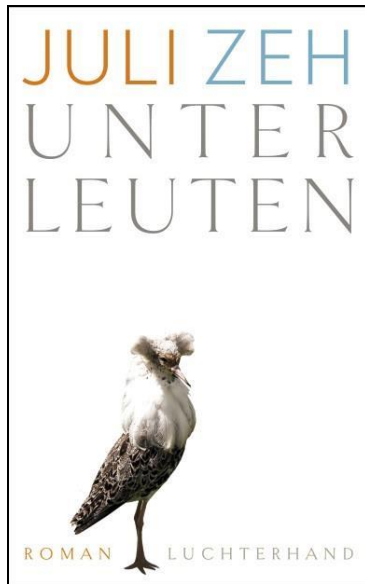


Juli Zeh

Other People

[Unterleuten]

Outline + Sample Translation



Literary Fiction

Luchterhand

640 pages

March 2016

It looks as if Linda, who is only ever called the "horse woman", has found paradise for herself and her stallion Bergamotte. Unspoiled countryside, a romantic cottage and endless space in the little village of Unterleuten promise to be an idyll. The peaceful life goes out of joint when an investment company decides to erect a wind park close by.

Meiler, a city real estate speculator spoilt by and used to success, and Gombrowski, a farmer owning a large estate, are both willing to provide the necessary land for the project so as to cash in on the subsidies to the tune of a few million euros. The only rub is that the land of the two gentlemen is just a few square meters too small. The missing plot is on Linda's property of all places, which she sees as her big opportunity of making her dream of setting up her own stud farm come true. While she is skilfully manipulating the two men and playing them one against the other, Gombrowski's archenemy Kron, a crutch-wielding one-time Communist and hard-boiled troublemaker, does all he can to prevent the wind park being built. It is not long before jealousy and greed, craftiness and intrigues lead to all hell breaking loose in Unterleuten.

With a keen feel for all that is human and a subtle sense of humour, the author gradually exposes the true nature of her protagonists, thus making even the apparently noblest of motives seem dubious. For readers, in the end nothing is as it appeared to be at the beginning.

Juli Zeh was born in Bonn in 1974, studied law in Passau and Leipzig and took her PhD in the field of European and international law. This was followed by longer stints in New York and Kraków. Her debut novel, *Eagles and Angels* (2001) was an international bestseller, and since then her books have been translated into 35 languages. Juli Zeh has been awarded myriad prizes for her work, including the Rauris Literature Prize, the Hölderlin Promotion Prize, the Ernst Toller Prize, the Carl Amery Literature Prize and the Thomas Mann Prize.

Sample Translation

by Sally-Ann Spencer

Unterleuten is a prison.

Kathrin Kron-Hübschke.

1. Fliess

‘He’s got us right where he wants us. It’s worse than the heat and the stench.’ Jule raised her head. ‘I can’t tolerate that animal any longer.’

‘You mustn’t work yourself up about it, my love. If you allow yourself to hate someone, everything they do will upset you.’ Gerhard was doing his best to sound confident. Whenever Jule showed signs of hysteria, he clung fixedly to good sense.

‘You’re telling me I should like that animal? He’s ruining our lives!’

‘I’m saying you shouldn’t torment yourself. It isn’t good for you, and it certainly isn’t good for the—’

He was fighting a losing battle. Jule had started to cry, and all he could do now was sit beside her and put his arm around her slumped shoulders. Little Sophie continued to squirm on her lap, keeping up a constant grizzle. The child never settled and woke repeatedly in the night, which was no wonder: the house was unbearably warm. To make matters worse, Jule barely took the baby from her breast. Since the fire had started, they had all been driving each other crazy.

Gerhard wiped his face with the corner of his shirt, feeling the sharpness of his features beneath the skin. Lately he had avoided the sight of himself in the mirror: Jule looked exhausted, but the change in him was brutal. He had an extra two decades on her anyway, and his leanness allowed the strain to hollow out his face.

When Jule had appeared in a course he was teaching at Humboldt University five years ago, he had greeted her exuberantly with a ‘Welcome!’ that hailed her arrival in his life. She had sat quietly among the other students – pale-skinned, red-haired and with a dazzling aura that no one else seemed to notice. Her long locks and flowing dress conjured up images of Woodstock and kindled in him a yearning for an era he had missed. Instead of camping out in meadows and sticking flowers in his hair, his younger self had wrestled with problems in a communist study group and worried about the state of the world. The women in his circle had never wandered

around half-naked or got high on LSD: they wore roll-necks and glasses, chain-smoked, and debated capitalism's impending end. Against this backdrop, Jule had seemed like an envoy from a distant star.

Now he looked at her heaving shoulders and bowed head and wished that he could soak up the heat and the fumes: soak them up, so that Jule and Sophie could be free. It was the height of summer, thirty-two degrees in the shade, and they had been sitting inside for four days. The garden was off-limits, and there was no question of opening the windows, even after dark. Schaller, whom Jule could not bring herself to mention by name, kept his toxic bonfire burning throughout the night. At the thought of their neighbour crawling from his bed every few hours to tend it, Gerhard felt his fingers shake with rage.

'It won't be long now until we get our wall.' In discussions about the next-door rubbish dump – which Schaller, incredibly, had elevated to a 'car repair business' – Gerhard found himself talking increasingly like a diplomat in a border crisis.

Jule looked up at him tearfully. 'When?'

'Just as soon as our application has been approved.'

'You mean when the administrators come to their fucking senses.' Jule's voice rose to a shout. 'The animal turns his garden into a scrap heap and they forbid us from putting up a wall!'

Gerhard shook his head. There was no point discussing the matter. The fact was that for months now the planned wall had not progressed beyond a metre-deep trench along the length of their boundary with Schaller's land. In moments of dark humour Gerhard and Jule referred to the abandoned channel as the Hindenburg Line. Blades of grass and Robinia shoots were already poking through the freshly turned earth. The wall was supposed to block out the view of Schaller's junkyard and restore the privacy of their garden. To do so, it needed to be two-and-a-half metres tall. The authorities were of the firm opinion that two metres would suffice. Gerhard worked for the Bird Conservation Office and had good connections, but so far his efforts to fast-track their application had failed.

'A wall won't stop the fumes,' he said in a low voice.

Over the past four days the smoke had fanned out, covering the garden. It billowed over the trench, got stuck among the raspberries, and rose in spirals through the three young pines that would one day grow into a forest of Christmas trees, bought in their pots and replanted by Jule at the back of the garden behind the tool shed each spring. The smoke climbed right to the top of the

line of Robinia trees, several metres above the roof. Every inch of their rural idyll was thick with noxious fumes. Although they were careful to shut all the doors and windows, the smell had managed to get inside. Sometimes Gerhard found himself wondering why they had bought the house and not some secluded cabin in the woods – somewhere in a shaded clearing, nice and airy, without a neighbour in sight. People needed space of their own. Gerhard had lived in Berlin for long enough to have learnt that lesson. But what he now came to realize was that a village of two hundred inhabitants could be overcrowded too.

‘You know how it is here. East Germany never had an environmental movement. Everyone burns rubbish in their backyards.’

‘What he’s doing,’ protested Jule, ‘goes way beyond burning rubbish.’

‘They think it’s fine to dig a well and pump out the groundwater, or put up sheds on protected land.’ Gerhard decided to seek safety in generalizations. ‘They don’t have a problem with turning the unique natural habitat around Unterleuten into an adventure park for horses and motocross bikes. It doesn’t bother them in the slightest that the ruff is an endangered wading bird, which makes it all the more important that we focus our—’

‘I’m not interested in the ruff! That animal is poisoning my daughter!’

Jule bellowed the last word, and Sophie’s grizzling changed immediately to a full-blown scream, prompting Jule to leap up and walk around the room with her. Gerhard hated it when she said ‘my daughter’. Sophie was his daughter as much as hers, although he still struggled to believe that something so beautiful could come from him. The little one was almost his opposite and yet they could hardly be more similar. She was a tiny, female version of him.

‘Shall I take her?’

Jule said nothing, just hugged the baby even tighter as if Gerhard might snatch her away. Her behaviour had grown challenging even before the bonfire had started. Ever since Sophie’s birth almost six months ago Jule had suffered from a form of nervous distraction. Whenever Gerhard enquired, she assured him she was fine, but she was clearly not herself. Sometimes she failed to notice that he was talking to her. She only heard him if he raised his voice and she even looked at him as if he were a total stranger. Of course, he didn’t blame her. Her current state of chronic sleep deprivation was a consequence of breastfeeding. The CIA tortured prisoners by waking them at irregular intervals throughout the night. And Gerhard had read online that fathers were often rejected by the mothers of newborns and the problem apparently resolved itself with

time. He put his faith in that theory. One day Jule would stop breastfeeding and go back to being her usual self. She would laugh at him for suggesting that her behaviour had been strange or different in any way. He was looking forward to that moment. Gerhard idolized Sophie but he was not prepared for the baby to take his wife. Now that Schaller had started the fire next door, Jule treated the child like an appendage of herself, and it could not be healthy.

‘How about an excursion?’ he suggested. ‘We’ll pop Sophie in her car seat and drive out to the lake. We could do with a change of scene and a bit of fresh air.’

‘There’ll be midges.’

‘The lake was just a suggestion. We can go anywhere.’

‘Where?’

‘Wherever you like! How about the woods? Let’s go for a walk.’

‘The buggy doesn’t work on the trails.’

‘For Chrissakes, Jule!’

She stopped in front of the sofa, sat down, lifted her t-shirt and held Sophie to her breast. Immediately the noise ceased and the room filled with droning silence. Gerhard studied Sophie’s little face, the furiousness of her expression as she drank, fists clenched against her sucking cheeks, clinging to life with all the strength in her tiny body. A few strands of hair had escaped from Jule’s long ponytail and were tickling the baby’s naked legs. Jule was sobbing silently. Every now and then a tear landed on Sophie’s back or arms.

He found it heart-breaking to watch. ‘Jule,’ he said gently. ‘I’m just going to the kitchen to make us both some ginger ale. The two of you can be alone for a few minutes, all right?’

Jule nodded without lifting her gaze. Gerhard kissed the top of her head and got up. When a woman who had not yet turned thirty decided to share her life with a fifty-plus man, it was beholden on the man to make a bit of effort.

He paused for a few seconds on the way to the kitchen, enjoying the feel of the wooden floor beneath his feet. The old pine boards gave out low, rich creaks that seemed to contain the memory of a century of footsteps. The sound took him back to the moment he had entered the house for the very first time. He had been leading the way, with Jule and the estate agent close behind him. Suddenly, right outside the living room, he had stopped.

‘Feel free to go in,’ the estate agent had told him. ‘Just give the door a good push.’

Gerhard had simply stared at the handle. The graceful brass lever curved gently, curling into a spiral at the tip. It had to be one hundred years old at least, and for a moment he was rooted to the spot. When the original owners of the house had fitted that handle, they could not have known that two world wars were on their way. In their delight at building a brand-new home with all the latest comforts, they would not have stopped to admire the handle nor realized it would outlive them all. Everyone who had ever lived in that house had touched the door handle one last time. Right then Gerhard had wanted the same thing to happen to him. He had wanted to be a phase in the life of the door handle which would still be in place long after his death. He knew there and then that he had to buy the cottage. There could be no question of living in a new home in which everything was younger than he was. He did not want a house where even the skirting board had been enslaved by his creative will, where every fixture and fitting was forced to recognize his mastery because he had called it into being. He had no desire to bring anything new into the world; he wanted to preserve it. Nothing was more important in this overcharged era than protecting the last remnants of the old world against the psychotic forces of constant change. As the estate agent had reached past him to open the door, Gerhard had made up his mind.

He went into the kitchen, took the jug of ginger ale concentrate from the fridge and placed it on the work bench. The kitchen window faced out to the west. Because they lived right on the outskirts of the village, the view was completely clear: no houses, no fences, not a single pylon or structure of any kind. The only sign of human civilization was the road that climbed gently towards the forest for about a kilometre before disappearing among the trees. You could stand and watch for minutes on end until the forest finally spat out a vehicle and sent it rolling down the hill. Gerhard particularly loved the pear trees that bordered both sides of the road. Most of the trees on the verges in the region did not grow perpendicular to the tarmac but tilted outwards across the fields. 'Open-book boulevards,' was what Jule had called them on their first trip to Unterleuten, and so far no one had been able to settle their argument about whether the trees had been planted that way on purpose to stop windfall on the carriageway or whether the camber was to blame.

On the far side of the forest, the twin line of pear trees stretched into the distance, this time connecting with boulevards of apples, plums and cherries – thousands of tons of fruit ripening throughout the region, swelling and hanging heavy in the branches, dropping in autumn and rotting by the roadside because nature was indifferent to whether her products would be used by

man. At present the pears were small and green but in another two months the trees would be at breaking point from all the fruit. April and May had been wet, but not a single raindrop had fallen in weeks, and the heat hung over the landscape like an invisible cloak. The fields of wheat had grown tall and they moved now in ripples like the surface of a lake. There was nearly always a breeze in Unterleuten. It came from the east. From Schaller's land. From his fire.

Gerhard poured two glasses of ginger ale concentrate, fetched some ice cubes from the freezer and sliced an orange.

He had soon secured Jule's approval: the brick cottage with its green shutters and high roof had appealed to her too. And it was well-situated, right on the edge of the village with five thousand square metres of land and an old lime tree beside the front door. They had marvelled at the low asking price. Berlin was barely an hour away and yet it had seemed further than the moon. Their fears about missing city life were soon forgotten; so too was Jule's intention of starting a doctorate at Humboldt University and commuting three times a week. Instead of analysing the destructive impact of the happiness imperative in capitalism, she had thrown herself into bringing their neglected idyll into bloom. While Gerhard was still finding his bearings at the Conservation Office and trying to convince his colleagues that a professorship in sociology made him overqualified but not wholly ineffectual, Jule had taken to the garden in cut-off jeans and a sweat-drenched t-shirt, wielding a scythe.

Their joint decision to leave the city had been made spontaneously, but it was a logical next step. Moving to the countryside had been Gerhard's final notice of termination to the world. It marked his definitive break with a society in which the last remaining shared value was personal gain.

As an early supporter of the environmental movement, he had always seen political involvement as part of daily life. When the demonstrations started at the nuclear site in Gorleben, Gerhard had been one of the first on the scene. He had lived in the 'Free Republic of Wendland' for all thirty-three days of its brief existence until Helmut Schmidt's police had closed it down and carried him out. He had witnessed the founding of the Green Party in Karlsruhe. Later, when the wall came down, he had moved to Berlin and never missed a protest march. After completing his PhD on the topography of rebellion, he had resisted the comforts of small-town academia and accepted an underpaid position in the Social Sciences Department at Humboldt University in the

capital, where he had helped young people on their journey towards critical consciousness for the next twenty years.

On his forty-fifth birthday Gerhard had found himself alone on a battlefield, abandoned by his former comrades who had turned their backs on activism in favour of marathons. Environmentalism had fallen into the hands of management consultants and there was barely anything left of real politics, besieged from all directions by technocratic expediency and the sensation-hungry media. Gerhard looked with increasing bewilderment at the faces of his students: they seemed fearful and expectant in a zero-sum combination that left them strangely void. The Bologna Process had long since turned universities into high-performance units for young adults who had been working on their CVs since nursery school. Gerhard's colleagues were cheerful, sporty and went along with everything. They loved their kids, ate salad, drank a single beer at work functions, and went home at half-past ten.

If Gerhard tried to engage them in political discussions, they looked at him like a demented old man. His favourite topic was the modern mania for change. People could no longer conceive of leaving things alone; they had to improve on them, whether they were faulty or not. They wrecked things that worked perfectly and created new problems that demanded further changes – then they implemented their solutions to great acclaim. That was the problem with the famous scene in *Faust*, Gerhard liked to say. The devil in man does not do good while seeking evil – it does evil while seeking good.

His listeners would grow visibly uncomfortable as Gerhard worked himself into a fury. Universities that were envied the world over, abolished in favour of standardized student pathways and transferable learning credits! The great ideal of European solidarity, swapped for a centralized system that operated without proper democratic accountability and sought to regulate farmers but gave bankers and brokers free rein! Airports always had to be optimized, railway stations redeveloped, cities bypassed, and fields replaced with malls. Everything had to grow, everyone needed to go places, although no one could actually tell you where or why. These days, Gerhard would say over his third glass of red wine, you didn't need revolutionaries to smash the system but heroic preservationists to save the edifice from mindless change. By then the small group of listeners would have noticeably thinned. As soon as Gerhard proposed the immediate creation of a group to stop the restructuring of higher education, the last of the circle would pick up their mineral waters and leave.

Gerhard seemed to be the only one left who still believed happiness could be found in the shared struggle for a good cause. Everyone else sought salvation by working on their bodies and their careers. Gerhard felt like he was surrounded by athletes: classroom athletes, career athletes, family athletes, sex athletes – multi-sporters excelling at every discipline in life. Fighting for a cause had brought people together; the new regime of training kept them apart. People were always going off to be with their families, go jogging, or update their Facebook pages. It seemed to Gerhard that everyone had scattered while he had been left standing, arms dangling by his sides.

He shuddered at the memory of his last few years at the Humboldt in Berlin. Standing in the kitchen of his cottage and pounding the orange and ice cubes into a gravelly slush, he remembered how he had been made to feel like a stranger in his own department, in his own city, in the country of his birth. At first the efforts of his co-workers and citizens had struck him as excessive, then ridiculous, and ultimately dangerous. He had stopped making an effort. At work he gave up his academic ambitions. If he went to the pub in the evening, he made no attempt to enjoy it. At the theatre he stopped trying to like the play. Friends and colleagues found him odd. Gerhard had realized he could either become embittered or start again. Embitterment was easy, but he had not begun to fathom how a person in his situation could recreate himself. Then Jule had come along.

Gerhard listened out for a moment. The living room was still quiet, which was a good sign. Sophie was almost certainly still feeding. When Sophie refused to feed, Jule invariably lost the plot. Gerhard spooned the orange slush into the two glasses and filled them to the top with sparkling water. As soon as the drinks were ready, he was overtaken by such thirst that he drained both glasses and had to start again.

By the end of week three, Jule had joined not only his social theory seminar but also his workshop on surveillance and the private sphere. She apologized to him for signing up late and asked permission to join the class. Then she came to his office to discuss her choice of essay. She started going to the cafeteria where he always had lunch, sat at the next table, and always greeted him with a nod.

During a public lecture delivered by the ubiquitous Professor Münkler, he had spotted her in the audience and afterwards they ended up in the same crowd heading for the pub. She had sat next to him and made it crystal-clear that Münkler was not only ridiculously overrated but also a buffoon. Gerhard knew then for certain that she was the one for him. When Jule had left the table in the direction of the tiny dance floor, he had refrained from following her and jiggling about

among a bunch of students in defiance of the last fifty years. There was no need to prove anything to a woman like Jule. Instead he was content to watch as she danced with her eyes closed, her movements unforced and understated, swaying to the music for no one but herself.

In their eyes it had never been a lecturer-student liaison, although of course it was precisely that. In the small universe of the university they were a walking scandal: the sharp-tongued, somewhat bristly professor who nonetheless looked good for his age, and the tender, flame-haired beauty. Their relationship wasn't like that, though. They found in each other what they lacked. For Jule, Gerhard's fury was an antidote to the paralysing onslaught of information in the twenty-first century. For Gerhard, Jule was living proof that you could love someone without having to understand them. Together they could do what others only dreamed of – leave everything behind them instead of wallowing in despair. Together they could leave the city, where most of everything was.

When Gerhard had heard about the Conservation Office vacancy from a former colleague and birdwatcher who regularly went looking for ruffs on the heath, he had seen it as his final wake-up call. Moving to the countryside was not a problem; it was part of the solution. Even the name of the village where the office was located seemed auspicious: Seelenheil, promising salvation of the soul. It was less than ten minutes away from Unterleuten by car.

Two years later the new raspberry canes in the garden had already produced a bumper crop. All four corners of the house were covered in wisteria, and Gerhard had started a vegetable patch in which a few rows of beans, onions and carrots were fighting against the diletantism of their cultivator. The garden had just started to look truly idyllic when Jule became pregnant. In the evenings they would sit in the front garden and talk about acquiring the neighbouring plot of land. It was separated from their garden by nothing but a dilapidated wire fence and it was home to a small farm with a block-shaped main building and some derelict barns, all of which had been abandoned for years. The whole place was lacking in charm, but Jule liked the idea of knocking down the buildings and doubling the size of their garden. A person could never possess enough land, as their new existence in the parallel world of the provinces had taught them. Gerhard had no objections but wanted to wait for the baby. One addition at a time, he would say, and Jule would laugh.

It was around the time that Jule's bump had started showing that Gerhard went out to the vegetable patch one evening and saw a man in the field next door, smoking one cigarette after

another and flicking away the butts. The man was fat but not fleshy: every movement hinted at the power contained within his enormous form. He returned Gerhard's tentative wave after staring blankly for a number of seconds, apparently trying to decipher the meaning of a raised hand. His arms and back were covered in hair. Two weeks later an old van with a trailer had pulled into the yard. It kept returning several times a day for days on end, even at weekends. The fat stranger emptied load after load of rubbish into the yard and re-distributed the items according to an impenetrable system. A curt nod and a reluctant growl were all that they could get from him. Gerhard and Jule suspected that the poor fellow was feeble-minded. In the intervals between sorting rubbish, he sat on a plank balanced across the top of two barrels, drank beer from a can and stared into space.

Within a matter of days Jule had retreated from the garden.

'That animal won't stop gawping at me,' she would say. Despite Gerhard's assurances that their new neighbour clearly had no interest whatsoever in either of them, that in all probability he wasn't looking at anything in particular, or possibly even suffered from partial blindness, Jule continued to feel observed. By contrast, their view of his land could not be endured: it tortured their senses like a scream. Disembodied car parts, rusty oil barrels, tarpaulin, hoses, tools, jerry cans and beer bottles. Grass trampled into the muddy field. Unwanted clothes that had been drenched and dried by the elements, now lying in clumps like road-kill. An ever-changing queue of cars parked outside the house, some without bumpers, others without wheels, most with licence plates from Poland. And every so often there was a brand-new Audi without a registration number.

Schaller was a catastrophe. He was Gerhard and Jule's personal Armageddon. But Gerhard still believed they should remain calm. In the fifty years of his life so far he had learned that war never ends in peace. Schaller was a destiny they had to accept before they could begin to tame it. That was the theory. The practice was hard to bear.

In the living room, Sophie had started grizzling again. Gerhard paused for a moment in the hallway, a ginger ale in each hand, and closed his eyes, fighting the urge to take the glasses back to the kitchen and leave by the back door. Although he had arranged to stay home all week to support Jule, he felt an overwhelming desire to return to work. There was always plenty to do there. He could check on the observation towers, edit an article about breeding patterns of the ruff, comb through the databases on population changes, or check whether a cease-and-desist letter had been sent to the woman with the horse-riding plans.

Longingly he imagined his peaceful office with its open windows and the chattering of the storks as they circled the steeple of the empty church, flying back and forth to feed their three chicks. Getting the job at the Seelenheim office – an outpost of the Subdivision for Bird Conservation at the Department of Conservation in Plausitz – had been a real stroke of luck. The role involved looking after the welfare of thirty-three ruffs, a species of Palearctic wader that had been all but wiped out in Germany. He had come to the job knowing almost nothing about bird conservation, but two decades of university teaching had made him an authority on applying for grants. When his new colleagues had noticed how he breezed through EU forms, always finding precisely the right words to support their application, they had welcomed him into their fold.

Best of all, Gerhard's working life now coincided with his political convictions. Planning proposals directly concerned the Department of Conservation. The erection of a new grain silo, a country lane that needed to be widened, trees someone wanted to chop down, plans for a new petrol station or light airstrip or pigsty: Gerhard received the paperwork for every new development in the area. If a project went ahead without approval, he always got wind of it and stepped in before the worst of the damage had been done. On behalf of the ruffs and the vastly more numerous geese and cranes that touched down in the heath around Unterleuten twice a year, Gerhard was able to offer at least some resistance to the disastrous ideology of progress and growth. He could say with pride that he had thwarted seventeen planning proposals and placed significant restrictions on eleven others in his first three years of conservationism. Were it not for the precise location of Schaller's 'car repair business', he would have added it to the list.

Unfortunately, Gerhard's position of authority counted for nothing against the fact that his neighbour lived in the so-called mixed-use area of Unterleuten village, in which small-scale industrial activities were allowed. The conservation zone began on the outskirts of Unterleuten. Nonetheless, Schaller had started to re-roof his barns without permission from the authorities, so Gerhard could report him for something at least.

In the living room Sophie's dissatisfied grizzling had turned to fury and now despair. Gerhard sighed, pulled himself up tall and continued down the hallway with the ginger ale. He opened the door with his shoulder. Jule had left the sofa and was jiggling the baby up and down while whispering 'hush-hush', which was not having the desired effect. Gerhard forced himself to walk calmly across the room and deposit the glasses on the coffee table. Then he went over to Jule.

'We need to get the little one to bed,' he said. 'She's completely overtired.'

'She's crying because her mucous membranes are reacting to the toxic fumes. Look at her rubbing her eyes! Her nose is running. She's bright red!'

'Because she's been crying,' he said. 'The smell in here isn't so bad.'

He stood in the way of Jule's pacing and held out his arms.

'Let me hold her.'

'Leave it.'

'Come on, I'll hold her for a bit.'

'I'm holding her. Can't you see? I'm holding her, I'm carrying her. Backwards and forwards. Not just now, I carry her all the time when you're not here. Do you think you can do it better?'

'Of course not, Jule.'

'You drive to work and sit at your desk with the windows wide open or you wander around your nature reserve. But I'm here all day. I'm here with Sophie, here in this sauna. I carry her around with me day and night, and it's bloody hard!'

'You won't let me help you!'

'Right, so now Sophie is my responsibility and you're generous enough to pitch in.'

'Let me rephrase that: I can't do anything because you won't let me.'

'On the contrary, I'd love you to do something.'

'Such as?'

'Call the police.'

Gerhard shook his head. 'Once was enough.'

On the second day of the fire, when it had dawned on them that it was not a one-off occurrence but a targeted campaign, Gerhard had rung his boss at the conservation headquarters in Plausitz who redirected him to the regional council which regretted to inform him that off-site inspections were only possible if booked in advance. Gerhard then tried the police who directed him back to the council. Then Gerhard lost his temper, insisted on immediate action and threatened to make a formal complaint.

At around eight that evening the doorbell had rung. A patrol car was parked outside and there were two spotty young men in uniforms on the doorstep. Gerhard had pointed to their neighbour's yard. The fire had stopped. Not even the tiniest flying spark could be seen. By all accounts the problem had resolved itself, said the young men and tipped their hats. Gerhard had

stammered a 'thank you' and watched the patrol car disappear. In the next moment he had spotted Schaller lugging a stack of tyres into the field. Soon afterwards he was back again with a petrol can.

'Remember our Unterleuten code of conduct?' said Gerhard. 'First, if you arrive at a party with fifty other guests, make sure you shake hands with every single one of them. Second, if someone insults you, they only mean well. Third, if you've got a problem, keep the police out of it.'

'You need to take it up with the council, then. Or sue the animal!'

'By the time we get an injunction, we'll be half-dead from the fumes. A written notice will be issued and Schaller will throw it in the bin. They'll try to fine him and he won't pay. A bailiff will turn up at his door and there won't be anything worth taking. Schaller will—'

'Shut up!'

The words came out at such a volume that Sophie fell silent in shock. With an expression of utter amazement she stared at her mother, put her fingers in her mouth and started sucking on them. Gerhard smiled in spite of himself. He put a hand under Jule's elbow and steered her to the sofa. Once she was sitting, he thrust a ginger ale towards her and waited until she took it and reluctantly clinked glasses with him. It was freezing to the touch, but the ginger somehow warmed the mouth and throat. Gerhard liked the sensation.

They sat in silence for a while, enough time for Jule to accept that he was right. Villages like Unterleuten had survived the GDR and knew exactly how to keep the authorities out of their business. They had their own way of solving problems. And they never involved anyone else.

A muffled snore punctuated the silence, underscoring the fact that Sophie had not grizzled or screamed for several minutes. She lay on her back, draped across Jule, her tiny fists clenched against her cheeks, her face red and damp from crying. After reaching the point of utter exhaustion, she had fallen asleep. Jule had also sunk deeper into the sofa; she was more lying than sitting. Gerhard bent over her, lifted her legs onto the sofa and took out her hairband, allowing her red hair to fan out as he rested her head against the armrest. She looked up at him, glassy-eyed.

'We must be able to do something,' she murmured.

Gerhard nodded and rested his hand comfortingly on her forehead.

'Don't worry about it, darling. We'll find a way.'

Just because they could not call the police or discuss the matter civilly with Schaller did not mean that their options were exhausted. As a sociologist Gerhard had taken an active interest in

the workings of the village from the start, and three years had been long enough to learn at least something about it. Unterleuten was only a hundred kilometres from Berlin, but anthropologically it belonged to an unrelated tribe. Far beyond the reach of politicians, journalists and academic observers, the village survived as a completely independent, semi-anarchic organism. Operating almost entirely outside the state, its pre-industrial barter economy was unintentionally subversive: despised and forgotten, Unterleuten was oddly free. It existed in a parallel universe of social theory, not to mention social practice. Hard currency was less important than the question of who owed a favour to whom. In order to initiate change in the system, you had to be part of it. Gerhard needed allies. Or to put it another way: he needed people in his debt. That evening the village council would be holding an open meeting: 6pm at the Märkischer Landmann, all welcome. Unusually the mayor had not specified why – but no matter. Gerhard would be on the look-out for an opportunity to make his point.

‘Do you know what?’

Jule was barely awake. Her eyes were closed and her voice was just a whisper. Gerhard had to crouch beside her to hear what she was saying.

‘What is it, darling?’

‘You should probably kill the animal.’