SUSANNE RÖCKEL

DER VOGEL GOTT

Roman

German Title:	**Der Vogelgott**
Date of Publication:	**March 2018**
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Translation Funding:	**New Books in German (Goethe Institute)**

Description

Conspiracy novel meets psychological thriller as a family of four fall under the spell of a mysterious bird god. This remarkable novel captivates and disturbs in equal measure and keeps you wondering long after its final page.

The Bird God is divided into four parts, each of which is dedicated to one member of the Weyde family: the father and his three children, Thedor, Dora, and Lorenz. The siblings' descent into obsession and madness is narrated convincingly in the first person.

The prologue is an excerpt from an ostensibly unpublished manuscript by the father in which he encounters a mysterious bird deity in a faraway country … an experience that changes his life forever.

Thedor, the youngest child, describes his upbringing under a strict, bird-obsessed father. Following an encounter with a stranger, Thedor decides to travel abroad to work in a hospital in a strange country, with odd and unlikeable inhabitants. The hospital is attacked and Thedor witnesses a cannibalistic ritual in honor of a bird-like god.

Dora, the middle sibling, is an art historian whose marriage unravels as she becomes more and more obsessed with Johannes Wolmuth, a German artist whose work dates back to the Thirty Years' War. After an encounter with the enigmatic director of an art institute, she becomes convinced that Wolmuth depicted monstrous birds in his paintings.

Lorenz, the oldest sibling, is a freelance journalist who grows increasingly distanced from his wife and children as he investigates the mysterious death of a child. He discovers that many children are plagued by nightmares and a fear of birds.

The Bird God is one of those rare novels that readers cannot stop talking about — an unexpected and exciting blend of genres which is sure to captivate an English-language readership. Susanne Röckel's delightfully strange and refreshingly original novel combines fantastical and horror elements with details of ordinary people's lives to produce a haunting tale reminiscent of Andrew Michael Hurley's gothic triumph, *The Loney*.

Critical Acclaim

The Bird God is one of 6 novels that have been selected for the shortlist of the 2018 German Book Prize. The members of the jury considered entries from 105 publishers and a total of 165 works competing for the title of the best German-language novel of the year.

German Book Prize jury description

"Here a master storyteller has taken a grim story and turned it into a superb novel. The chance discovery of a church painting draws the members of an academically-oriented family into the puzzling myth of a bird god, which captivates them as inexorably as it draws readers into this story—especially when it becomes clear that this is indeed not merely a myth. The worshippers of this bird god live in a fabled yet dismal region of the world, where they appear to be not so much devoted to him, but rather living at his mercy.

In this irresistible novel, an occult world turns out to be our very own, in which nature turns its back on us and we are confronted with its malice and darkness."

https://www.deutscher-buchpreis.de/en/nominated/

Reviews

Excerpt from *Lesenswert Kritik* on SWR2 (German radio) broadcast on 26 July 2018 by Eberhard Falcke

"The settings and stages of this novel are strange, fascinating and often haunting. Its central characters are enveloped by an aura of horror that is occasionally intensified, to the point of nausea, by a revolting stench. What's more, behind every event lurks a baleful menace, if not evil itself. There can be no doubt that Susanne Röckel's novel *The Bird God* is one of the most peculiar, disconcerting and puzzling books of the year."

"Susanne Röckel has no intention of providing a realistic portrayal of actual events. Instead, her novel is rooted in the tradition of Dark Romantic Gothic fiction and the uncanny tales of writers like Edgar Allan Poe. Yet the tangled web that the novel's protagonists encounter during their searches is often reminiscent of the works of Franz Kafka. This is precisely what makes the highly diverse accounts of the three siblings and their father so intriguing."

"Susanne Röckel's bird figures are essentially messengers of evil and of the seemingly never-ending violence that, as an archaic force, regularly tears through the thin veneer of civilization."

"Based on the unusual genre of the modern Gothic novel, Susanne Röckel has crafted a work that is both surprising and captivating."

Excerpt from the literary series *Ex libris*, ORF (Austrian TV) broadcast on 29 April 2018 by Cornelius Hell

"Susanne Röckel is a wordsmith of the highest degree: Her writing is never marred by a superfluous, trivial or wrong adjective, and nothing ever disturbs the flow of her sentences. She must have something akin to perfect pitch for prose. And she is a great storyteller: Nothing happens by chance, everything is interconnected, and even the most minor details later turn out to be significant or recur in variations. And, above all, she knows how to tell the tale of the downfall of an individual in such a way that her characters are rendered unique and distinctive."

"The book consists of four parts. The prologue is presented as an unpublished manuscript by a teacher and ornithologist named Konrad Weyde. While traveling in a vaguely defined region, Weyde encounters a huge bird that is revered as a deity and that he is able to capture and preserve as a taxidermy specimen. In the three following chapters, which are skillfully linked and complement each other, his children—Theodor, Dora and Lorenz—have an opportunity to relate their own experiences."

"[The novel] is compelling in all respects—both in terms of the philosophical and religious issues that it raises as well as the depictions of the relationships and the downfall and social exclusion suffered by its protagonists.

For the past three decades, Susanne Röckel has been publishing extraordinary prose, but she has yet to become a household name. This may have to do with her frequent changes of publishers and the long intervals between her publications. Perhaps her novel *The Bird God* will achieve the notoriety that she has deserved for so long. It's high time that her work is finally discovered."

Prologue

Sample Translation

Prologue

... It was, as I soon realized, that fabled region that the greats of my field had written so much about. While the battered old locomotive was towed off to its depot, I was approached by several local taxi drivers sporting mustaches and muddy rubber boots who offered to drive me over the winding and pothole-ridden mountain road to the next railway station, but after glancing at the sky, which promised to be unusually bright and clear, I decided to remain right where I was and seek accommodation in the village of Z.—an irregular assemblage of leaning structures perched high among the cragged rocks, like the nesting site of a peregrine falcon.

The path that had been pointed out to me wound its way gently upwards among meadows, groves and fields. At first glance, the landscape appeared picturesque, but as I trudged with my heavy bags, I realized that my gaze had been clouded by the memory of the books that I'd read. Pechstein and von Boettiger had rhapsodized over the diverse views of the cultivated fields, green hills, gushing springs and charming woodlands, with the stunning silhouette of the rocky peaks rising in the distance. Droste had—I particularly recall this passage from his Wanderings of an Inveterate Birdwatcher—described how the melodious singing of industrious peasant women had blended with the devout exultation of the larks.

I found none of this. Aside from the monotonous chirping of crickets, the landscape was devoid of the sounds of people and birds, and the fields had apparently not been cultivated for years. I saw the remains of fences, barns and outbuildings for animals and other signs of past agricultural activity, but they had all sunken to the ground and were overgrown with thistles, grass and nettles. Someone had apparently attempted to destroy and burn a once handsome group of beehives with multi-colored landing boards; the boxes ripped from the frames lay half moldering in the soil. The hedges resembled impenetrable thorny thickets, and the woods had not been thinned for so long that they had become veritable primeval forests where the deadwood gleamed whitish. The old springs had silted up and a small lake, which lay at the foot of the hill and washed against reedy shores, had murky, foul-smelling water that
I dared not drink despite my raging thirst.

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I saw isolated, tall, often barren trees here and there; some with cracked and splintered trunks, others that looked as if their tops had been sheared off. On the highest treetops, I made out the silhouettes of a group of large birds of prey, but I spared myself the effort of retrieving the binoculars to make a more precise identification; once I've had a chance to settle in at the village, I'll have plenty of opportunities for that, I said to myself. The hills were dotted with huge, yawning holes that I could not explain. Even more curious were the massive rocks that were scattered everywhere. They resembled fragments of the rocky peaks that loomed behind the village, and on their sunlit surfaces I noticed large numbers of lizards (bright green, with many specimens of Lacerta viridis). The structures in the village, which was not far away now, had the same color as these rocks. They were built of gray wood and topped with gray roofs, and they seemed no less dilapidated and forbidding than the surrounding countryside.

The weight of my equipment forced me to take frequent breaks. It had become hot and my shirt was drenched in sweat. The inhabitants of the high-lying settlement must have spotted me long ago, but I glanced around in vain for someone who could help me carry my heavy rucksack and suitcase. Alongside the path ran a ditch. It was filled with refuse. Aside from decaying pieces of clothing, orphaned shoes, and the usual assorted detritus of civilization, I noticed large pieces of rusty metal, a mildewed gun holster, something that was half-embedded in the ground and looked like an artillery shell and, in one spot, a charred, bent rifle. In conjunction with my previous observations, it seemed logical to assume that in the not-too-distant past this region had been ravaged by a military conflict whose instruments of destruction lay rotting in this ditch. I had not read or heard anything of this—although I regularly read our Daily Gazette and was even one of the first faculty members to own a television—and I had no idea what people had fought and perhaps died for here or what had moved them to contemplate the downfall of others and, armed to the teeth, fall upon their neighbors. I was once again painfully aware of the fragmentation of our world, whose individual parts appear to know nothing of—and learn even less from—each other; at any rate, they comprehend nothing that extends beyond the superficial needs of trade and tourism. My thoughts went back to my father, who had told me so much about the war during his final years, and I recalled that he had felt

repulsed by his commanding officers and no less so by his fellow soldiers, and that during the long internment his love of nature, especially of birds, blossomed—a love that I had inherited from him. I also found refuge and solace in nature's wondrous order, whose limbs are ultimately "the elixir of life to us all," as the poet says; it had become a habit of mine during the little free time that my profession allowed me to assiduously study the flora and fauna, even if my family was not thrilled by this pursuit, and in view of the peculiar wounds of this tormented landscape I was comforted by the thought that, here too, nature would soon ensure renewal and, in an act of healing, erase all painful memories of the past.

The village, which I finally reached after an arduous three-hour march, was dingy and made a bleak impression. Everything exuded backwardness and bitter poverty. The gray houses had foundations of firmly joined stones, but the upper levels seemed so primitive, so hastily and artlessly built, that it appeared as if they could easily be reduced to their individual parts by the next strong wind. Yet it was evidently this very type of construction, so insufficient according to my human standards, that was exceedingly beneficial to the beloved birds. As I walked uphill through a narrow, shady street, I realized that unusually large numbers of them felt at home here. I noticed their nests in the rain gutters, the wide gaps in the stonework, and in the holes and cavities in the sides of the houses that leaned apart as if exhausted. Everywhere I looked, all manner of genus and species of Aves whirred in and out, with an abundance of tumultuous activity. There were sparrows in cracks and crevices close to the ground, in the occasional rampantly growing bush and scampering over the irregularly cobbled lanes—so many of them that it almost defied estimation, but they surely numbered in the hundreds. Above them, on the roofs and antennas, flew jackdaws, magpies, starlings, finches, chickadees, siskins and many more that I only fleetingly observed and could not immediately verify. Countless common swifts plummeted with piercing cries and young swallows sat on the wires strung between the buildings. I now also became aware that I was surrounded by people who were observing me. Expressionless faces came to light out of the dark window cavities and behind me gathered a group of ragged children who, in the company of their silent, shaggy dogs, warily followed me at a distance of a few meters.

I settled on a building with a weather-beaten inscription identifying it as the "Hotel International." Under its gray tiled roof with innumerable holes clung the nests of a

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house martin colony and the chirpy, polyphonic colloquy of these graceful creatures was the most wonderful welcoming greeting that I could have imagined. I stepped through the door and found myself in a kind of sun-room with white crocheted curtains. In the middle stood an old black table surrounded by a number of stools. Recesses in the wall were filled with course, yellowish earthenware. It was quiet and no one had apparently noticed my arrival. I called softly a few times in the direction of the narrow staircase that led along the side of the room to the next floor, but no one answered. The small country that I called home and yet had fled with such delight suddenly seemed so remote to me. And me, with my smooth white skin, my useless occupation, completely cut off from my family and fellow countrymen, did I not appear to be a simpleton in the eyes of the locals here? After an agonizingly long time, a door finally opened and a young woman entered the room. In a glance I registered behind her a courtyard with hanging wet laundry, pecking chickens, rabbit hutches and a rusty sheet metal vat that was evidently used for distilling spirits. The woman was strong and broad shouldered, and under her headscarf a long blond plait of hair hung down between her shoulder blades. Even more peculiar than her coarse, croaking voice were her eyes—large, round, dark eyes that stared at me with flagrant hostility. I tried in vain to converse with her, but she did not understand a word of the common languages in use today (which, I'm pleased to say, I all speak fluently), so our conversation was limited to gestures. I was made to understand that there was no room or food available, and that she could somehow accommodate me for, at most, one night. Since I was far too exhausted to search for anything else, I had her show me to my room and hoped that I could find something to relieve my growling stomach.

The room was a large chamber with several windows and a low ceiling, crammed with crudely-made bed frames sans mattresses or covers. Inscriptions and symbols carved into the wooden bedsteads revealed that this space had once housed a large number of people; perhaps they had been soldiers. An adjacent room had a spigot with a garden hose and a hole in the floor that served as a latrine. I put down my things and ran clear cold water from the hose over my back. Then I felt better. The windows offered a spectacular view. I saw a green hillside with an orchard and right behind it the rugged rocks of the mountains. When I spotted a brownish-red bird with a long, curved beak and black-and-white banded

wings perched on the roof of an old shed roughly thirty meters away, I gasped in surprise. I hastily reached for my binoculars and was soon able to confirm that this was indeed a hoopoe, a species that is sure to make the heart of every bird lover beat faster.

Until the first twilight, I marveled at this unusual animal as it probed the grass with its long bill in search of caterpillars and crickets to feed its trailing brood, a nearly full-grown fledgling; time and again I spotted the two birds with their magnificent crown of feathers, and in the final rays of light of the setting sun I managed to make a number of fine photographic images. After the feeding was over, the adult bird flew to a wooden post, and I heard the low, resounding oop-oop-oop call that gives rise to its scientific name, Upupa epops. I now no longer needed the field glasses. Standing motionless at the window, I was completely mesmerized by the sight of these birds as they calmly strutted back and forth and occasionally briefly flew to neighboring rooftops. I felt amazingly privileged to remain so long in the presence of these splendid creatures. It almost seemed to me that it was not I who had discovered them, but rather they who had called me here, and it suddenly dawned on me why in Eastern religious traditions the hoopoe is ascribed the mystical role of messenger and spiritual guide.

It grew dark and my rumbling stomach forced me to look for my next meal. The proprietor was nowhere to be seen, nor were there any signs of either a kitchen or cooking facilities. Only the dogs were out and about in the narrow streets of the village, and when I moved to open the door of a shop in which glaring electrical light illuminated a paltry selection of victuals, a number of these curs barked at me furiously and, with bared teeth, forced me to retreat. I had nothing with which to ward them off, but I shouted in an attempt to draw attention to my plight. This prompted the dogs to desist with a snarl and lie down panting at the entrance to the shop, but no one came to my rescue; on the contrary, in the windowpanes all around me I saw faces shy away from me. As my pulse quickened with disappointment and outrage, I quickly strode through the village and reached the gently rising meadow where I had just seen the hoopoe. I hiked up to a small knoll that afforded me a of view of the vast surrounding landscape. White streaks of cloud in the sky reminded me of a scribbled blackboard. But as the sun set they assumed the colors of flames that encompassed the uniformly light gray sky,
only to rupture in slow motion into irregular

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orange-yellow-black spots and spatters and remain suspended in the air like a frozen rain of sparks. Smoke rose from the earth; it was the night, whose blackness gradually engulfed the last faint speck of orange in the sky. "Now falls the new world of night and darkens the brightest sunlight,"—I recalled this verse that I must have recently read, but drove away the maudlin thoughts that this brought to mind. For quite some time now, I have made it a principal to view any predicament with an eye for the good that I can nevertheless reap from it, so I said to myself that the encounter with the hoopoe had ultimately made the entire arduous detour worthwhile. I would have something to tell my friends! I decided that the very next morning I would leave this inhospitable village, either get hold of a car or, if necessary, walk to the nearest railway station where I could catch the express train. The city of B., my original destination, was less than one hundred kilometers away and a comfortable hotel room awaited me there.

It was pitch-black in the village. All lights that had shone here and there at dusk had now disappeared and, in the silence of night, the contours of the houses dissolved and blurred in the deep darkness. Fortunately, I have a very keen sense of orientation, but my fear of the dogs had in no way diminished, so I cautiously inched my way downwards. At one point, I saw something light-colored next to my head and was brushed by something soft. A moment later, I heard at close quarters the characteristic warning screech of a barn owl (Tyto alba). Higher in the sky—above the post that the hoopoe had sat on during the afternoon—even more nocturnal birds appeared to be hunting. I heard the angry hissing of a long-eared owl, then the sustained glissando of a male little owl (Athene noctua) and the calls of other members of the order Strigiformes, so often wrongly considered birds of ill omen, that had all apparently found an exceptional hunting ground here. I finally made my way back to my accommodation. Here, too, everything was pitch-black. There was not a soul in sight. When I reached my room, I went to light a match, but I couldn't locate the rucksack where I kept the matches in a side pocket, so I got undressed and, groping forward in the dark, simply crawled into the bed near the window. After a fitful night's sleep, I awoke just before dawn to an enormous clamor in the courtyard. Roosters crowed, geese screamed, dogs barked and a dreadful commotion revealed a raid by a nocturnal predator in the pens of

the domesticated animals. Meanwhile, not a sound was to be heard from the local inhabitants, leading me to the absurd thought that the intruder must be carrying out his gory work with their approval. Or were the people simply not there? Did they perhaps not sleep in their homes, but instead indulge in dark pursuits at some secret gathering place? As soon as the morning light crept over the mountains and the side of the house across the street became visible again, I laughed at these bizarre speculations and realized that hours of fasting in combination with the strange surroundings had almost certainly sparked an unusually vivid imagination in me.

My bed stood parallel to the windows. The village was still shrouded in shadows while the dewy roofs were already glistening in the sun. I was gazing drowsily out the window when my heart skipped a beat: A large bird with outstretched wings had appeared over the gray mountain chain. And what a bird it was! I was immediately spellbound by the beauty of its form, the lightness and elegance of its soaring flight, as I followed with bated breath every movement of this astonishingly majestic animal. My hunting instinct had been aroused. It was clear to me that this had to be something extraordinary. I immediately ruled out harriers and kites because they do not venture to such high altitudes. Could it be a golden eagle or a lesser spotted eagle (or a rarer Aquila heliaca)? No, even if the silhouette was similar, this bird was much larger. The form of the head was reminiscent of an Egyptian vulture (Neophron percnopterus); the other characteristics that I could make out by squinting my eyes—the long, wedge-shaped tail, the huge wings, the light-colored head—suggested a bearded vulture or even a cinereous vulture (Aegypius monachus), yet the shape of the wing feathers and the color of its plumage made me instantly doubt this interpretation as well. No matter how intensely I pondered, the details didn't fit together and I couldn't reach a satisfying conclusion. The most far-fetched of possibilities flashed through my mind, and I even fleetingly entertained the notion that it was the fearsome, seemingly diabolical harpy eagle (Harpia harpyja), which remotely resembled this powerful raptor with its broad wings and massive head, but since its range is manifestly on the other side of the globe, this line of reasoning also proved to be a dead end. When I leaned over to retrieve my binoculars from their usual place in my rucksack, I came up empty handed.

I had purposely slid my bag under the bed to keep it close at hand during the night. It must have been

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stolen from me the previous day while I was out looking for a bite to eat. It contained possessions of utmost value to me that also symbolized my entire existence as a man of science: my trusty old binoculars that my father gave me when I passed my final exam; the recently acquired spotting scope; my dependable Leica; plus the indispensable field guide and a foldable goshawk trap. As a taxidermist, I primarily relied on this practical device that had already allowed me to capture many a magnificent specimen. The loss of my gear was a harsh blow for me. Scrimping by with my modest teacher's salary, it had taken me ages to save up enough to purchase it, and some of what I could have provided to my family as a husband and a father had gone toward paying for this costly equipment. In short, this rucksack was the most precious thing that I owned. Faced with this crushing theft, the bitterness of being groundlessly rejected by the people of the village swelled to violent rage. But after blindly searching the room and surroundings, I soon realized the futility of my actions. My rucksack was gone and I had no hopes that anyone would help me to recover it.

At least they had left me my suitcase. And I now recalled that, acting on some strange impulse, I had placed a small net among my clothing shortly before embarking on my trip.

I stood at the window with this net in my hands until I once again regained my composure. No, I couldn't capitulate now. The massive birds—I slowly realized that there were two or more of them that were hunting together—flew in majestic high circles before my eyes. They were the best, the greatest, the most magnificent thing that I had ever encountered; they were what everyone dreamed of in our field, something exceptional and unique that justified the many long hours of fruitless watching and waiting in the wee hours of the morning, crouched in a secluded camouflage tent or in the undergrowth; they were that singular discovery that each of us longs and hopes for when—startled by a silhouette, an astonishing aerial maneuver or an odd call that cannot be immediately identified—we reach for our binoculars, only to find over and over, with a certain disappointment, the same expected species.

My trip had been worthwhile after all. While I checked the net and tied my shoes, several thoughts went through my head. They revolved around

concrete and practical matters; I asked myself how I would ship out my bird as surreptitiously as possible, how I would pass it through customs, etc., but there was not the slightest doubt in my mind that I would capture it. Of course, I regretted not being able to use the goshawk trap, but I had enough experience to know that I would succeed even without this infallible tool of the trade. I saw it in my mind's eye. I would present it with half-spread wings, perched on a rugged, picturesque outcrop, slightly crouched, but alert and rapt, in the typical stance of a bird of prey that is about to take flight. It would receive a place of honor among my best specimens; with its ruffled white head and strong beak, it would tower over the buzzards, falcons, sparrowhawks and kites of my collection; yes, they would appear insignificant and trivial in comparison to it, like servants bowing down before their lord. The inscrutable gaze of its black, shiny glass eyes would strike fear in the hearts of every observer—and I would be the creator of this awe-inspiring work! I imagined the admiring glances of my friends, those wimps and armchair travelers that make up the small circle of the Ornithological Society, with its weekend hikes, lectures and slideshows—oh, how futile and pathetic we were in our attempts to embrace nature, that mysterious stranger who, the more you know of her, the more unfathomable she becomes ... and yet this ancient law had never prevented anyone from yearning to know more about her ... and I would now have an opportunity to distinguish myself before them all and take a great stride forward in advancing our field ...

I was entertaining such thoughts as I stepped out the door. I saw neither people nor dogs, and even the birds appeared to have disappeared; at any rate, no trace remained of their lively activity of the previous day. The silence was steeped in hostility, but I was disturbed by no one. In fact, I was not hindered until I reached the outskirts of the village and saw the hillside with the old telephone pole before me—and behind it a narrow path that wound its way upwards in wide curves.

Before the man stepped into my field of vision, I recoiled. I had detected a slight whiff of something that vaguely annoyed, alarmed and startled me. It was the stench of something noxious, foul and putrid, an odor that came from the animal kingdom and immediately induced the most profound aversion in me. The smell clung to the stranger, yet began to dissipate as he started to talk, so that it soon no longer bothered me (or was I merely becoming accustomed to it?).
The man was shorter than me, but very burly

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and stocky; he had thick black hair, a low forehead and deep-set eyes, and under the pale, carefully shaven skin, I could see the shadow of the dark beard that extended from his strong cheekbones to his muscular neck. Exceedingly well groomed and clad in European clothes, he greeted me in my language without a trace of an accent and even knew my name—which unnerved me in the extreme.

"Would you kindly step this way, Mr. Weyde," he said, "It won't take long."

He could have been mistaken for a tour guide, but his discreet request sounded more like an order from a policeman or a secret agent, whose instructions are to be followed to the letter. I was revolted, dumbfounded, speechless—and, I have to admit, irrepressibly curious. With surprisingly nimble, nearly dancingly-light movements, he walked in front of me and led me to a building—I hadn't noticed it earlier—that was better constructed and taller than the other structures in the village. It was chilly and quiet inside, but distant voices were audible along with metallic sounds that somehow seemed threatening. After walking up heavily worn stairs, we reached a wide, irregular, stately room in which daylight streamed through a dome-like skylight. I fleetingly saw locked wooden trunks on the floor and, hanging above them on large hooks, garments that I initially assumed were long, shaggy patchwork coats. It was only a few minutes later—we were already in the next room—that it occurred to me that the gray, brown and white patches that I had glimpsed were in reality feathers.

The next room was small and pleasant. The walls were covered with white plaster and a large window offered a view of the picturesque range of craggy peaks. Sumptuous old carpets lay on the floor and on the benches along the wall and teacups and a bowl of pastries had been placed on a small table. The stranger motioned for me to take a seat. At the sight of these enticing delicacies, I was overwhelmed with hunger and gobbled up the sticky cakes, which instead of satisfying my appetite actually made it that much more intense. The man poured me a cup of tea and observed with a disquieting expression on his face how I greedily ate and drank. Then he stated: "This is why you're here," and pointed to the window.

I couldn't believe my eyes: There it was again, the unknown bird, that exquisite creature that still had no name. It hovered astonishingly close to the last stunted pine trees on the mountainside.

My host's voice echoed in my ears, but I am incapable of giving a literal rendition of what he told me. It was all so surprising and mysterious that I barely understood at first what he was talking about. What he wanted to say was that they would not allow me to capture the bird—and that if I failed to respect this ban, I would be punished. In whose name was he speaking? Who had vested him with this authority? At any rate, it became clear to me that the inhabitants of this village that seemed forgotten by time worshiped this strange raptor as if it were some sort of god. They attributed supernatural powers to it and believed that they had to submit to its will. The stout man seemed to be a kind of guardian or emissary who felt entitled to issue instructions to others. He spoke of "we," of "our mountains" and "our duties."

Did I have to listen to all of this like some silly boy? "You constantly speak of 'we'," I exclaimed, "but you forget me! You are no longer alone—because I am here now!" I laughed cockily in his face. Suddenly I realized that an unsightly, crude and dirty body must be concealed under his fine suit. He pointed again to the window: The bird was so close that it nearly brushed against the glass—but in the next instant I couldn't see it anymore—it must have flown off in a rapid maneuver. My host's hand was in his lap. Now he raised it—once again, the bird glided up to the window and turned its striking head back and forth—only to disappear again when the hand was lowered. I observed this bewildering hocus-pocus for a while and felt hot anger swell up in my chest. Did this man really believe that he could impress me with his sleights of hand? Who was he? And why should I see any more in him then an ugly, stinking, meddlesome brute who was trying to talk me out of what I had firmly resolved to do?

I refused to allow myself to be hindered by this man, neither by him nor by the others who I vaguely discerned while I was shown out of the building again. This time, we descended a wobbly outdoor staircase that led directly to the street.

"Farewell then," the ominous stranger said very calmly while he scrutinized me with a cold, piercing gaze.

Prologue

I was still filled with rage and felt provoked, insulted and upset to the point of exasperation, and could not bring myself to take the hand that he proffered. Then he tapped me with a finger very lightly, touching on the cloth of my jacket precisely on the spot where I had placed the net in my inner pocket. It was of course pure coincidence—it was nothing—, and yet this light touch felt like fire and I involuntarily winced as if I had been pierced by a red-hot knife. A moment later, it was over and without hesitation I marched away from him and toward the crag where the enigmatic birds were circling. The painful sensation did not completely disappear, however. Although I had ascertained that I was outwardly absolutely unscathed, I could not shake the absurd impression that my brief contact with his hairy hand had somehow marked or branded me. Bewilderment and anxiety melled with the determination with which I strode away from my rival. "Rival"? How did I come to designate the stranger this way? I don't know. All I know is that at that moment our brief encounter seemed to me to be a skirmish of sorts, a duel over an object that I could not name anymore than I could discern the cause of the peculiar mood that seized me, a mixture of the energy of curiosity and the fire of anger, as I approached the gray cliffs that towered above me, with their maze of jet-black cracks and crevices, where twisted and stunted bushes and trees clung to the crags and crusted snowfields covered the shaded slopes.

The village quickly disappeared from view as I steadily hiked up the mountainside. I repeatedly laughed out loud as I imagined the look on my friends' faces, those dauntless and inquisitive men with whom I silently conversed. Would they not all have acted precisely as I did? Were we not all determined to resist the allure of illusory myths, did we not all strive for new discoveries, broader knowledge and a greater understanding? Identifying and possessing are closely related; and, while we did everything in our power to overcome the challenges of establishing the correct classification of a steady stream of new mysteries, as indefatigable men of science we were also driven by the deep desire to enrich our collections—reflections of the tremendous wealth of nature. And what drove me? I could have done the obvious thing and, instead of pursuing this strenuous and perilous climb, simply headed for the nearest railway station, as I had resolved to do the previous day, but—even if I had known of the ordeal that awaited me, the long wait under a rock ledge, the bitter

cold of night, the twitching muscles and pangs of hunger and thirst—that was now completely out of the question. The theft of my rucksack and the odd exchange of words with the stranger had aroused my hunting instincts to the point that there was no turning back. I was no longer content to classify this bird. I was determined to possess it. And my efforts were to be crowned with success ...

The best hunters keep a cool head, as they say, but they essentially follow an inner voice, an instinct that renders them wide awake and sharp-eyed and a worthy adversary of their quarry. They approach this adversary, lose their higher self and sink to the level of a primitive being that had existed before a clear boundary emerged between man and animal. I felt a strength and vigor that took me totally by surprise. All fear had dissipated. The scattered thoughts and superficial sensitivities of my normal state of consciousness had been replaced by the overwhelming urge to track my prey, capture and kill it. After a few hours, I saw a remote dot circling overhead and another one somewhat farther away. Even without my binoculars, I knew that I had reached the birds' territory and before long I located their nest and developed a suitable strategy for my undertaking.

But before I could make my final, decisive, crowning step, something happened that threw me off course for a moment—something inexplicable and deeply disturbing—a kind of dream in a waking state. As it turned out, it had greater consequences for my life than the actual capture. I never spoke to a soul about it, but I couldn't forget it, and the pleasure that I experienced from my collection, whose splendid trophies soon attained prominence among experts, was forever spoiled.

The steep slopes were covered with loose stones and large rocks would regularly come tumbling down in clouds of dust. To avoid getting hit, I was forced to seek shelter in the deep shadows of the cliff face whenever I heard the rumbling noise above me. I had just managed with difficulty to clamber over a gnarled, uprooted tree that was blocking my path when I suddenly saw the huge raptor in front of me. The bird stood before me on a rock outcropping, slightly crouched with partly outstretched wings—precisely the stance that I had envisioned for the taxidermic preservation—and stared directly at me. It was perched at a distance of roughly twenty meters. I saw its magnificent, dazzling plumage that appeared to me to alternate between gray-brown and black, its white head and round eyes under the bony projections

Prologue

of its skull—those eyes that have many times the acuity of human eyes—, I saw the powerful beak, the dagger-like claws—and at that moment I ceased to be myself. It was as if I suddenly could see myself with its eyes. My actions seemed to me to be equally uncanny, ridiculous and futile, since they in no way altered the fundamental fact of my weakness and inferiority. My curiosity had led me here; my thirst for knowledge justified the sacrilege; my hunting instinct, my burning desire to face off with this creature and take it home as a specimen had given me strength and endurance, but now it all collapsed like a fire that is suddenly starved of oxygen. I felt the deep weariness of my body in the shadows as the bird dove without haste from the precipice, spread its majestic wings and, glistening in the evening sun, casually soared below me. When I lost sight of it, I felt more lonely then ever before. The loneliness left me paralyzed. My arms and legs were ice-cold and incapable of movement, and my thoughts lost all coherence. The world around me, my immediate surroundings—rocks, dust, yellow lichen, ants and a mouse hole—seemed more alien to me than the surface of the most desert planet. I heard my teeth begin to chatter. I was consumed by the thought of becoming invisible, losing myself and disappearing in the cold shadow of this cliff. Yes, I would disappear—and with me would disappear my children and their children—, forsaken by light, our contours would blur, our bodies would blend with the shadows of the earth and the darkness of the universe would absorb and swallow us—but this god, whose omnipotence I could no longer doubt, would remain ...

(Konrad Weyde, The Bird God, unpublished manuscript)

Translated from the German by Paul Cohen

The Author

Susanne Röckel, b. 1953, lives in Munich. She is the critically acclaimed author of nine works in German, including *Palladion* (1989), *Chinesisches Alphabet* (1999), *Aus dem Spiel* (2003), *Vergessene Museen* (2009), *Rotula* (2011) and her most recent novel, *Der Vogelgott* (2018), which has been selected for the long list of the 2018 German Book Prize.

Röckel is also a highly accomplished translator of books from English and French into German. She has translated many non-fiction books as well as dozens of literary works by authors such as Joyce Carol Oates, Irène Némirovsky, Antonia S. Byatt and Paula Fox, to name just a few.

The Bird God would be her first novel to be translated into English.

The Translator

Paul Cohen, b. 1962, is an American translator with over 25 years of professional experience.

He has translated hundreds of articles for SPIEGEL Online and rendered numerous German books into English.

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Translation Funding

The Bird God was selected in the spring of 2018 by *New Books in German* as a promising book for translation.

This means that any English-language publisher that purchases the English foreign rights to the book is guaranteed translation funding from the Goethe Institute.

For more information, see
http://www.new-books-in-german.com/funding/

For those who are unfamiliar with it, *New Books in German* is a twice yearly journal aimed at busy editors in the UK, the USA, and increasingly those in other countries, who would like to publish more translations but would also appreciate independent help in finding the right titles from among the thousands published each year in the German language.