



Helene Bukowski
THE WARRIOR
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**The sea is constant.
The war seems far away.
The light lies in the shadows.**

Lisbeth and the warrior have known each other since their training in the Armed Forces. They chose the military because they wanted a body that isn't weak — as if the only way to face the world is with a heart clenched in a fist. Lisbeth is very sensitive: her skin reacts to other people's feelings and dreams; she can only protect herself by keeping her distance.

When Lisbeth comes home after her day at the flower shop and sees her husband, her daughter and a few friends sitting in the kitchen, she suddenly can't stand it any longer. She turns around, leaves the apartment, gets in the car and drives to the Baltic Sea. On one of the days at the beach, when Lisbeth's life is at a crossroads, the warrior suddenly stands before her. Many years have passed since they last saw each other, but they are still drawn to one another. But her past doesn't remain dormant either. They are women who have experienced violence and commit violence against themselves and those close to them. But Lisbeth and the warrior are also ready to fight against it.

The Warrior is a novel about the special friendship between two women whose top priority is to strip themselves of all vulnerability. Helene Bukowski tells of the resulting wounds, the violence, their traces and the trauma - both experienced and inherited.

"Bukowski has a keen sensorium that allows her politically virulent topics to be captured with crystal clarity." Der Tagesspiegel

Helene Bukowski, born in Berlin in 1993, once more lives in her city of birth. She studied at the Hildesheim Literature Institute and, in addition to writing, also runs creative writing courses and workshops. Her debut novel *Milk Teeth (Milchzähne)*, for which she was nominated for various awards, was published in 2019. The novel has been translated into French and English and a film adaptation is in the works.



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THE WARRIOR

by Helene Bukowski

Sample translation by Jen Calleja

“A woman will forever be an object”

– Finch

“Taste my blood, boy

Taste my blood”

– Ebow

First Part

SALTWATER

Lisbeth woke with a start. The darkness was so dense that she didn't know whether she had her eyes open or closed. She groped for the bedside table, found her mobile, held it in front of her face. The screen glowed brightly, for a moment Lisbeth couldn't see anything. She squinted. Three thirty. Malik sighed in his sleep, rolling over towards her. Between them lay the child, quietly breathing, sleeping deeply. Lisbeth threw back the covers, got out of bed, slid on her slippers, put on a jumper, left the room, walked down the dark corridor, put on the lamp in the kitchen. In the light she examined her arms. Her skin was raw, the crooks of her arms blood smeared. She checked her fingernails, picked scabs out from under them, put water on to boil, spooned instant coffee into a cup.

In the bathroom mirror she saw that she had scratched at her neck as well. She had a cold shower, washed the blood from her body, carefully dried herself, put on lotion, but the skin

wouldn't stop burning. Back in the kitchen she drank the coffee, ate a slice of toast, put on her lilac-coloured puffer jacket, and left the flat.

She had parked the flower shop van in a side street under a linden tree that was already losing its leaves. Lisbeth scooped a few from the windscreen, got in the car, started the engine.

The streets were empty. She made swift progress. She'd put the radio on so low that she couldn't understand what was being discussed, only able to make out a low murmur.

There wasn't much going on at the wholesale market yet, the scent of flowers filled the hall. Lisbeth's movements became more relaxed. She went around all the stands systematically, reaching for flowers, checking their stability, haggling, handing over money, chatting about the weather. After she'd got everything on the list, she stowed away the flowers in the van and smoked a cigarette in the car park, leaning against the vehicle's cool metal. A siren rang out, cutting through the night. Lisbeth smelled burning, looked around, believed for a moment that she was standing in a downpour of ash, blinked, it was instantly silent. She rubbed her arms, increasing the pressure.

"Damn," she cursed, shaking out her hands, resisted the compulsion to scratch, threw the cigarette away, and climbed into the van.

Lisbeth drove out of the city, parked by a canal, walked through the high weeds. Leaves and burdocks clung to her trousers. She took her jack-knife out of her jacket pocket, cutting ribgrass, wild-beaked parsley, golden oat grass, a few slow twigs by the light of her phone. Slowly, the itching waned. On the horizon, the first strips of light were visible. As she drove back into the city, the sun rose. Red glowed in her rear-view mirror.

The florist was near the Spree. Lisbeth could smell the water that day. She parked the van on the embankment and carried the flowers and the cut weeds to the shop, distributed them among the enamel buckets, removed what had withered overnight, wrote out new prices on the signs, reviewed the orders, arranged the pots and plants out front, and extended the awning.

It remained a quiet day. Only a few people came into the shop and bought flowers. Lisbeth's hands smelled of pistachio green, she had made several bunches of flowers using the grasses from the canal, and frequently went out into the backyard to sit on a discarded chair and smoke.

In the afternoon the owner of the shop called, passed on the wishes for the arrangements for a wedding, hung up without saying goodbye. Lisbeth wrote a list, swept the offcut leaves and stems that had accumulated into a thick layer on the floor during the course of the day, changed the water in the buckets, filed the receipts, put the key to the van in the till and smoked a final cigarette before bringing in all the pots from outside back in, wound in the awning, wrapped one of the bunches with the grasses and twigs from the canal in paper and clamped it under her arm.

At six she closed the door of the florist, held the bouquet over her head. She felt the weight of her hands, the raw skin, the cuts, shoved her fingers deep into the pocket of her puffer jacket and walked under the already almost bare sycamores, along the pavement, under her feet vibrated the U-Bahn.

In a few weeks it would be dark when she opened up the shop in the morning, and it would be dark when she left it in the evening.

A fine drizzle set in. Lisbeth pulled the hood of her jacket low over her face. She felt the cold of the water, the streetlamps had come on. In the orange light the rain looked like snow. To Lisbeth's left, a vacant plot appeared between the houses. Tall stinging nettles. Lisbeth left the pavement, walked through them, taking no notice of the wetness transferring to her trousers from the leaves. That spring someone had planted wild chrysanthemums in the middle of the wasteland. They were still in bloom. Lisbeth looked around. On the ground between the flowers cowered a white dog. She broke out in a sweat. In her head, a shot rang out. She squinted and realised that it wasn't a dog. A white plastic bag had got caught amongst the stalks. The sweat burned on Lisbeth's skin. She pulled up the sleeves of her puffer jacket, ran her hands over the crooks of her arms, her wrists, tried not to use her fingernails, picked at scabs. Then she bent over towards the plastic bag, took a walk around the plot, found a screwed-up piece of foil, an empty drink carton and three plastic corks. She left the wasteland, threw everything in a bin, and kept walking.

Lisbeth opened the front door to the building, climbed the stairs, noticed how she became

slower and slower. Next to the doormat lay Malik's trainers, beside them the child's yellow boots and another three pairs of shoes Lisbeth didn't recognise. She felt her body become heavy, she turned the key in the lock in slow motion, opened the door. The flat was brightly lit. She was hit by a wave of warm air. It smelled of cooking. A buzz of voices was coming from the kitchen. Lisbeth hung her jacket on the coat rack, walked down the wide hallway, stepped over toys, paused in the doorframe to the kitchen, held the wrapped bouquet in front of her chest. Malik was busy at the hob. Three of his friends were sitting around the extended kitchen table. They greeted Lisbeth. Eden was among them wearing a bib. In the moment that Eden saw Lisbeth, Eden reached greasy arms in the air and giggled.

"There you are," Malik said, turning and smiling at her.

"We were about to start."

Lisbeth held the bouquet tighter. The bright light was burning her eyes. Eden's arms were still reaching out to her, yet she wasn't able to make it over the threshold, to step into the warm room completely, to sit at the dressed table, to reach for a wineglass, to say cheers with the others, to take part in the conversation.

Malik had turned back to the saucepans, opening a packet of pasta, emptying it into the boiling water. His body seemed so light while he was doing so that he seemed hollow to Lisbeth. She looked at the table, even the child suddenly looked as if it were made of papier-mâché.

"I left something at the shop," she murmured, turning around, quickly taking her jacket from the hook and leaving the flat. When she was at the bottom of the stairs, she heard the door open above, heard Malik calling after her, heard the child crying, but she didn't stay.

Down on the street she gasped for air. The rain had got heavier, she walked through puddles, her shoes became wet. Lisbeth's car was in a no-parking zone, she screwed up the penalty notice, got in, pressed her face into the bunch of flowers, screamed, bit down. The darkness rose in high waves, filled Lisbeth's lungs, crushed her chest, tasted of ash. In her jacket, she felt her mobile vibrating. She brought it out. Two missed calls from Malik. Lisbeth mechanically started the engine, turned on the windscreen wipers, pulled away. She had seen the journey so many times on a map that she knew exactly which way to drive. She was quickly out of the city, accelerating on the autobahn, driving north.

Shortly before midnight she reached the Baltic Sea. Not a cloud in the sky. In the bright light

of the moon Lisbeth stumbled to the beach, sat down in the dunes. The sand was wet. She buried her hands in it, staring at the water, ignoring the cold.

It wasn't until around midnight that she went back to her car, curled up on the backseat with her jacket as a cover, fell straight to sleep. Just as she had done the previous nights, she walked in her dream across a burning plane, searching for three stones, getting lost, once more bending towards the ground.

In the morning, a fine layer of ice covered the windows of the car. Lisbeth pushed open the door. The sky was wide. Seagulls floated on the wind.

At a bakery Lisbeth picked up still-warm pastries and coffee, sat on the beach, ate and drank and once more looked out to sea. When the waves drew back, they left behind a quantity of seafoam on the sand, which glittered in the sun and gradually collapsed in on itself.

Lisbeth's mobile showed a number of missed calls. She crushed the coffee cup, lit a cigarette, and selected Malik's number. He picked up immediately.

"What's happened?" he asked with a heavy voice.

"I'm at the Baltic Sea."

"Why?"

"I can't explain that now."

"When are you coming back?"

"I'm leaving in a minute."

"What's up?"

Lisbeth didn't say anything, tapping the ash off the cigarette into the sand. "I'm fine. Don't worry."

She could hear Malik breathing.

"I'll let you know when I'm driving into the city." Lisbeth said goodbye, hung up. She dropped the end of the cigarette into the coffee cup. It hissed. Out at sea, a freighter slowly sailed by. Lisbeth got up, patting the sand from her trousers, intended to walk away, but instead she fell backwards. She tried once more to get up, but her muscles didn't listen. For what felt like an eternity she fought against herself, then she finally managed to get up. She left the beach, stumbling, climbed into her car, was about start the engine, but her hands lay motionlessly on her thighs.

She hit her head against the steering wheel. So hard that she was dizzy for a moment.

“It’s impossible,” she said, laughing shrilly, unable to believe it herself.

In the place where she had sat on the beach there was still an impression in the sand. Lisbeth wiped away her trace, walked to the water and then further, distancing herself more and more from her car. A flock of seagulls pecked at a carpet of washed-up mussels. They didn’t fly away as Lisbeth walked by them closely. The shells cracked beneath the soles of her shoes. She crested the dunes, shielded her eyes with her hand. Before her was a bungalow. The wooden façade was weather-beaten. Bleached curtains covered the windows. The house appeared to be abandoned. Lisbeth climbed down the dunes, immediately the sound of the sea became muted. She tried to look in through a gap between the drapes, but it was dark inside. She turned away, walked around the bungalow, and stopped. In the driveway were trucks, bricks piled on a pallet, a skip, a silver Jeep. On the porch stairs sat an old man smoking. At his feet, a black dog. The dog jumped up, barking. Lisbeth raised her hand and said: “I used to always come here in the summer with my parents.”

The old man peered at her: “I remember. The kid with the broken skin.”

Lisbeth was glad that she was wearing her puffer jacket and he couldn’t see her arms.

“Are you on holiday?” he asked.

She nodded without looking at him.

“And where are you sleeping?”

“I was going to ask in town.”

The old man laughed and flicked the cigarette into the dunes.

“I’ll rent you the bungalow if you want. The renovations are meant to be starting but you can never rely on people.” He scratched the dog, buried his chapped hands in the black fur, looking at Lisbeth.

“For how long?”

“A week and a half?”

“Deal.” Lisbeth held out her hand. He shook it and reached into his trouser pocket, pulling out a bunch of keys and passing them to her, together with a business card.

“Everything’s like it always was. If you need something, call me.” He took the dog by the collar, pulled it away, manoeuvred it into the Jeep. Lisbeth didn’t move until he was gone. Only then did she turn, open the door and step inside. It smelled like it did back then. She

went from room to room. The furniture hadn't changed either. Faded cushions. Laminate flooring. Pinewood furniture. She immediately pictured her father walking across the room in a stretched t-shirt and shorts with sandy hair.

Lisbeth walked out onto the terrace. The wood had become even lighter from the salty air and the sun. She sat on a rusty chair and took out her mobile. The owner of the flower shop had tried to call her. She turned it off and leaned back.

Lisbeth slept a lot. She mostly got up around midday. She spent the afternoons on the beach, walking constantly until the sun went down. In the evening she ate in the local restaurants. People eyeballed her. As an unaccompanied woman she stood out. That there was no one by her side wearing the same raincoat as she was, or whose hand she was holding while she walked along the beach. Lisbeth didn't take any notice.

In a small boutique she bought trainers, tops, a tracksuit, underwear, and a travel bag, from the pharmacist a toothbrush, soap, toothpaste. She liked wearing the new clothes and using the unfamiliar hygiene products. The toothpaste tasted different.

At night when she jumped awake and her hair smelled of the smoke from the burning plane, she put on her trainers and walked along the beach. She walked until her body was tired again. Only then would she turn back to the bungalow, lay down to sleep, wouldn't dream. She thought time and again of Malik and Eden, but she felt as though they were far away, in a distant land on a different continent.

On the fifth day her mother called.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Did Malik call you?" Lisbeth asked. She was sitting in the living room of the bungalow, her legs stretched out.

"I had to worm it out of him. What's happened?"

"I'm at the bungalow," Lisbeth said.

Her mother didn't say anything.

"Where we always went on holiday."

"Why?" my mother asked.

"I can't go back to Berlin."

"What does that mean, you can't?"

"It's just not working."

"And what are you going to do now?"

Lisbeth didn't respond. Her mother sighed. "You have to call Malik."

"He doesn't need me."

"What are you talking about?" her mother cried out.

Lisbeth bit her lip. The skin on the back of her knees began to burn. She ran her hand over her throat. "I have to hang up now," she said.

"Please call him, talk to him."

Lisbeth raised the pressure of her fingers.

"Did you hear what I just said to you?" her mother asked.

"I'll call him."

"Promise me"

"I promise."

Her mother sighed with relief. "Good."

Lisbeth hung up.

It had become dark outside. She sat blinking in the absence of light. She made a coffee, went back to the sofa, chose Malik's number.

"Hello." She said, scratching her collarbone. He didn't say anything.

"I have to stay here for a bit."

"Damn, Lisbeth"

"I'm sorry."

"What am I meant to tell Eden?"

"I don't know."

"Have I done something wrong?"

"No."

"Is there anything I can do to make you come back?"

Lisbeth was silent.

In the background rang the crying of the child.

"I have to get off the phone." Malik said.

"I'll call," Lisbeth rushed to say, but he had already ended the conversation. She lay dazed on the sofa. She finally managed to get up, turned the light on, went into the bathroom. She noticed in the mirror that she had scratched her throat. She rubbed at the blood, washed it

off, cleaned her teeth.

While lying in bed, she picked up her phone and searched the internet for the terms *florist, job, abroad* and scrolled through adverts. Two cruise ships were looking for florists. Lisbeth saved the pages and turned off the light.

The next morning she walked along the beach into town. In a backroom of a kiosk she found an internet café. The computers seemed to not have been used for a long time. The fans droned sluggishly. Lisbeth paid for four hours, wrote application letters, sent them to the addresses she had found the day before. She felt dizzy as she left the kiosk. She could still see the flickering of the screens. That day the clouds hung thickly. It smelled of snow even though it wasn't cold. Lisbeth ambled to the sea, smoking.

The water was churning. Seagulls shrieked in the distance. She slowly walked in the direction of the bungalow. A woman was walking towards her. It was only when Lisbeth had almost passed her that she saw the baby that the woman was carrying under her jacket and tightly embracing. Lisbeth had only carried Eden that way once. She was travelling on the U-Bahn. Eden was just a few weeks old. Lisbeth had a thick winter coat on, like the woman. When two men with blonde gelled-back hair got on at one of the stops, Lisbeth immediately imagined one of them pulling out a knife and stabbing her without knowing that there was a baby under her coat. She had begun to sweat, didn't let the men out of her sights, and got off two stops early. After that, she never carried Eden so close to her body, and instead always took her out in the pushchair, even if only a few of the U-Bahn stations had lifts. Malik on the other hand had always just used the sling, had gently stowed Eden against his chest, had feared nothing, or perhaps simply knew that he could defend Eden in an emergency.

Lisbeth nodded to the woman and hurried to increase the distance to her. She looked at the ground, where seaweed, stones and mussels lay in the sand.

"Careful."

Lisbeth raised her head, stopped.

The warrior stood stiffly before her. Her eyes were alert. Her lips chapped, her face hardly aged. Only her hair was now white, like an old woman.

For a while they just looked at one another. Then Lisbeth broke the silence.

"What are you doing here?"

“Swimming,” the warrior said, grinning.

Lisbeth suddenly noticed that the warrior had taken off her shoes and socks.

“That’s not what I meant’ Lisbeth said.

“I grew up here. Did you forget?”

Lisbeth shook her head. Of course she hadn’t forgotten.

“What about you?” the warrior asked.

“Holiday,” Lisbeth said shortly.

“Alone?” The warrior looked around, as if she were expecting a group of tourists to abruptly jump out from behind Lisbeth.

“Alone.” Lisbeth said with emphasis. “Isn’t it a bit cold to swim?”

“I’m used to completely different temperatures,” the warrior said, taking off her running jacket, her jogging trousers, her sports bra, and her knickers, until she was standing naked, save for her cap, in front of Lisbeth. Then she turned away and, without hesitating, went into the sea. She swam a stretch, only her head was visible. Lisbeth had to think of her mother. She had never looked back when she had gone into the water either.

The warrior swam back, climbed out. Her skin glowed red from the cold. But she didn’t seem to be in a hurry to put her clothes back on, taking her time to get dressed.

“Where are you staying?” she asked.

Lisbeth pointed in the direction of the bungalow.

The warrior closed the zip of her running jacket and put her gloves on.

“I have a room at a hotel right by the pier. There’s a good bar there. Come by this evening if you want, we can have a beer.” She nodded to Lisbeth and walked along the beach in the direction of the town. Lisbeth watched after her for a while, then scurried back to the bungalow.

She had firmly resolved not to go to the hotel, to leave the warrior waiting in vain, but as it got dark her body reacted automatically. It put on her shoes, got into her jacket, and drove the car into town, parked in front of the hotel, got out and entered the lobby. A huge chandelier hung from the ceiling, the marble floor reflected its light, a darkly panelled bar split the room. Lisbeth saw the warrior straight away. She was sitting in a bulky leather armchair angled towards the window facade and looking out at the sea, a half-empty beer glass in front of her.

“There you are,” she said, as Lisbeth sat next to her. In the light of the chandelier, the greyed hair of the warrior was even more conspicuous. Lisbeth had the urge to reach out and touch it, wanted to certify that it was real. She quickly pushed her hands under her thighs.

“Did you dye it?”

The warrior took a gulp from her glass and shook her head. “It’s got to be a genetic defect. My grandmother also went grey during the war.”

“War?”

The warrior twisted her mouth scornfully. “Right, not war, *peacekeeping activities*.” She stretched out her legs and leant back in her chair. Without saying anything, a waitress placed a glass of beer in front of Lisbeth on the table and left as noiselessly as she had come. Lisbeth took a sip, felt the foam on her lips, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. In her shapeless puffer jacket, faded trousers, sandy shoes, she felt out of place. She shifted her position.

“So, are you still a soldier?” she asked.

“Paratrooper” the warrior clarified. The pride in her voice couldn’t be missed. “And you?” Lisbeth thought about the flower shop, thought about Malik, the child. “I’m applying to cruise ships.”

“To do what?”

“To be a florist.”

“Right, you studied it, before –” The warrior went quiet, lowered her gaze, shifted her glass. “Seems like an age ago we shared a bunkbed.” She laughed, laughed like she used to, widely and with all her teeth on show.

Lisbeth opened the zip on her puffer jacket. “How’s your grandmother?” she asked.

“She died. A while ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. She was old” the warrior said, leaning back. “What’s happened in your life since the last time we saw each other?”

“Not a lot. Different jobs. Different places. Most recently I was a florist in Berlin.”

“And your family?”

“My mother’s well.”

The warrior nodded, reaching into the pocket of her coat, and laying three stones worn

round by the saltwater next to her beer glass. Lisbeth stared at the stones.

“What’s wrong?”

“Where did you get those stones?” Lisbeth asked.

“From the beach. There’s some there.”

“I dream of them.”

“Of what?”

“Of stones.”

The face of the warrior became serious. She sat up in her chair.

“What do you dream exactly?” she asked.

“I’m walking on a plane. The landscape is like in another century, everything is full of morass and ash, there are no roads. Sometimes I come across others, but we walk by one another without saying anything. And while I’m walking, I scan the ground the whole time, looking for stones. Only when I’ve found three and have them stowed in my pocket can I calm down. But this state doesn’t last for long, because a short time later I always notice that my pocket has a hole in it, that I’m no longer carrying three stones, but rather two, one or none, and the search begins anew.” She considered the warrior, tried to read her face, but it gave away nothing.

“That sounds very bleak” the warrior said, suddenly standing up. “Do you mind if we go upstairs? The music here is giving me a headache.”

Only then did Lisbeth register the sounds around them. Somewhere a piano was being played, maybe it was only a recording of a concert she could hear. She left behind her half-finished beer and followed the warrior. In the narrow cabin of the lift they stood so close to one another that they were almost touching. The warrior had to steady herself against the mirror in order to not lose her balance. They rode to the top floor, walked along a long corridor. A thick carpet dampened the sound of their steps. With a blank white card, the warrior opened the door to her room. Bright curtains covered the windows. Lisbeth could make out the sea behind them. The warrior put the card in the slot. The light came on. Now Lisbeth could see that there were stones on every surface. Some were rubbed smooth like the stones the warrior had left behind in the lobby. Others were pointy. There were small ones, large ones, light ones, dark ones. Lisbeth stood there motionlessly. The warrior took off her coat. She was only wearing silk pyjamas on underneath. The gleaming material shimmered in the light. She sat on the bed.

“Why are there so many stones here?” Lisbeth asked.

“Why are you dreaming my dream?”

“Your dream?”

The warrior nodded. “Have you ever dreamed other people’s dreams before?” she asked.

Lisbeth avoided looking at the warrior.

She was still standing in the middle of the room. “Can I sleep here?” she asked.

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“I shouldn’t drive again tonight.”

The warrior sighed. “Because you drank half a beer?”

Lisbeth’s skin began to tighten. “I thought –”

“The bed’s big enough” the warrior said.

Relieved, Lisbeth was released from her frozen state. She sat on the mattress awkwardly.

“Aren’t you warm?” the warrior asked, indicating the puffer jacket.

“I am actually,” Lisbeth took off the jacket, passed her hand over her face. Now that she was so close to the warrior, she could clearly smell the alcohol on her breath

“Why do you dream that you’re collecting stones?” she asked, folding up the puffer jacket, forcing the air out of it.

The warrior didn’t say anything.

“Don’t you want to talk about it?”

The warrior slipped under the covers. “There isn’t a reason.”

“The dreams come from nowhere?” Lisbeth asked. The warrior shrugged, reaching for the TV remote on the bedside table. “Let’s watch something.”

“You want to watch TV now?”

“Something or other.”

Lisbeth nodded.

The warrior turned on the TV, went through the channels, opted for a trashy sitcom. Lisbeth leaned back. There were stones sitting on top of the TV too.

They watched in silence. The warrior kept having to laugh at some punchline or other. Her whole body vibrated. At some point she fell asleep. Her head slipped onto Lisbeth’s shoulder.

Lisbeth didn’t move. Only when the warrior rolled over to the other side did she stir, turn off the TV, get up, turn off the light, go to the window, push the curtains to the side. Behind

them lay the Baltic Sea. The waves broke silently. Lisbeth turned away, lay back in bed, covered the warrior, thought of the water, fell asleep. That night she once more wandered over the plane collecting stones. But this time she didn't forget that somewhere there was the sea, the salt, and the light.

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