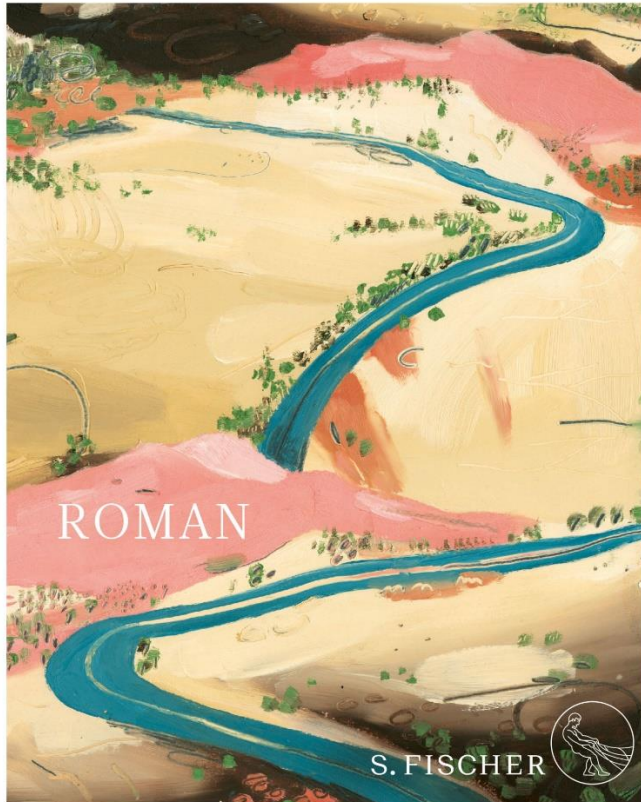


Reinhard Kaiser-Mühlecker Wilderer



Reinhard Kaiser-Mühlecker

WILDERER

POACHER

Novel

352 pp

S. Fischer

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“Part of the strength of his storytelling is that he succeeds in maintaining the tension of the opening moment over more than 300 pages without having to name the motives for the gamble with fate. Very carefully, the author levels up the tension by making the gap between Jacob’s self-perception and his external perception grow wider and wider. His long, elegantly winding sentences seem almost old masterly, [...] and when he paints the transition from winter to spring in impressionistic dabs, you almost believe you can smell and taste the air.” – Tagesspiegel

“The omniscient narrator describes in a calm tone of voice, sensitively unraveling the soul life of the protagonists before the eyes of the reader. POACHER is also a clever novel because it neither accuses nor complains, but describes the actual state of life in the countryside.” – Tageszeitung

“The author does not denounce [his protagonist], he takes the perspective of a person who takes on a burden that deprives him of his youth. The fact that he so convincingly presents a worldview that is subsequently formed, and at the same time so resolutely put it into perspective, makes this novel an aesthetic happening.” – Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

“Kaiser-Mühlecker keeps us at a half-distance from the tragic fool who is his protagonist. And he does this with a language, that is always close to the archaic. We are constantly around him, seeing what he sees, hearing what he thinks. We can never trust him. He remains a stranger to us, to himself and to the world. Terror is going on around him and within him. Even epiphanies cannot help him. The reader wanders through this novel as through dense undergrowth. You cannot quickly get rid of it. It stays poaching around within you for a long time.” – Welt am Sonntag

“What Reinhard Kaiser-Mühlecker writes here is the panorama of a decline, be it ecological, be it moral. Realism embedded in an aesthetic concept based on

sparseness as well as clarity. Reading Kaiser-Mühlecker's books feels like staring at a pane of glass clamped too tightly, listening for the crackle and pop, and yet knowing that the author will not relieve us of the burden of bringing about the redemptive bang. This is humanly terrifying and literarily captivating.” – Süddeutsche Zeitung

“This novel is compelling and moving, harsh yet poetic, as it observes its protagonist’s gradual descent into silence. – Der Spiegel

“The way the author creates literature out of the helpless muteness that befalls his protagonists is virtuosic.” – DIE ZEIT

“The author portrays silent life struggles. Far more than a family novel. It can best be read as a reflection on life as a prison.” – taz

“Kaiser-Mühlecker makes the cracks inside and outside the figures tangible.” – FAZ

“Credible characters outlined with powerful strokes, a suspensefully told plot, and existentially relevant topics.”– Upper Austrian News

“His language lives from its narrative force, from the painting of concrete situations. It is anchored in literary history.” – Süddeutsche Zeitung



Reinhard Kaiser-Mühlecker was born 1982 in the Krems Valley, Austria, and grew up on his parents' farm in Upper Austria. He studied agriculture, history and international development in Vienna and runs the family farm. Kaiser-Mühlecker has won numerous awards for his literary work, including the **Austrian State Prize**. **POACHER** is his eighth novel.

Siegfried Lenz said of Kaiser-Mühlecker's work, "It's wonderful the way you write," and Peter Handke sees him "in a row with Stifter and Hamsun".

How would you describe your main character Jakob and his development (or just the impossibility of it)?

Jakob feels responsible for his ancestors' farm from an early age and has little time to deal with himself. The amount of work also leaves no time to develop anything like a social life. So he becomes quite a loner at an early age, relying only on himself. With the artist Katja, light comes into his life, but ultimately this encounter does not change anything about Jakob's very idiosyncratic, unreflective view on things - and on himself.

What does family mean in a rural life?

In family farms, there is no clear dividing line between private and professional life. These areas overlap and intermingle continuously. People are not only in a relationship of kinship, but also in a working relationship. As a rule, the farming business and the concerns for its continued existence are always at the center of all conflicts. This makes this type of family a kind of community of fate.

How would you describe your relationship with nature?

I spent a lot of my adult life in cities in different countries, and there I missed nature a lot in everyday life. In writing, however, I have never left the landscape of my childhood and youth, and to that extent I have always been in touch with it. For a few years now, I have been living there again and running the farm that I took over from my parents. Nature, weather, landscape, these are protagonists for me who are in no way secondary in importance to those of flesh and blood.

What does origin mean in POACHER?

In the book, which has Jakob at its center, it means imprinting, impregnation. Something that one could hide, or even overcome - Jakob's siblings Alexander and Luisa go other ways, for them the place of origin seems to be not much more than a point on the map that could be anywhere - but nevertheless one's origin must be faced somehow.

What role does violence play in your new book?

Above all, what one understands by violence plays a role. To one person, for example, it seems violent and cruel to kill a poaching dog by one's own hand, which to another person seems merely necessary or unavoidable.

What do you mean when you say that you want to show your world and make it tangible to someone who is a stranger to it?

When I travel through unfamiliar or little-known areas, I have a desire for someone to tell me about that area and its people. I wish for a voice that speaks to me from that particular place. And as a writer, I want to be such a voice myself, something disembodied, nameless, egoless, showing others something they cannot know, at least not as I know it.

POACHER

by Reinhard Kaiser-Mühlecker

Sample translated by Alexandra Roesch

As soon as Jacob stepped into the clear, ice-cold, amber-coloured water, which was barely ankle-high at this point, he spotted the bitch a stone's throw away, standing with her forelegs splayed out in front of a deep spot, seemingly staring into the water, which was taking on a grey colour similar to that of the silt lying under the topsoil in the wetlands here. Jacob could see the muscles twitching above her withers. Although the sound of the stream was not very loud, more like a gurgle, it was loud enough for her not to hear him. Step by step he made his way through the water darting away beneath him. The stones, polished and covered with algae or moss, felt soft and slippery, and only occasionally did he step on something sharp; he did not always recognise what it was, as the sun's rays penetrating the canopy or rather the undergrowth made the surface of the water gleam, blinding him and causing him to step more carefully. Landa was only a short distance away. A few metres. He had almost reached her. Two, three breaths. Jacob untied the knot he had made in the lead and took one last step and reached for the bitch, but before he could grab her, something sharp penetrated the sole of his foot with such force that

he groaned, and although the pain did not make him stop, the brief delay was enough to make the bitch jump away to the side. She shook herself as if she knew she had the time, that he was too slow or could not move any faster because his foot hurt and the water was getting deeper, and so she ran on as if nothing had happened, as if he had not just ordered her to come to him with a sharp command.

‘Damned bitch,’ Jacob hissed and pulled his foot up and looked at the sole; bright red blood, thin, thin as the water with which it was merging, was oozing from the ball of his foot right under the big toe. ‘You stupid bloody bitch. I’ll kill you.’

He knotted the lead in front of his belly and ran up the creek with hardly a thought for his feet, which were growing more and more numb from the coldness of the water. He ran and ran. Shouted her name again and again. It was a hunt that he had lost from the outset, a hunt in which the hunter never once got to see the hunted, a hunt that he did not give up, could not give up. It took him a long time to admit to himself that it was pointless to keep running, to keep limping along, because he would not catch up with her or track her down, and then he gave up. He was hoarse and bruised, bruised and hoarse. There was no sign of the bitch. Jacob climbed out of the stream and went back onto the road. He walked as if he had logs tied to his feet. As if he had no toes. He walked like a penguin. Every now and again someone came towards him, someone overtook him, a few times a car tooted at him; each time he just raised his chin a little or, with those coming from behind, his hand, not even paying any attention to who it was.

When he arrived home, his boxers were still wet and stuck to him. His feet and legs ached and were numb at the same time: likewise

his cock – all he could feel was a dull pulsing inside it. The front door stood open as before, just as he had left it. His mother and father were sitting in the kitchen having breakfast; piano music was playing on the radio, clinking tinnily like everything that came out of that box, and two mosquitoes were sitting on the plastic crucifix on the wall.

He went into the boiler room, put the mug – the John Deere mug, his favourite – with the lukewarm, too weak coffee on the stepladder, took off his boxers and hung them on the clothes rack. He pulled his knees up a few times and felt a little better afterwards. He took dry underwear and a pair of trousers from the rack and got dressed. His socks were hanging over his wellies; he took them, plucked off a few bits of straw and slipped them over his still numb feet. His toes were white, as if dead; when he touched them, he felt nothing. Then he stepped into his boots and reached for the dust mask. He took the ear defenders with the built-in radio from the hook, turned one of the two small dials and put the defenders on. The seven o'clock news was on; he turned it down a little; there was still no mention of anything else but the plague. He reached for the mug and left the boiler room; taking a sip every few steps, he went into the stable. For a moment he had even forgotten about Landa, but when he put down the empty black mug with its image of a yellow, leaping deer in a green field, just anywhere, as always, he remembered that the bitch was not in her place at his side and, in the next few hours, while he finally began to feel his feet again, he kept looking for her. It wasn't until eleven that she suddenly returned, and if she had appeared sooner, Jacob would have been furious and would have roared at her and maybe even given her a belting; but after all those

hours, he had passed that point, and so he pressed his lips together and said nothing, only beckoned her towards him and stroked her, the suddenly obedient creature, on her head.

‘Yes, Landa. Yes.’

Landa looked at him, narrowed her eyes and, when he stopped stroking her, moved away from him and stretched out in the shade, no longer lifting her head. Jacob followed her, crouched down beside her and stroked her some more. He saw dried blood on her front paws and thought of his own foot: a deep cut across the ball of his foot that didn’t hurt.

‘Did you hurt yourself too, Landa?’

But even before he saw that she had blood on her flank, he knew that it wasn’t hers.

[...]

Supper was ready on the table. Jacob sat down and began to eat. He heard his mother moving around in the living room – ironing perhaps, or sewing, something, he did not listen. He ate two slices of bread with cured sausage and Swiss cheese and a little of the beetroot salad with caraway seeds and horseradish left over from lunch and drank a glass of water. When he had finished, he crossed the cutlery, pushed the board away from him towards the centre of the table, left the kitchen and went into the part of the house that faced north, towards the motorway, and climbed the steep stairs. He went into the bathroom and had as cold a shower as he could bear. As always, this dispelled the tiredness that struck him after supper and which he essentially quite liked, but if he allowed it to take effect, he would fall asleep at

nine or ten, much too early in any case, because he was managing on four hours' sleep for years now, or rather he could not sleep for more than four hours, and he did not like lying awake at night, so he never went to bed until after midnight – regardless of whether he had something to do before then or not. He squatted down on the bed, again just in his underpants, and pulled out the crate of beer that was still almost full, took out a bottle and pushed the crate back. He took the lighter, used it to open the bottle with and chucked the bottle cap into the corner where the rubbish bin was – missed; he let himself sink back into the cushions, took a big swig, reached for his mobile phone and unlocked it: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4. He opened the browser and read something about a possible storm the next day from 6pm onwards on the homepage of the hailstorm insurance company. There was no mention of it on the other two pages he looked at afterwards. He thought about harvesting the wheat – the weather would have to hold for that. But perhaps he should wait anyway. No-one had threshed yet, despite the ears already leaning everywhere, almost touching the stalk as if they were joined together, and despite the almost red, roundish kernel being hard and no longer giving way when you took it between your teeth. The thistles, here and there, that had survived the poison, bloomed like the most beautiful flowers; soon, white as snow in summer, the withered part of these tough weeds would drift through the air. But what if a storm really were on the cards? Nonsense. And strictly speaking, this remaining little strip could not be called a field at all. Jacob closed the browser and opened Tinder. The app took a while to load. Then they started appearing as if he had whistled for them: Trixi, 18 ... Emily, 23 ... Mia, 20 ... He already knew them all, and they probably knew him too. And they kept coming back, and he kept

swiping them aside, he swiped them aside, one after the other, very slowly after looking at them for a long time ... He didn't even know why he was doing it. Was he looking for something? No. The women hanging about there did not even turn him on. Didn't excite him. Maybe at the beginning. He had been aroused. A little. Restless. But now? He already knew them all. And even if a new one came along, she didn't excite him. Not even if he changed location and the Linzers or the Viennese wanted him – he didn't want them. Somehow they didn't seem very different from the girls in the 'Rose'. And yet he paid over thirty a month for the app and looked at the profiles of those who liked or had liked him, again and again; at first he had liked back, but nothing had ever come of it. He wrote: 'Hello, how are you? I am Jacob!' And then they would reply: 'Hey Jacob! How are you?' And then you would chat a bit and then you would stop and maybe you didn't know why, or how it had come about that all of a sudden you didn't feel like it any more. Why there was suddenly nothing more to say, to ask. If there was a match, it was always he who had written first. Once he had liked a woman back and not written anything. But the stupid slag didn't write either. That had irritated him so much, annoyed him so much, that since then he had not liked one back, but hadn't been able to break the habit of swiping every evening or almost every evening either.

[...]

After half an hour, he switched off the phone and put it under his bed and took a new bottle of beer. He drank it half lying down while he stared at the wall. It didn't bother him that the beer wasn't chilled, he

just allowed it to flow into him anyway, almost without swallowing and without really noticing it. It had a pleasant effect. He thought of nothing or, if he did think of something, he didn't notice it; when the bottle was empty, he took another one and stood by the window with it. Outside, the noise of the night transit rose and fell continuously. He raised the bottle and let the beer run down his throat. Then he wiped his mouth and went downstairs, bottle in hand. He had to switch on the light; everyone was already sleeping; Landa was lying in the vestibule and didn't even raise her head. Jacob took the torch from the kitchen drawer and went out into the workshop. He left the front door open; if Landa woke up, she might run off, and wouldn't he prefer that a thousand times more than anything else?

He opened the workshop door and sucked in the smell he liked so much, the smell of wood and metal and oil and grease. On the sideboard, next to the screws he used to sort in bad weather, was the white jar with a lid. He slipped on some gloves and removed the lid, took something out of the container, closed it again and went back into the house. He slipped one glove off, took two slices of ham from the fridge and wrapped them around what he had taken from the workshop; then he spread some liver sausage around it. He closed the fridge, put the glove back on and left the kitchen. He carelessly dropped the small package from his hand next to Landa, who was sleeping on her blanket. If it's still there in the morning, he thought, I'll throw it in the rubbish. And it probably would still be there because she hadn't been hungry all day and might not be hungry tomorrow either. God knows what she had eaten. A fawn? They're still quite small ...

‘You stupid bitch,’ he said, kneeling down beside her and stroking her, ‘you bloody stupid bitch.’

Suddenly he had to smile; he shook his head, got up and went upstairs and got into bed without another thought for the dog.

It was barely four o’clock when he woke up again, but this time not of his own accord. His father’s shouts woke him.

‘Jacob! Come. Hey, Jacob!’

It hadn’t been a bad dream. Jacob took a deep breath and went downstairs.

‘What’s the matter?’ he asked.

‘What’s the matter! Just look at it! What’s wrong with it?’

Jacob shrugged his shoulders.

‘Don’t know.’

‘But what’s wrong with it?’

‘It’s a she, Dad.’

‘Yes, God, does it matter now? Look at it!’

‘She’s been poaching. Maybe some bone splinters are troubling her.’

‘Nonsense. Look at it squirm. Something’s wrong. You need to call the vet.’

Mother had woken up too; her breasts were moving under her old, thin pyjamas, shimmering through; Jacob quickly looked away.

‘What’s going on? What’s the matter with the dog?’

‘She’s been poaching again.’

‘It’s picked up some rat poison.’

Mother looked at father first, then at her son, as if considering whom to believe.

‘Take her outside, Jacob,’ she said finally as if she couldn’t make up her mind and as if that didn’t matter, at least not to her, but as if the only thing that mattered was that the vestibule didn’t get any dirtier.

‘Yes,’ he said, kneeling down beside the animal, as he had done a few hours ago too, picking it up and carrying it outside.

His father followed him. Jacob could feel him at his back and would not have been surprised if the old man had stepped on his heels.

‘Where are you going to put it?’

‘In the milking parlour.’

‘Call the vet, Jacob.’

‘It’s four, Dad. Let’s wait and see. If it’s no better in the morning, I’ll call him.’

Jacob carried Landa into the parlour; there was a large cardboard box on the floor containing a couple of cans of paint that he had used to paint the windows.

‘Put the cans away, Dad.’

His father took the cans and put them on the windowsill above the shelf where the rifle was and moved them into place. Jacob put the dog down and left the parlour. His father joined him immediately afterwards. They stood opposite each other. His father looked black in the pale morning light, black like a bird, like a black bird.

‘Aren’t you worried, Jacob?’

‘Why are you so worried? You don’t usually care about her.’

It was true, his father didn’t really seem to have registered Landa until now, just as he paid little attention to everything else that wasn’t his

or wasn't useful to him. And maybe that was what Jacob actually meant: you don't care about anything else.

He went into the house and up to his room; he knew that his father stayed outside. His heart was pounding, he couldn't get back to sleep. For an hour, almost two, he lay there motionless. At six he got up and went back downstairs. He went outside. It was light and the birds were singing, and a few sparrows hopped in the dust outside the milking parlour and flew up, chirping excitedly as he approached. His father was squatting on the old milking stool beside Landa, who lay stretched out, foaming at the mouth and panting shallowly.

'I think I'll call him now,' Jacob said and pulled his phone out of his trousers.

'You can save yourself the trouble.'

Jacob crouched down and reached out to Landa, but something prevented him from touching her. There was silence. And although not five minutes passed since she died, it seemed to Jacob that it had been at least an hour. Was it his father's gaze that he kept feeling? Landa had stopped moving; had simply stopped breathing at some point.

His father got up and left the parlour. He doesn't understand, Jacob thought, and corrected the thought: he wouldn't understand anyway. Should I have let Manfred shoot her down, as he had announced more than once that he would after all if she didn't stop poaching? Let her run in front of a car and cause an accident in which someone else ends up dying? You couldn't assume that everything would always turn out well. He stood up too. He would still have to call the vet. He would tell him that he found her like this. Maybe the vet would take her away and examine her, or maybe he would just call the carcass disposal unit

and ask them to pick up the carcass – for him, Jacob, it didn't make any difference. He went into the workshop, then returned once more to the milking parlour, then got changed in the boiler room, heading for the stable.

'Jacob?'

His father appeared from somewhere.

'Yes.'

'What were you doing in the workshop?'

'I fetched some cloth to cover her. The old press cloths.'

'I meant during the night.'

Did he freeze? No, something just rippled through him, a shudder, that didn't feel unpleasant though; in a strange way it was almost pleasant.

'During the night? Nothing.'

At the weekend, he painted the school caretaker's cottage again and afterwards thought it smelled less bad. She could come back, if she wanted, and stare into space, or she could go jump in a lake. It was none of his business. He was in a good mood, picked up a pen and paper and wrote in his childish handwriting: 'Hello Katja! I hope it is better or rather okay. If you need anything else, my number is down below. Jacob (Fischer) P.S. I am a FARMER (not a caretaker)!'

He wanted to make a particular point of that – he wasn't the school caretaker. He hadn't actually written anything personal on his Tinder profile, he had no practice, the girls all had so many hobbies and interests and – judging by their thousands of photographs – had been all over the world, but he didn't go anywhere and didn't want to

go anywhere; somehow he suspected that such a confession wouldn't go down well, so he didn't write anything at all. Would that make him seem somehow mysterious?

[...]

No-one had ever been as happy about having Jacob as this couple, two of whose children had been born blind while the third, the oldest, had gone to Vienna and processed asylum applications at some office and showed no interest in farming or even their parents' property; the two blind ones lived in the area, but the one in Vienna never came here.

They were younger than Jacob's parents, but looked much older, and the man, Fritz, who had recently had an operation, had great difficulty in accompanying Jacob in the first few days, which is why Rosi, his wife, initially went with them and introduced Jacob to everything. Jacob had no idea how to deal with this gratitude, and when his father asked him on one of the first few days how he was getting along with Fritz, Jacob said grumpily that the two of them were a bit too 'quaint' for his liking.

'Better than unfriendly, isn't it?'

'Not sure.'

But he got used to it, and after a week or two he admitted to himself that he liked going, indeed that in the evenings he even looked forward to the next day. The farm was doing well, demand was so great that they could have kept three times as many animals, and the two of them were satisfied and did not complain, not even after they got to know each other better. Jacob was sure that it would have been different with any other farm here - not because, as the silly joke went,

they had had pebbles put in their shoes as children so they would learn to whine and complain from an early age, but because the market situation in the so-called conventional sector had been tight for a very long time and was getting even tighter. He saw that Fritz had quickly realised that he, Jacob, was very interested in the matter. Little by little, Fritz gave Jacob an insight into the entire business, even showing him the very simply prepared accounts. Jacob was surprised that they had any at all; like the vast majority of farms, this one was taxed on a flat rate basis, and did not have to make any payments to the state beyond social security contributions and land tax. Fritz, however, said it was always good to keep an eye on one's costs. He demonstrated and explained as a matter of course, but at the same time he did it as if he were a teacher. Jacob absorbed everything, nothing escaped him, and in the evening, in his room, he made notes. It invigorated him to finally have the feeling of being active after the long period of passivity. The beer crate under the bed was no longer emptied as quickly as it had been a short while ago. Yes, passivity. For even the chickens – and before them the fish, and before that the sheep – had not really been active, not decisions, but in a way just stopgap solutions.

And now? He could have said no, but he had said yes. He had said yes also while thinking of how often he had wished as a child and adolescent that his father would come to him just once with something that was, or could be, something they could do together because it made sense. Wasn't that exactly what his idea of hope was? Not doing something because you were sure it would turn out well, but because it made sense? He didn't like admitting it to himself or even believing it, but the idea filled him with a wild joy.

What also kept him occupied were messages from Katja. She had messaged him that she was back and that it was much better, she was able to sleep.

‘Thank you, Jacob.’

He had not replied, just didn’t have the time for things like that, forgot about it. A few days later she had texted again, as if she had only now read his postscript:

‘So you are a farmer? I imagine that is exciting!’

Exciting? They all had no idea. At the same time, he felt flattered. After all, he knew that farmers didn’t count much in society, and no one wanted to have anything to do with them; all the talk on the radio lately about security of supply and the importance of the soil and such things hadn’t been able to change that much. Again he didn’t reply. Then she texted again.

‘If I could start all over again, I would do a farming apprenticeship.’

This message annoyed him. He pictured her, sitting in the sun on the most beautiful summer morning, staring into space, her finger in her mouth, doing nothing.

‘You can still do it. Or are you that old already?’

‘I’m twenty-seven, not really young any more. And it’s hard to change your life, don’t you think? To really give something up.’

He thought about it and replied. She texted back. She always wrote in such a way that he had to reply, never sent a message that didn’t contain a question that made him think. So in the evenings he texted her too, and they were often going back and forth for a whole hour before he sometimes fell asleep, the mobile in his hand, and then in the morning he would read:

‘Good night, dear Jacob.’

Soon she suggested they meet again; she would like to visit him on his farm one day, she wrote. This put him on the spot. He didn't want to be seen with her, he didn't want to be seen with anyone, and bringing her here seemed completely out of the question, and the whole thing was made even more difficult by the fact that he couldn't explain to her why it wasn't possible. He himself had no words for it. [...]

Katja, of course, had not been satisfied with his 'Don't know' or 'Don't know either'. She hadn't been annoying or demanded anything, it wasn't that, but she had made it very clear to Jacob that his replies were not proper replies. She never pushed at all, and he liked that. She was simply nice, at least that's how she seemed to him, and that's why he messaged her, just like with a pen pal, that was all. He didn't think of anything else, and he didn't think about her thinking of more either. But didn't you have to answer the questions of a friend like that? Especially since she willingly and openly told him about herself and her worries and fears and the feeling of pointlessness that she had all the time. Sometimes he didn't know what to say, sometimes he even got angry with her because he didn't understand, didn't get why she didn't just start something else if she thought her choice of profession was so wrong? And she didn't actually give the impression of being insecure or squeamish ... Because she was so open, he realised that he wasn't, and in the end he told it anyway, and not even unwillingly, just very clumsily: that he, barely fifteen years old, had had 'something ... well, something like a girlfriend,' who had then had a child, but it wasn't his, which apparently everyone but him had known. And that

this still made him feel 'uncomfortable', although he assumed that no-one thought about this old story any more, especially since Nina had moved away with the child years ago and the child's actual father was no longer alive. But wouldn't all those who had long forgotten remember it if he were to appear with a woman? And therefore also the story with Markus, which he had better not even get started on? 'And that's what you're afraid of? That's why I'm not allowed to visit you?'

'Not afraid.'

Or was it fear after all that made his heart beat faster? It wasn't the thought that this might be true but the thought that she might believe it was, might think him a coward or a quitter, that made him decide to change his mind. He spent an entire evening working on the message that turned out to be very short.

'If you're really interested, you can come over sometime.'

It was November and already very cold; there was frost in the mornings, and Jacob was never allowed to forget to check at Fritz's to make sure the muck track wasn't frozen – it wasn't allowed to operate if it was frozen, that would damage it. Although Jacob wasn't at all forgetful, for some reason he found it hard to remember this, and a few times he did almost forget. As a precaution, in the evening he now always switched on the heating, which was installed in the concrete underneath the rods of the track. He and Katja had agreed on 2pm on a Saturday; by then he would be finished with most of the work, would have eaten and would have time until the stable work in the evening if nothing came up. Until shortly before, he wanted to cancel and went through all the possible excuses, then he just resigned himself to it; he felt terrible, was pale and restless, so that even his mother asked him

what was wrong. It was only when Katja stood in front of him and got off her bike that Jacob remembered that she didn't have a car. She said you didn't need one in Salzburg and besides, she 'didn't have the money for that'. He calmed down then. He liked her, yes, but they were inhabitants of different worlds between which there could be no connection.

'Hello,' she said.

'Hello,' he said and removed the ear defenders.

'What are you listening to?'

Why was he even wearing them? To distract himself, to calm himself? He had turned the radio up so loud that you could hear the music from metres away.

'Radio.'

He turned it off.

'So this is where you live.'

'Yes.'

'Are the fish ponds your family's too?'

'Yes.'

'What sort of fish do you have in them?'

'I have leased them out.'

He was surprised about her choice of words, she had said 'you' and 'your', as if she knew that ownership in farming families was different from usual. In a way, things did not belong to you alone, but actually to everyone in the family, to everyone who lived on such a farm – and at the same time to those who were already dead in the ground, as well as those who had not yet been born. Did she understand it intuitively without coming from a farming background herself? At the same time, he thought that he had probably phrased it

like that sometimes – ‘we are planning a barn,’ ‘we had to repair something on the roof yesterday, the storm was so bad,’ ‘it got late at our place last night, I just fell asleep,’ – and she had adopted it.

‘Don’t you have time for it?’

‘That’s right,’ Jacob said.

‘That’s a pity.’

She was a little out of breath, unzipped her overly large and worn NATO jacket and fanned herself; then she leaned the bike against the wall of the house, slipped her hands into the pockets of the black chinos that left her ankles bare over her trainers, tilted her head a little and smiled at him. He looked away.

‘What do you want to see?’ he asked.

‘What do you want to show me. Preferably everything.’

Everything? All he could really think of was the barn. A stone’s throw away from them, a magpie clucked and flew up.

‘A magpie,’ Katja said, as if pleased.

‘They like sitting there. They’ve only been here for a few years, they didn’t used to be there.’

‘What’s there?’

‘The garden. Well, it was.’

Katja walked over through the wet grass, Jacob followed her. The rusty fence was almost engulfed by blackberries, field bindweed and tall grass that had grown yellow, and raspberries were rampant inside the fence.

‘Don’t you grow any vegetables here?’

‘Yes, potatoes.’

‘Nothing else?’

‘Wheat.’

‘But no vegetables?’

‘No.’

‘Too bad.’

Jacob furrowed his brow. Was that all she could say? Like a crow.

‘If you want to see the barn, you’d have to put on something else – for hygiene reasons.’

‘I would like to see it. What do you mean by put on something else?’

‘Wait here.’

He went into the house and came back with a freshly laundered overall, a cap and a clean pair of wellies and showed her to the boiler room where she could get changed.

‘You can lock the door if you like.’

He walked up and down in front of the boiler room, and when she came out two minutes later, he had to laugh, she looked so funny, as if she were dressing up, and she looked down at herself and laughed too. Nevertheless, the tour continued as stiffly as it had begun, not helped by the fact that Katja asked all sorts of questions but didn’t actually say anything else, just ‘too bad’ now and then. What did she want anyway? Too bad, too bad, too bad! Yes, it was too bad that the garden had withered away and that nothing was being done with this and that, that this and that was lying fallow, he was all too aware of it, and it demanded a lot of his strength to notice these things day after day. After all, he couldn’t be everywhere at once. But why was he bothered by what this timewaster might think? Yes, timewaster. Because she was right: what she was doing was pointless, even if one or two of her paintings, of which she had sent him photos, were quite

nice to look at. Why did it annoy him? What did he want? He had imagined it differently. And it was only because of this imagined idea that he had finally agreed! He had believed – hoped, wished, even expected – that she would be impressed. But none of that. He felt the desire for war awaken in him. Wasn't that strange, when military service had been so terrible, so different from what he had dreamed of? Had he forgotten? When Katja finally left, he felt worse than he had in a long time, despite her hugging him quite unexpectedly when she left making him feel dizzy, despite her thanking him so kindly, despite smiling at him so warmly when she was already a little way away, already close to the motorway, looking over her shoulder. He was just glad that there was no sign of his parents that day – nothing new about that in the case of his father, but where was his mother? He drove to Fritz's place and did the work, and when he got back home, he washed and went to his room. He took a bottle of beer from the crate, lay down on the bed and emptied the bottle in one go. Then he put it down on the floor next to him and closed his eyes. He felt space return to his body. It was air, it was light, it was relief. Only now, as if she had only just left, was he finally alone and that was good. As if she felt the same way, as if this encounter had been something unpleasantly thrilling for her too, they texted less from then on; days passed without them hearing from each other; he did not text, and she did not text; and yet Jacob thought about her a lot, and it had long ceased to annoy him that she had not thought of anything else to say than what she had said. She was right. It was too bad, and it was too bad about a lot of things. Wasn't it actually surprising that she, the ignorant one, had noticed that at all? At the same time, he was also right when he said to himself: who is supposed to do it?

He knew that her scholarship would be over at the end of the year and that she would head off before Christmas to visit her parents in Tamsweg, Salzburg, where her sister would also be coming to spend the holidays with her family, because apparently, she was also alone. Shortly before she left, she contacted him again. She wanted to say goodbye to him, she texted, and invited him to join her for a cup of tea.

'Can you come today?'

'Today I can't.'

He didn't want to. She should just go back to her world and leave him in his. He had enough to worry about, enough things that he needed to take care of. The fact that they had met was a big misunderstanding. Couldn't she see that? Why had he written that stupid note and given her his number? Why couldn't he have let her believe he was the caretaker? Wasn't it completely irrelevant what she thought, believed, meant about him? A pen pal friendship, fine, it was a nice way to spend some evenings, it was something different from listening to the radio or watching a series or surfing online. But more? Drinking tea with her? What for? No, he didn't want to.

'Tomorrow?'

Not tomorrow either. Tomorrow even less than today. He didn't fancy it at all. But how could he tell her that?

'Today does work after all. When should I come?'

'When it's dark.'

'I can also come in the afternoon.'

She shouldn't think he was a coward.

'5?'

'All right, I'll see you then.'

But if he didn't resent her for making him feel like a failure, because he had realised that the feeling came from himself and not from her, why did he feel so self-conscious as he sat in the caretaker's cottage? Either he looked at the floor or at the ceiling that was painted so impeccably that any professional would have taken their hat off to it.

'Are you happy with your stay here?'

The one question he had prepared.

'I've barely done anything.'

'Really?'

How could that be? Or rather: how did that even work? Secretly, he had been thinking repeatedly over and over that he was probably not the only person she had liked on Tinder, and he thought that now, and he would have liked to have asked her directly whether she had met up with any other men here. Or didn't his 'really?' actually imply that question before anything else anyway?

'But I don't regret it.'

'It did sound like that. When you wrote. Discontent.'

'That's not what I mean. If I hadn't come, I wouldn't have met you.'

Jacob's heart beat to his throat. He gulped.

'Hardly,' he said, and it sounded more bitter than he had expected.

Katja wanted to say something else, but she too seemed startled by his tone and remained silent. She just looked at him, insistently and as if beseeching him to look at her too. But he didn't, just searched the walls for marks that were not there.

'Would you like another cup?'

'I think I should be on my way.'

She looked away then too. He got up, almost knocking over the armchair in the process.

'Oops,' he said.

'That's okay.'

'Well,' he said.

'Yes,' she said.

As Jacob stepped out of the cottage, he noticed that the wind, which had been blowing sharply earlier, had died down. He half-turned again; she was still standing in the doorway. Should he tell her? That the wind had died down? And why had he said 'oops' like a little child?

[...]

The nights were long, still. They gained what seemed to be excess length from the empty days that seemed squeezed out, that brought hardly any light, only a few hours of twilight. At night, it froze, during the day it thawed again; earth, dirt, dead grass, decaying leaves and small and large stones that stuck to your boots. In the mornings, wisps of mist often hovered motionless over the pools that had formed on the trampled pasture; never anything with any substance; always just wisps. Apples still hung on some of the trees, red-black and shrivelled. Where it hadn't been mowed again in autumn, the grass lay pale yellow, as if it had fallen over itself, on the dark, wet ground.

Night. No moon. No stars. It had to be about half past one. The hour of the ox. That was the name of that time of night in Japan. That's what

they said. Yes, it was all connected. The young cow that had suddenly started limping had been standing next to the ox. Yes. And his breath, too, in the glow of the headlamp that had been fading for days, was thick and heavy like the steam that rose from the damp muzzle of an ox. Or like the smoke from his grandfather's pipe. The motorway roared louder than ever, and you could even hear the whirring of electricity in the high-voltage line. Jacob thought about how he had never consciously been aware of these sounds before he had been in the army, and how they had almost driven him mad when he returned. He had often thought he would go mad because it just never got quiet. Each lorry was followed by the next, announcing itself long before the roar of the bridge with a hum of an unbearable frequency, almost a screech. Then there had been phases when the noise had bothered him less. Lately, however, he had been wearing his ear defenders more often. When the radio was on, it was harder to concentrate at work, but for some activities it didn't matter and he liked listening to those pleasant voices and at the same time not listening, to understand and at the same time not understand; his thoughts, his perceptions and these voices merged together and became a kind of music, or a kind of language in which everything could be said, in which everything was said, a world that existed nowhere else and to which only he had access and which had become more and more of a refuge to him over the years. It was a bit like a dream, because you couldn't really speak about that either; if you did, the dream disappeared, or what constituted it: the feeling you had experienced. Certain similarities, somehow, and yet it was completely different. A few times he had tried to tell Katja about it, but she had never said anything about it, but had looked at him a little strangely instead; that was when he had

understood that he couldn't make anyone understand these feelings – and that he wasn't allowed to, either, if he wanted to keep them.

Jacob's senses were hyper-acute, even more acute than normal, but on the other hand he felt numb. He glanced over his shoulder. No light could be seen in the house. Even Luisa was asleep at half past one. And Marlon always slept through the night anyway. A great boy. Jacob's pride and joy, who meant everything to him and for whom he would have given his life without thinking about it. At the same time, he didn't think about him often; he often forgot him; sometimes he didn't even notice him when he was next to him. Carefully, so as not to make a noise, he opened the gate to the workshop,

'It's me,' he said unnecessarily; he said it in a hushed voice.

As usual, Axel only briefly raised his head. Jacob stepped over to him, squatted down and stroked him. Somehow, he wanted to say something to him, but nothing came; he patted him a few times. How thick his fur had become.

'Yes,' he said, 'yes, Axel.'

Then he straightened up and went to the back. The sky-blue tow rope with the galvanised carabiner hung from the hook from which the chains for the woodwork and also a few thinner ones that were still there from the cowshed were also hanging. He took it down and threw it over his shoulder, grabbed the stepladder and walked with it into the middle of the workshop. He unfolded the ladder and adjusted it. It was a good ladder. Sturdy. And it was high. Suddenly, from somewhere, the sound of a moped. Who was that so late? He recognised some by the sound, but it wasn't one of the ones he knew. He climbed the ladder and put the rope over the pulley hanging from the ceiling and tried to see if the wheel would move freely. Yes, it did.

It did not squeak. He climbed down and folded the ladder. The tinny clang. He carried it back to its place. Leaned it against the wall. Then he took off his jacket and laid it on the workbench. Rolling up his sleeves, he walked over to Axel, untied him and stepped back underneath the pulley.

‘Come, Axel,’ he said quietly.

The dog raised its head, then it quickly got up, shook and stretched itself and came. The lead dragged across the ground like a snake.

‘Come here.’

Jacob crouched down and stroked him, hugged him; the dog stood still.

‘Axel,’ he said. ‘Axel.’

Without stopping his stroking, he took the end of the dog’s lead, slowly stood up, reached for the carabiner dangling above him and hooked the lead in it; then he reached for the other end of the rope and pulled on it, putting one hand in front of the other, and it almost felt like when he used to milk the cows by hand. He did it slowly so as not to frighten the dog, but the moment the rope tightened and began to pull on him, Axel resisted and braced himself. Even though it was harder now, Jacob continued to pull relentlessly. Axel jerked his head back and forth, trying to free himself from the noose the collar had become. As if he understood what was happening here, that someone who looked and smelled and sounded like his master but could not be his master was about to strangle him, he jumped at Jacob and snatched at his arm, but did not get hold of it; Jacob had pulled back in time. But somehow the dog had caught him after all; there were bite marks, scratches that immediately began to bleed. Still, Jacob felt nothing but a brief burning in the tense muscles of his forearm; quickly he pulled up the animal, which shook the rope so much that Jacob feared it

might jump out of the guide. He stopped pulling and tied the rope to the vice. The dog, which had been almost silent until then, now howled and, without thinking, Jacob grabbed it by the hind legs and pulled on it, hanging on to it with all his weight. Almost immediately, the yelp died down. Jacob, his hands in front of his face, eyes closed, knees just barely above the ground, almost like a supplicant. The trembling of the animal's body shook him, and there was a choking in his throat as if the noose was tightening around his neck too. Again he thought he heard a moped, and again it was gone a moment later. Like before. Exactly the same sound as before. Where was it coming from? Could it just be in his head? And it was also the same hour as before. This has nothing to do with then, he told himself. It is different. It has nothing to do with then. You can't walk through water without getting your feet wet. Wasn't that exactly what they had said on the radio today, weren't those exactly the words he had been looking for and hadn't found for himself, words that helped him and guided him and, it seemed to him, in a way also absolved him? You can't walk through water ... no, you can't. The old life has to end, and this was the last thing left to do. At last the twitching grew less; it finally stopped altogether. Jacob let go of the limp hind legs. Sank to his knees. Took some deep breaths. Then he got up and walked over to Axel's place, picked up the blanket the dog had been lying on, pulled it over to the carcass and spread it out. You could still see the reddish-brown spots from the lice that Landa had once struggled with. He released the rope from the vice and lowered the carcass. He untied the rope from the lead and loosened the collar with a jerk as if he didn't want the dog to be strangled any further. A final, horrible sound came from the carcass: the air escaping the body; then it was as silent as before.