

Thunder Rolls in From the North

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Sample translation by Romy Fursland

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They appear on the October heath, on top of a ridge beyond which there seems to be nothing but a steadily drifting veil of cloud: the silhouettes of two dogs, and then the shepherd. With his stick in his right hand, he stands with the light behind him, his body so bent that you might have taken him for an old man. Only when he steps forward does his face become visible. He has smooth cheeks, reddened by the weather, and slightly protruding ears, also red. A gust of wind parts his oat-blond hair. Where it meets the back of his neck, his hair is fluffy, and darker – the same colour as his eyes, which remain fixed on the ground. Behind him is his flock, hundreds of them. He leads the way, and gradually the herd at his back forms itself into a broad grey train.

Thunder rolls in from the north, then dies away. No lightning. The animals don't flinch, and neither does the shepherd. He doesn't even look up, just trudges on. Slowly, as if they are in a bubble where time moves more sluggishly, they drift across the drab countryside. It's a gently rolling wasteland, coloured by brown, woody plants and the sand where nothing grows but the juniper bushes, like broken pillars.

His name is Jannes Kohlmeyer, and he is nineteen years old. He barely registers the cracks of the tank ammunition which is tested throughout the day at the Rheinmetall arms factory. For him it's part of the working day, just like the hiss of the wind and the bleating of the animals. He has other things on his mind.

He stops at a hollow and lets the herd go past him, counting them almost automatically; he checks, in passing, the state of their flanks, the condition of their fleeces, their noses, their gait, their teats, their hooves. There are 42 goats and 357 moorland sheep – archaic creatures with curly horns, shaggy greyish-brown wool, jet-black heads and bright, bulging eyes. They are hardy and undemanding, producing just enough milk for their own lambs, of which the family has kept only six this year. The others have been sold or slaughtered.

Down in the hollow, the animals press closer together. Hera and Kasch, the two sheepdogs, circle the flock. Jannes looks down at them; their movements remind him of images from a documentary about space. Like moons or planets they orbit the herd, the centre of the universe. And then his thoughts start to wander: he has his own dark voyager, a thought that's been coming and going in an elliptical orbit for days now, its gravity pressing on him and paralysing him, forcing him to stare into the void, until the centrifugal force flings him back into the night once more: Dad is going to the doctor.

They'll be there by this time, thinks Jannes – they're probably with the doctor right now. This in itself is nothing serious, no, surely not. He just can't remember it ever happening before. His father doesn't get ill. He never complains, not even of a headache or a bad back.

One of the older sheep breaks away from the herd, bolts, and races up the slope on the other side of the hollow. Like an organism the rest start to follow, flanked by the two collies.

It can't be anything serious, Jannes thinks again, or rather tries to tell himself, as he climbs the slope with the aid of his stick. It'll just be a little blip. Probably some kind of *deficiency* or other, his mother had said, or stress. He watches the last few animals as they try, half-skipping, half-galloping, to catch up with the rest. The herd, he thinks. The centre of the universe.

In the hollow the ground is wet and covered with animal prints. He looks too long at the jumble of tracks in the sand and notices something that unsettles him: some of them are not hoofprints but pawprints.

The dogs, is his first thought. But at the same moment he wonders – don't the tracks look strangely linear? Perhaps; or perhaps it just looks that way because there are so many tracks criss-crossing each other. Who can tell? He scans the slope for the slim silhouettes of the collies, but he can't find them in the throng, and he realises he never saw the dogs down here in the middle of the hollow. Suddenly the pawprints also seem to him to be too deep, and not fresh enough in comparison to the hoofprints of the herd. He whistles.

'Kasch! Hera! Come!'

The dogs come streaking down the slope one after the other, and before he can tell them to wait they've ploughed through the tracks. They stop in front of him, and he stares into their translucent, willing eyes.

'What's going on in there?' he asks. 'You little hooligans, what are you thinking?'

He crouches down, grabbing each of them by the muzzle and giving them a playful shake, feeling the warmth of their breath on his fingers and the strength of their fine neck muscles; then he lets go. Kasch shakes himself, Hera dances on the spot. Jannes turns away. His phone is vibrating. He clamps his stick under his arm and calls: 'Off you go, then!'

The dogs go coursing back up the slope, and Jannes takes his phone out of his coat pocket, staring at the fresh pawprints: they do look very similar. Why didn't he take a photo? Idiot, he thinks, as he reads his messages. There's one from his mother, who's saved in his phone as *Modder*.

'How are the convalescents doing? Are they keeping up okay? How much longer will you be roughly? Love, Mum'

Jannes types a reply as he follows the herd up the slope. His muscle memory knows the terrain, and his eyes stay mainly on the animals or on his phone.

'About two hours and yeah doing fine. All behaving themselves', he types, and then, after a short pause, he writes another message: 'How did it go at the doctors?'

He scrolls back through the chat to see if she's written anything else, but finds only the usual short sentences back and forth, alternated with blurry photos of a hand holding up a scabby cloven hoof, or a thumb pulling back a sheep's lip, the exposed rows of teeth always startlingly human-like. Photos of damaged fences, photos of reddish or runny droppings. In between, the odd *Okay*, *Good* and *Love, Mum*.

When he reaches the crest of the hill, a gut feeling causes him to look up from his phone. The herd is not moving. The dogs are still too. No wind. Just the rustling of the animals, the odd bleat. He thinks at once of the tracks in the hollow. At the same time he sees a few of

the horned heads turn towards the treeline. The goats look up, the black slits in their eyes staring into space. Suddenly a few animals break away from the herd.

‘Hey!’

Hera is off like a shot, driving them back into the huddle. Jannes leans on his stick again, squinting, following the animals’ gaze. The clouds hang low and heavy over the land, and the nearby forest is a dark wall. Anything could be lurking in there, staying hidden until hunger drives it out into the open. He thinks of the grainy, blurred videos on the Facebook groups – in one of them you could clearly see the animal. It was walking calmly by the side of the road, its gait springy, its head lowered, its gaze intent – curious, perhaps. The person filming it, however, was breathing heavily, panic in his voice: *Go away! Just go away! Go away!* over and over again. The animal didn’t so much as flinch in response – but then a stone flew through the air, clattering across the country road, and the wolf ducked, turned and ran off across the field. Within seconds it was no more than a dot at the edge of the forest, grey against brown; you could easily have mistaken it for a young deer or a stray dog.

Jannes thinks of the killing three weeks ago on the Steinbecks’ land, less than thirty kilometres from here; he sees the badly photographed images of the dead calf in Siegrid Steinbeck’s Facebook gallery, four shots arranged in a grid. Click, the mouse on the gnawed parts between the back legs, the frayed flaps of skin, his father’s words: *Just look at this shit, not even a hundred metres from the house. Just look at this shit.*

Kasch is crouched with his chin on the ground, staring at a sheep; Hera is panting, her tongue hanging out. Jannes can detect no sign of fear in either of them. Gradually the tension ebbs out of him. He puts the thought aside for the time being and walks on, calling ‘Co-ome!’

And the herd slowly starts to move.

Above, the sun traces its arc behind a shroud of mist; below, the wind ruffles fleece, fur and hair, sweeping the last of the leaves from the birch trees that grow at the edges of the heath. Like specks of gold they land on the sandy paths. In a few days they will merge into the colour of the landscape, and rot to brown.

The herd don’t stop again for the rest of the day. Jannes drives them steadily onward at a trot, continuing the work people like him have been doing for decades, for centuries. Between the large reforested areas are a few remaining patches of heathland, on which the paths worn by the animals stand out like dark veins, and above which the thunder of the artillery rings out every fifteen minutes: fire, impact. An old, sluggish heart.

That evening, after he’s put the animals in the barn and fed the dogs, he peels off his grey coat, wipes his hands on it roughly and hangs it in the room at the entrance to the barn, beside the other musty-smelling raincoats and jackets. He can hear the muffled noise of the herd behind the concrete wall, and the buzz of the ancient electronics. On the workbenches lie hoof nippers, syringes and scissors in plastic boxes with multiple compartments. There are shelves made of thin sheet metal that hold medication bottles, canisters of disinfectant, slaked lime, stacks of tubs for mixing lambs’ milk. Nooks and crannies strung with cobwebs, and bright yellow adhesive strips hanging in the spaces between, dotted with fat dead flies. In the corner of the room, feed bags stand on pieces of cardboard to keep out the damp, the cardboard covered in mouse droppings. Jannes takes his stick and places it with the others in

a plastic barrel with the top sawn off, which stands against the opposite wall. The worn handles clack against each other.

They each have their own, because they all do the same work: his mother Sibylle and his father Friedrich, and there are even some belonging to Grandpa Wilhelm that are over fifty years old. Those are hardly ever used these days; they're practically museum pieces now. Jannes's father only takes them out when he's giving tours of the farm. Jannes's own stick is unpainted and knotty. He and his grandfather made it together. He loves it when he can feel the growth and age of an object under his fingers. As a child he used to pick up all the bits of bone and antler he could find on his walks in the forest or on the heath, and line them up in his room. That something so rock-hard could have grown from a living creature feels strange to him, even now.

The only members of his family never to have owned one of the sticks in this barrel are his Grandma Erika, who has been in a home for a long time now with dementia, and his sister Janine, nine years older than him, who is living a different life in a different place.