

Steffen Popp

Traces of a Village Story

Translated by Katy Derbyshire

Early morning, walk over glittering field. Dive through a hovering bank of fog into the tree stock, following frozen stream courses to valley floors, ascending along hollowed paths towards medium peaks. Vantage points marked long ago, swallowed by trees. Not your story – that of a colonization, of a wild hamster who no longer awakens in his burrow after months of sleep under snow. Rigour, clear with frost. The distant sound of an axe.

The inner light; people who live on nothing else, allegedly. You find it exhausting; in the event that it exists. Cordelia and Berthold, who share this perspective, Dirk, who ignores it. On the back seat of Dirk's Golf: it's the ignoramus' car, you can't just chuck him out. From the rear-view mirror dangle a faded air freshener tree and a bulbous-nosed troll, making Berthold feel pensive.

Stagnant film in a headwater region. Village houses, barns, garages clumped together on the slopes, telling of material need, technical incompetence. Movements of heads behind net curtains. Cordelia can't make out in what form something like socialism was ever here. They produced prototypes of the German garden gnome in the region.

We'll never understand socialism. Dirk: As a child I had a book about the times of day – a red paperback from the fifties that my mother learned to read the clock from, if not tell the time. It showed the ideal socialist family's working day: bright, functional, a hovering Bauhaus world. No conflicts, no trash, only occasional slight disturbances, crinkles on the surface smoothed out on the next page. Which he liked at the time. Dirk: Children have this instinct – everything has to be in a certain order or be put into one.

Your bourgeois consciousness on the back seat, a dreaming wreck, a centaur. Cordelia sees owls, their incredibly revolving heads, eyes in timeless darkness. Their hovering flight, the breaking of delicate bones in that flight. The unprecedented softness of the owl's pelt, pulled over her hand like a puppet by a taxidermist.

Dirk sees the clock book.

Loused-up monuments reach Berthold. In the village they're factory buildings: a brick complex from the Wilhelminian era, converted to a tourist centre; a block from the post-war years, nailed up, with a ruinous roof, dead eyes. Thinking of windows as eyes seems misguided to Berthold, and the fact that they produced not only optical lenses and X-ray tubes behind them, but also glass eyes for a while, doesn't help the dirt-blind, partly cracked panes to see. On the other hand, objects once thought of as eyes do tend to stare at you; in Berthold's case the windows stare through him. They made the first X-ray tube here in 1896, as we learn. It was the first in the world – even before Röntgen, Berthold suspects, purchasing a glass paperweight in the shape of

a giant schnauzer at the museum shop for a friend, a dog breeder from Konstanz.

Thinking about this object, you've often come across paperweights: horse shoes, river stones, once a pretzel made of salt dough – only in two cases did the things weigh anything down, on one occasion the pile of confiscated icons, unlikely to tip over anyway, at the Syrian customs, on one occasion actual papers at an aunt's house in Krefeld, a woman who always wanted to pop home-made treats in your mouth. Even if it was only bills and bank statements, it looked like the paperweight fulfilled its purpose – the magazine of a Beretta, who knows where she got it from, and on the Syrian border the lower jawbone of a donkey. Your satisfaction with this image. The donkey doesn't fight back, offers up part of its skull indifferently for the purpose.

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The village has wings, perches on the back of the hill like a vampire. By night it flies over the woods, a huge blackness, with tiny islands of light, shimmering spherical lamps. A cosmos of its own – a wannabe Milky Way, you standing amidst it in running shoes. It doesn't care about your ideas; it preys on life. The all-pervasive senilization, nanization, stabilization plunges Cordelia down into gorgeous snow, which melts into slush in the warmth of her body. Berthold's unhappy shin protrudes into the picture.

Characteristic building stock: pointed-gabled houses belonging to the forestry commission and winter bungalows belonging to city folk on the edge of the village, towards the woods. Warped huts in fields near the village, in one of them lies Dirk on a flowered sofa. In one are piles of components for electric fences and drinking troughs for the cattle that graze the slopes in summer. In one a crush of drunken shouts, clashing by night with wild boar, colliding with stags. Dirk: All the village's singing is grounded on cacophonies of intoxication, crashes and pain. And you think you make out statements from the forest inhabitants in question.

Characteristic building stock: an abandoned company holiday camp at the foot of the Rübstein. Huts run-down over the years, in which Russian-German immigrants awaited their distribution to the cities, later asylum-seekers the outcome of their applications. Stored out of the way, and the forest too seems an external warehouse, an external camp, when Berthold and Cordelia move around in it, historical fur trappers, akin to furred animals, shooting through its body decimated by storms and overfelling like moon rockets.

Search for villagers: the woman with the home-cut fringe trudging forcefully through knee-high snow, her toy terrier dragged along on its lead after inefficient leaps. She feels sorry for all nature's little creatures, you hear; people step on them. Berthold senses great misery under the roof of this skull. As he's only ever learned sociology he can't make a better diagnosis. The terrier, a mongrel with terrier blood at least, you didn't know that fur could go yellow. This dog was once white. It barks, a kind of squeaking, at nothing. She's so attached to this dog, you're told. The dog, looking strangled yet optimistic, wrapped up in a fuzzy vest made of fleece.

Search for villagers: the professor emeritus cleaning his tiled kitchen floor with a scrubbing brush. A hand that once cracked walnuts, now almost boneless, an arthritis case study of tendons, muscles, a little gristle and habit. Cordelia sees an ugly lamp, beneath it ferric cassettes (Telemann, Händel), discarded laptops, on them dust from indoor plants, traces of indoor spiders.

Demonstration on the back of the sad hand: skin pinched together that stays standing as a wrinkle indicates a water deficiency. Which doesn't bother old people, by the way. Brothers, join hands for the future! On a banner at the gate to an abattoir. It's all long ago, he says. Pharmaceutical research for the army. Pro bono summer camps for epileptic children. Insertion of a capillary into the gall bladder vessel of a laboratory rat, unbeaten in his day at twelve seconds. Berthold begs further anecdotes from the days of socialism. The huge Hedwig Bollhagen vase in the background glows black and blue.

Filling water from an Altbunzlau jug into a Born mustard jar in the tiny kitchen. There are some designer glasses from my nephew in the cellar, Berthold hears. Soundless course of the mountain water in your body. Communism was a great thing, Berthold hears, private property is for idiots, he's told. All this with an eye on the landscape untouched outside the window, forming billions of ice crystals, shining under the weak mountain sun like a dreaming brain under a contrast agent.

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Terrain reconnaissance, following a brief scrutiny of the frozen forest: better stick to the village roads. Cordelia snaps arm-length icicles off a rain gutter, Berthold gives a lecture on gables and balconies, never ending as more and more come along. Snowballs, first from Cordelia presumably – awkward, indecisive, a quote from something once called fun, fight. Suddenly thrown eagerly, with skill, low parabolas cut through the air. Hits, scattering white. Then building a snow-rabbit, the peace and efficiency of the collective activity moving Cordelia to tears. Berthold's tears come from a snowball that left something behind in his eye, now melting. Our winter jackets glow in tourist colours, but that was OK, though we didn't know why.

At the break of darkness a stop-off, in the Christian, at least Social Democrat atmosphere of the Happy Hog Inn. A long tube of a saloon, poorly lit, the air thick with alcohol, smoke. Snow heaps and darkness press through small windows, a metallic object beating distant against wood, rhythmic, muffled. A cautious approach in this milieu, feeling your way with your eyes, ears, you think you're in a historical film; not even the modern beer pumps change that, the electronic cash desk, the gaming machine by the bar blending in seamlessly into the past. The whole village, Cordelia sees, is in an anachronistic snow globe.

Search for villagers: the works manager, alone with his beer stein, you ask him to join you. He repairs glass things in a workshop, since they closed down the works, the glass factory, to stop him from losing his mind if you like. Visible traces of working with flames in his face. A single flame left from one pitiful gas burner, and that ghastly

and all, and the works manager: hisses. The village, more than three hundred years built on glass, Berthold notes on a beer mat: the most important local raw material was wood, used to fire smelting furnaces. Cordelia submerges herself in a portrait of the happy hog, its end in stew and sausage not leaving her cold. The works manager expands upon quartz sands, ashes, secret additives, Berthold beautifies the coaster with definitions: amorphous substance, frozen fluid. Cordelia unmaskes the saloon as the unhappy hog's stomach – leaving the place immediately, following the frozen road to the village store, buying a yogurt made by Zott, an ivory-coloured eraser made by Koh-I-Noor. The elephant upon it laughs, breaking a resistance – Berthold too comes to something at that moment, beyond his scribblings on chemistry, sunken skills. Hallucinating, the landlord fears, though Berthold drank only mineral water; he throws him out of the pub.

Sitting outside the flesh-coloured new fire brigade building in a pile of snow, you see the local land register: generations of old argument over properties, rights of way, grotesque annexes; a mountain of mortgages, debts mirroring the hill; fences of wood and wire around every foot's-width of earth. Cordelia sums up the village with one cool glance: zero asset value, just about adequate for living purposes. A case for the excavators, if demolition weren't too expensive. Cordelia finds Berthold's vision of a village made of glass worth considering, especially beautiful – it would be dark in the summer, transparent in winter, seen from afar no more than bare white clearance stains in the hills. Dirk finds two empty beer bottles on a windowsill.

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For hours now the village has held its ground by a huge emission of light, only the art dealer's house melting without resistance into the low sky, straggly conifer forest. You'd announced your arrival but she doesn't seem to expect you – so Berthold and Cordelia, after some ringing of bells, push the gate open themselves, entering the yard with a plough through a snowdrift. Only now, on the property, the matte glow of a lamp on the second floor.

The art dealer sits at her desk in a fox fur, surrounded by correspondence, artefacts and artefact fragments. Her face behind white breath like a planet beneath clouds, her hands in knitted pulse-warmers up to her wrists, pale, with slim fingers. Ice crystals on the window, complex solitaires along the heat bridges; the light of the simple table lamp lends the room the flair of a Renaissance workshop, shock-frozen for eyes of our time. The art dealer gets up, looks for a while at the village glowing, glimmering in the densifying darkness like the model world of a train set. I've always liked graveyards, she says, even as a child.

Significant assets once stored in this room – originally corn, later hay, the remains scraped out with effort after she moved here. Cordelia for instance is sitting on a head of Djoser, granite, she tells us; she put a blanket over it before we came in. Berthold looks down, he's sitting on a normal old chair. Still so broke though that she can't even heat the place. Don't we want to take something with us, perhaps this duck weight, polished porphyry from Susa, just right for a backpack like Berthold's. I'll put a replica stamp on it, just to be on the safe side. Cordelia reaches for the weight, which

not only represents, but is the weight of an ancient Persian duck; she's rarely felt the past so unfiltered. Berthold finds the term unfiltered incorrect, but he accepts it in view of the situation.

Walk back through great silence, downslope, following our own traces towards the village. The cracking of snow frozen over pains your ears, the duck weight blueing your back – dead poultry, your feel, takes revenge down three millennia. Concern over Berthold, Cordelia sees boundaries to sociology in pitch-dark night. Two boys by the wayside fell a withered Black Locust, the front of the two with a shiny new axe. Standing motionless, in the weak light of a storm lantern. The rear of the two, shouldering a whipsaw. The front of the two has the axe.

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Breathing at this point, drinking tea from one of Dirk's DIY-store mugs. With an eye on his cactus shelves, a collection of heroic stalks in earth fissured by drought, talking on about forests, wood logging. Horse-sized tractors that barely damage the forest; obstinacy pulls back in extreme situations, one would like to follow its example, but it works less and less. The more, the less – you think of the time when you were close to extremes, albeit without understanding the term. Now a giant thesaurus in forests standing apparently unchanged, looking unchanged without eyes, greeting. The eye of a needle without any camel, a false spring without a word for real. Poetic tones from Cordelia, who's in charge of Mergers & Acquisitions for Roland Berger in Munich, surprising you. Of no further use: the ballad of the forester, who shot himself taking

a shotgun out of his van (he grabs it by the barrel, the trigger gets caught in a loop on his rucksack). Annoying input from Berthold in the form of lists. Cordelia: the forest paths have been widened, filled out with gravel to drivable tracks, a deed put down as ecological compensation for building autobahns. You recall overgrown paths that you anxiously followed, weather-worn signposts promising the shortest of routes, even whether or not they pointed to ground and to sky.

On the table are crumbs that Cordelia doesn't see, Berthold doesn't include in his lists. Irrelevant for understanding the village, they do enhance the view. Aren't we, you write, and cross it right out. Dirk looks for a brush, finds cleaning cloths cut up out of fine-rib underpants.

Searching for villagers: the marten, the mouse. The lizard Hans, who sat in the post-office window for years once rescued from a wrongly delivered parcel, occasionally extending his tongue for a fly between mouth-blown decorative glasses and the postage stamp of the month. There was talk of a pagoda turtle in the Ursulines' shoe closet, never seen by you. It liked the slipper section and the drawer with the woollens, they used to say.

Characteristic building stock: the outdoor pool, the cracked concrete basin of a swimming bath by a spring in the forest. Dirk: We used to swim here, often even in June at a water temperature of twelve degrees. The last use of the pool was a trout farm. Sitting in this basin, upon layers of trout droppings and forest humus with stones, talking elementary spirits. I'd be the apocalyptic armies, the wild seven, and I'd strike torpor and decay. Berthold's theory of never-ending life in stagnant time – riding

practically weightless on the cusp of becoming. Cordelia's theory of senescence through inactivity. Dirk's theory of the succulent, the stalk.

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Elements of possible description float by as snow grouse, headless swans, the winter face of the mountain village, white on white. Your shining helmet from the nineties with the imprint BOLT. Dirk's Golf on the empty tourist car park at the foot of the Rübstein; the ski rack on the roof of the car, antlers. The legend of gods and devils who used this mountain aeons ago as a whisk. Whatever they gained from the foam of the primordial ocean that covered the region back then, whisk energy is Dirk's claim, is now in the stone. The smile of the dead lift under which you shoulder your skis, gradually climbing uphill.

With clumsy fingers you click the ski boots into fossilous bindings, each sound cracking like a shot across the frozen valley. Practice curves in slow motion, stiff, a wonder you don't fall, something in you remembers, releases the necessary procedures. Through scattering powder above firm older snow, more coming back with every motion, contact, experience with this slope. As the strokes alternate, you see the village as a helix, remainders of a code that no one can read. Postcard-pretty it perches in the ice, a mirror of inner motionlessness, while your body accelerates, taking the terrain automatically. Luminescence, interior brilliance of decay – then a bump in the ground that throws you up high, sends you back down hard on the snow, scattering any thought. You're to feel that, and burn off all foolishness, downhill in the white. At

the end of the run stands Dirk, like a philosopher in his giant snow glasses. Your last braking curve knocks both of you over.

Back again to the professor, as Berthold left behind the microphone windshield; his wife lets you in. A friendly bird's face behind steaming tea. Involved with architecture, if Cordelia understands the bookshelves correctly. When questioned, while Berthold crawls around on the floor to look for the windshield: urban planning, all-in, from the garage to the stadium. Historical terms, which Cordelia translates as Finance, Construction, Controlling. New cities for the new people; for years the only woman in the job. When material was there she renovated too, new roofs on a church or two. Berthold, from the floor: Does God exist? Surprise, jollity. Then pensively: the enraptured face of the young woman next to her on a train, after a low-flying raid with machine guns – no higher meaning, all she took with her back then was the meaning of the word “lacerated”. Morphine, sees Cordelia, holds up her exhausted body like courage holds a fate, gold holds a bank. Berthold fishes the windshield from under the couch with a carpet-beater.

Evening once more, and night. Critical, speechless night. Night of the world, it feels like to you; ridiculous, you know, and yet it's still good to think that way, to simulate sublimity in this Mittelgebirge. And also the starry sky is really incredible – you don't notice it, nor the forest, its delirious concert of almost only silence, in the effort to get all the ideas and tools through in one piece, up onto a peak. On which you might align them, put them into relation, to see something, to penetrate, what, you don't know.

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Early morning, walk across glittering field. The caterpillar spoor of a snow blower gives you ground, breath freezes all around you. The equinity of such beginning. Like a man from Mars in your jogging suit, the landscape repels you – which makes it easier to push off as you run, but harder to land. The pulse stopwatch in your throat indicates a maximum, keep it up, says a trainer's voice, keep it up, keep it up –

The village, seen from a mid-height peak: the smashed crown of an imbecilic giant. A madman who didn't make it over the hills, the Rübstein. You remember the council worker and his bear-brown fake-fur hat, double the size of his head, protecting him from the cold, from the world. A tool landscape, Cordelia sees, turning the spirit of its inhabitants roughly inside out. Silent matting of an action space, due to – the diversion of oxygen for thoughts and poor running technique force you to turn back, later to stop in the middle of a field. Berthold breasted a trigonometric point, by means of a special map even a super point, strange that he found such a thing, found anything at all. Standing as still as you are, at this point, rolling his freezing toes in his boots. Listening, but hearing nothing. Nothing moves, nothing speaks. The village brain, smashed, watches through tiny eyes.