

THE PASSPORT

HERTA MÜLLER

Translated by Martin Chalmers

Foreword by Paul Bailey



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THE POT HOLE

Around the war memorial are roses. They form a thicket. So overgrown that they suffocate the grass. Their blooms are white, rolled tight like paper. They rustle. Dawn is breaking. Soon it will be day.

Every morning, as he cycles alone along the road to the mill, Windisch counts the day. In front of the war memorial he counts the years. By the first poplar tree beyond it, where he always hits the same pot hole, he counts the days. And in the evening, when Windisch locks up the mill, he counts the years and the days once again.

He can see the small white roses, the war memorial and the poplar tree from far away. And when it is foggy, the white of the roses and the white of the stone is close in front of him as he rides. Windisch rides on. Windisch's face is damp, and he rides till he's there. Twice the thorns on the rose thicket were bare and the weeds underneath were rusty. Twice the poplar was so bare that its wood almost split. Twice there was snow on the paths.

Windisch counts two years by the war memorial and two hundred and twenty-one days in the pot hole by the poplar.

Every day when Windisch is jolted by the pot hole,

he thinks, "The end is here." Since Windisch made the decision to emigrate, he sees the end everywhere in the village. And time standing still for those who want to stay. And Windisch sees that the night watchman will stay beyond the end.

And after Windisch has counted two hundred and twenty-one days and the pot hole has jolted him, he gets off for the first time. He leans the bicycle against the poplar tree. His steps are loud. Wild pigeons flutter out of the churchyard. They are as grey as the light. Only the noise makes them different.

Windisch crosses himself. The door latch is wet. It sticks to Windisch's hand. The church door is locked. Saint Anthony is on the other side of the wall. He is carrying a white lily and a brown book. He is locked in.

Windisch shivers. He looks down the street. Where it ends, the grass beats into the village. A man is walking at the end of the street. The man is a black thread walking into the field. The waves of grass lift him above the ground.

THE EARTH FROG

The mill is silent. The walls are silent and the roof is silent. And the wheels are silent. Windisch has pressed the switch and put out the light. Between the wheels it is

night. The dark air has swallowed the flour dust, the flies, the sacks.

The night watchman is sitting on the mill bench. He's sleeping. His mouth is open. The eyes of his dog gleam under the bench.

Windisch carries the sack with his hands and with his knees. He leans it against the wall of the mill. The dog looks and yawns. Its white teeth set wide.

The key turns in the keyhole of the mill door. The lock clicks between Windisch's fingers. Windisch counts. Windisch feels his temples beating and thinks, "My head is a clock." He puts the key in his pocket. The dog barks. "I'll wind it up, till the spring snaps," says Windisch out loud.

The night watchman presses his hat down onto his forehead. He opens his eyes and yawns. "Soldier on guard duty," he says.

Windisch walks over to the mill pond. At the edge is a stack of straw. A dark blot on the reflection in the pond. The blot goes down into the depths like a crater. Windisch pulls his bicycle out of the straw.

"There's a rat in the straw," says the night watchman. Windisch picks the blades of straw from the saddle. He throws them into the water. "I saw it," he says, "it threw itself into the water." The blades float like hair. They turn in small eddies. The dark crater floats. Windisch looks at his moving reflection.

The night watchman kicks the dog in the stomach. The

dog yelps. Windisch looks into the crater and hears the yelping under the water. "The nights are long," says the night watchman. Windisch takes a step backwards. Away from the edge. He sees the unchanging picture of the stack of straw, facing away from the edge. It is still. It has nothing to do with the crater. It is paler than the night.

The newspaper rustles. The night watchman says, "My stomach is empty." He takes out some bread and bacon. The knife flashes in his hand. He chews. He scratches his wrist with the blade of the knife.

Windisch wheels the bicycle along. He looks at the moon. Still chewing, the night watchman quietly says, "A man is nothing but a pheasant in the world." Windisch lifts the sack and lays it on the bicycle. "A man is strong," he says, "stronger than the beasts."

A corner of the newspaper is flying loose. The wind tugs like a hand. The night watchman lays the knife on the bench. "I slept a little," he says. Windisch is bent over his bicycle. He raises his head.

"And I woke you," he says.

"Not you," says the night watchman, "my wife woke me." He brushes the breadcrumbs from his jacket. "I knew," he says, "that I wouldn't be able to sleep. The moon is large. I dreamt of the dry frog. I was dead tired. And I couldn't get to sleep. The earth frog was lying in bed. I was talking to my wife. The earth frog looked with my wife's eyes. It had my wife's plait. It had her nightshirt on, which

had ridden up to the stomach. I said: 'Cover yourself, your thighs are flabby.' I said it to my wife. The earth frog pulled the nightshirt over its thighs. I sat down on the chair beside the bed. The earth frog smiled with my wife's mouth. 'The chair is creaking,' it said. The chair hadn't creaked. The earth frog had laid my wife's plait across its shoulder. It was as long as the nightshirt. I said: 'Your hair has grown.' The earth frog raised its head and shouted: 'You're drunk, you're going to fall off the chair.'"

The moon has a red patch of cloud. Windisch leans against the wall of the mill. "Men are stupid," says the night watchman, "and always ready to forgive." The dog eats a bacon rind. "I forgave her over the baker. I forgave her for what happened in town." He strokes the blade of the knife with his finger tip: "The whole village laughed at me." Windisch sighs. "I couldn't look her in the eye anymore," says the night watchman. "Only one thing I didn't forgive her – that she died so quickly, as if she'd had no one."

"God knows," says Windisch, "what they're for, women."

The night watchman shrugs his shoulders: "Not for us," he says. "Not for me, not for you. I don't know who they're for." The night watchman strokes the dog.

"And our daughters," says Windisch. "God knows, they become women too."

There's a shadow on the bicycle, and a shadow on the grass. "My daughter," says Windisch, weighing the sentence

in his head, “my Amalie is no longer a virgin either.” The night watchman looks at the red patch of cloud. “My daughter has calves like melons,” says Windisch. “As you said, I can’t look her in the eye any more. There’s a shadow in her eyes.” The dog turns its head.

“Eyes lie,” says the night watchman, “but calves don’t.” He places his feet apart. “Watch how your daughter walks,” he says. “If the toes of her shoes point outwards when she puts her feet on the ground, then it’s happened.”

The night watchman turns his hat in his hand. The dog lies and watches. Windisch is silent. “Dew is falling. The flour will get damp,” says the night watchman, “the mayor will be annoyed.”

A bird is flying over the pond. Slow and straight, as if drawn along on a string. Close to the water. As if it were ground. Windisch follows it with his eyes. “Like a cat,” he says.

“An owl,” says the night watchman. He puts his hand to his mouth. “The light at Widow Kroner’s has been burning for three nights.” Windisch pushes his bicycle.

“She can’t die,” he says, “the owl hasn’t settled on any roof yet.”

Windisch walks through the grass and looks at the moon. “I’m telling you, Windisch,” calls the night watchman, “women deceive.”

THE NEEDLE

The light is still burning in the joiner's house. Windisch stops. The window pane shines. It reflects the street. It reflects the trees. The picture passes through the lace curtain. Through its falling posies of flowers into the room. A coffin lid leans against the wall beside the tiled stove. It's waiting for the death of Widow Kroner. Her name is written on the lid. The room seems empty despite the furniture, because it's so bright.

The joiner is sitting on a chair with his back to the table. His wife is standing in front of him. She is wearing a striped nightshirt. She's holding a needle in her hand. A grey thread hangs from the needle. The joiner is holding out his forefinger to his wife. The woman is picking a splinter of wood out of his flesh with the point of the needle. The forefinger bleeds. The joiner pulls his finger back. The woman lets the needle fall. She lowers her eyes and laughs. The joiner grasps under her nightshirt with his hand. The nightshirt rides up. The stripes wriggle. The joiner grasps at his wife's breasts with his bleeding finger. Her breasts are large. They tremble. The grey thread hangs on the chair leg. The needle swings, its point facing downwards.

The bed is beside the coffin lid. The pillow is made of damask. Spots are scattered across it, large ones and small ones. The sheet is white and the bedspread is white.

The owl flies past the window. One beat of its wings carries it across the pane. It twitches in flight. The light falls at an angle, and the owl becomes two.

Bent over, the woman walks up and down in front of the table. The joiner grabs her between the legs. The woman sees the needle hanging. She reaches for it. The thread sways. The woman lets her hand slide down her body. She closes her eyes. She opens her mouth. The joiner pulls her into bed by the wrist. He throws his trousers onto the chair. His underpants are stuffed into the trouser legs like a white rag. The woman opens her thighs and bends her knees. Her stomach is made of dough. Her legs are a white window frame on the sheet.

A picture in a black frame hangs over the bed. The headscarf of the joiner's mother lies against the rim of her husband's hat. The glass has a spot. The spot is on her chin. She smiles out of the picture. Close to death, she smiles. In less than a year. She smiles through the wall into the room.

The wheel of the well is turning, because the moon is large and is drinking the water. Because the wind is in its spokes. The sack is damp. It hangs over the rear wheel like a sleeping man. "The sack hangs behind me like a dead man," thinks Windisch.

Windisch feels his stiff, obstinate member against his thigh.

"The joiner's mother," thinks Windisch, "has cooled down."

THE WHITE DAHLIA

In the heat of August, the joiner's mother had lowered a big melon into the well in a pail. The well made waves around the pail. Water gurgled around the green skin. The water cooled the melon.

The joiner's mother had gone into the garden with the big knife. The garden path was a furrow. The lettuce had shot up. Their leaves were stuck together by the white milk that forms in the stems. The joiner's mother had carried the knife down the furrow. Where the fence begins and the garden ends, a white dahlia bloomed. The dahlia reached up to her shoulder. The joiner's mother smelt the dahlia. She smelt at the white leaves for a long time. She breathed in the dahlia. She rubbed her forehead and looked into the yard.

The joiner's mother cut the white dahlia with the big knife.

"The melon was just a pretext," said the joiner after the funeral. "The dahlia was her misfortune." And the joiner's neighbour said, "The dahlia was a vision."

"Because it was so dry that summer," said the joiner's wife, "all the dahlia's leaves were white and closed up. Its flower was larger than any dahlia can be. And because there was no wind that summer, it didn't drop off. The dahlia had long breathed its last, yet it couldn't wither."

“You can’t stand it,” said the joiner, “no one can stand it.”

No one knows what the joiner’s mother did with the dahlia she had cut off. She didn’t bring the dahlia into the house. She didn’t put it in the room. She didn’t leave it lying in the garden either.

“She came out of the garden. She had the big knife in her hand,” said the joiner. “There was something of the dahlia in her eyes. The whites of her eyes were dry.”

“It may be,” said the joiner, “that she was waiting for the melon and plucked the dahlia to pieces. Plucked it apart with her hands. Not a single petal lay scattered on the ground. As though the garden were a room.”

“I believe,” said the joiner, “that she scraped a hole in the ground with the big knife. She buried the dahlia.”

The joiner’s mother had pulled the pail out of the well late in the afternoon. She carried the melon to the kitchen table. She stabbed into its green skin with the point of the knife. She turned her arm and the big knife in a circle and cut the melon through the middle. The melon cracked. It was a death rattle. In the well, on the kitchen table, until its two halves were split apart, the melon had still been alive.

The joiner’s mother had opened her eyes wide. Because her eyes were as dry as the dahlia, they did not grow large. The juice dripped from the blade of the knife. Her eyes were small and full of hate as she looked at the red flesh. The black seeds lay above one another like the teeth of a comb.