



foreign rights

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The Architect

That's his profession, creating home. Four walls around a block of air, wresting a block of air from amid all that burgeoning, billowing matter with stone claws, pinning it down. Home. A house is your third skin, after the skin made of flesh and clothing. Homestead. A house made to measure according to the needs of its master. Eating, cooking, sleeping, bathing, defecating, children, guests, car, garden. Calculating all these whethers, all these thises and thats, in wood, stone, glass, straw and iron. Setting out courses for lives, flooring beneath feet for corridors, vistas for eyes, doors for silence. And this here was his house. For the sitting to be done by his wife and himself, he designed the two chairs with leather cushions, for observing the sunset, he made the terrace with its view of the lake, and their shared pleasure at receiving guests had taken shape as a long table in the main room, his and her chilliness in winter would be combated by the tiled heating stove from Holland, his and her weariness after ice-skating by the bench before the stove, and finally his drawing at the drafting table was provided for, as it were, by the studio. And now he had to consider himself lucky he was escaping with his life, suffering his third skin to be stripped from him and fleeing, insides glisteningly exposed, to the safety of the West.

When over the enemy's lines never forget your own line of retreat. Even in the first war this was easier said than done. They'd been able to discharge their bombs over Paris, but then the airship was struck and gradually lost altitude until finally it settled on the roof of a stable in a Belgian village, burying its own gondola beneath the huge limp sack. When he and his comrades had worked their way out from beneath the cloth, they saw a few chickens pecking at the sand down below in the yard, saw a cat sleeping in the sun, and only when the farmers refrained from shooting at him and his comrades but instead fetched a ladder did they know that the village had already been occupied by the Germans. And so it was pure chance

that instead of being shot they were invited to climb down a Belgian ladder back into life. From the airship you gazed down at the world as if at a mere outline, but it wasn't so easy to see where exactly the front was from so high above. To them, the village they owed their life to was occupied territory; to the Belgians, it was home, and quite possibly the front ran right between the whiskers of the sleeping cat. The lesson he learned that day was never to take a risk on so close a call. He walks around the house to the left, passing the rhododendrons, beneath his feet the gratings with which he covered the basement windows during the second war. The words "Mannesmann Air Raid Defense" are stamped on these gratings, even now, in the middle of peacetime. By the time the second war came along, he was already too old to be sent into battle, but in his own way he'd expanded his occupied territory. *Rule number one for aerial battle: When you attack, keep the sun behind you.*

In the morning the sunlight grazed the tops of the pine trees before the house, this meant that the weather would be lovely all day long, the terrace still lay in the shade of the house, and the butter on the breakfast table hadn't yet begun to melt. All day long, the sun shone on the two meadows to the left and right of the path that led down to the water, the sisters of his wife lay and sat there with their children in the grass to play, sleep or read, sunlight spotted the path as it descended amid oak leaves, conifers and hazelnut bushes down to the paved steps, eight times eight steps, rough sandstone in its natural color, down beside the lake the sunlight pierced the alder foliage only at intervals to reach the black earth of the shoreline, which was still moist, and the closer one came to the glistening surface of the lake, the louder the leaves rustled, the shadier it was all around you, blackout shades, Mannesmann air raid defense, but all of this only in order to blind a summer visitor as he took his first step out onto the pier, between sunlight and water he walked toward the end of the pier, and apart from him, the one walking there, there was nothing more remaining that might have cast a shadow. Here the sun

unleashed its force, falling both upon him and the lake, and the lake threw its reflection right back up at the sun, and he, who was now sitting or lying at the end of the pier, observed this exchange, casually extracting from his hand a splinter he'd gotten when he sat or lay down, smelled the tar paint used to impregnate the wood, heard the boat plashing in the boathouse, the chain it was bound with clinking faintly, he saw fish suspended in the bright water, crabs crawling, felt the warm boards beneath his feet, his legs, his belly, smelled his own skin, lay or sat there and since the sun was so bright he closed his eyes. And even through the blood behind his closed eyelids he saw the flickering orb.

The Visitor

The main thing is that here she can go swimming again. Even if the first time she visits she doesn't know the little pieces of porcelain on the table are for resting one's silverware on between courses. Nor does she succeed in eating her breakfast roll with a knife and fork, which she hopes will compensate for her gaffe at lunch the day before. Both misunderstandings produce the same silent smile on the face of her hostess, accompanied by the same light touch of the hostess's cool hand on her forearm. Bread, the hostess says, is so precious that it's perfectly all right to pick it up in one's hands. Back where she comes from she never had to lose any thought on whether or not to pick up the bread. She'd planted the grain herself, and the gesture of touching remained the same from the sowing of the seed to the harvest and baking to the eating of the bread. But here all that remains to touch is the finished bread, the skin covering some unknown interior like with the Christmas goose. Here in this garden, unlike the garden that belonged to her, there is nothing to sow and nothing to harvest. All one finds here are pines and oak trees, shrubs grow slowly in their shade, the gardener waters the lawn, the flowers are all perennials, and the dill for the potatoes comes from the neighbor woman at the end of the sandy path—the little girl is sent to fetch it from

her. Everyone who spends time in this garden does so only in order to be in a garden. Probably she has now reached the right place at the right point in her life, for she too is spending time in her life only in order to be alive. In other places, or so she's heard, old women like her are just stuck up in a tree and left to starve, but nowadays they're even given money to survive on, even if they're no longer able to work. Never will she get used to this money that is given her month after month for doing nothing. In this garden there is nothing left for her to do but sit—sit there in broad daylight with her hands in her lap, watching the larks fly to and fro. Stop dawdling, she hears herself crying out in an inaudible voice as she sits there, stop dawdling, just as she shouted out the kitchen window at her daughter, who was indulging in idle gossip with the neighbor girl—her daughter was to come inside to do the dishes, scale fish or pluck a chicken. Her daughter always came running, but now her own hands go on lying motionless in her lap, and as she sits here she can hear her husband playing the accordion, her own parents are silent while the grandchildren babble away, and she answers inaudibly, she offers silent words of consolation or sings without a sound or else just simply goes on saying nothing, and the main thing is that when evening comes she can go swimming again in this shimmering green, cool lake, almost like at home.

It's certainly better, at any rate, to be a stranger among strangers. Once she had returned from the city they'd fled to at first, walking with her three grandchildren all the way back to the farm, thirty kilometers on foot in the wrong direction, and for a short while had worked as a maid for the Poles who had already taken over the house, she had worked as a maid on the farm that belonged to her. So that her daughter would find her if she were to come back from the labor camp after all. Her little grandson had wanted to dig up the toy tractor he'd buried in a corner of the yard several weeks before when they were leaving, but she wouldn't let him. Her daughter never came back, just the wedding photo she'd always

carried with her returned to the hands of her mother after various detours, all tattered now and creased, with notations in Cyrillic handwriting on the back. On her way through the garden to the church, her daughter had caught her veil on the red currant bushes and thus had had to get married in a torn veil. For the photograph she'd arranged the veil in such a way that the tear didn't show. Her daughter never came home. And so the mother, who was now only a grandmother, set out again for the second time with her three grandchildren. It's certainly better, at any rate, to be a stranger among strangers than in one's own home.

The dandelions are the same here as at home, and so are the larks. Now, as an old woman, she has grown into the sentence that her husband always said to her forty years before. The dandelions in her village were the same as the dandelions where he grew up, in the Ukraine, from where he'd come vagabonding along, and the larks too, that's what he always said. And in Bavaria, from where his great-grandparents had emigrated to Russia, and to where he'd originally meant to return, without knowing anything more about this homeland than its name, there were surely also such dandelions, such larks. No doubt even her husband's great-grandparents had at some point or other said this very sentence another seventy or eighty years before. She wonders whether the sentences go looking for people to utter them, or whether it's the other way around, if the sentences just wait there for someone to make use of them, and at the same time she wonders if she really doesn't have anything better to do than wonder about such things, pure rubbish, she thinks, and then she remembers that she doesn't have anything better to do, she looks at the ottoman on which her crooked legs are propped, it's upholstered in the same red vinyl as the armchair in which she sits. Probably, she thinks, the sentences all get caught up with sooner or later and are spoken by someone or other, someplace or other, just as everything belongs to everyone when you're fleeing, for the way of all things and people, factored over the length of a lifetime, was no

doubt just the same as when you're fleeing. In peacetime it was poverty, and during the war it was the front pushing people before it like a long row of dominos, people slept in other people's beds, used other people's cooking utensils, ate the stores of food that other people had been forced to leave behind. It's just that the rooms became more crowded the more bombs fell. And finally she arrived here, in this garden, and when the gong calls her to supper, she finds it quite plausible to think that this gong had already been calling her back then, when she turned her back on her farm for the last time and set off again with her three grandchildren, carrying an eiderdown and with a blue-patterned kerchief on her head. When you've arrived, is the flight still called a flight? And when you're fleeing, can you ever arrive?

Her husband had died before all of this. When she looks back from his death to the accident with the clover press, it seems to her as if his dying had already arrived then, coming in through a side door without bothering to identify itself. Even the tearing of her daughter's bridal veil was a sort of entrance, through a side door, of what was to come, but since that was still the time when all the rest was yet to come, she couldn't yet recognize it. Now that she is old and only alive in order to be alive, all these things exist simultaneously. Now that she is old, her husband's injury could be the reason she fell in love with him, and the music he played when he arrived in her village had its roots in his early death, and her daughter, on the other hand, was perhaps already sitting beside her there in the oven holding her hand when she was pregnant with her and had been locked up in the oven because of having fallen in love with that vagabond, the father of the child she was carrying. And this, if you looked at it this way, was most certainly the reason he'd come vagabonding along, even before he knew her. As she looks back like this, time is becoming its own sister and flattening out. Things come one after the other only as long as one is alive in order to extract a splinter from a

child's foot, to take the roast out of the oven before it burns or sew a dress out of a potato sack, but with each step you take while fleeing, your baggage grows smaller and what you've left behind greater and greater, and sooner or later you just stop and sit there, and then all that is left of life is life itself, and everything else is lying in all the ditches beside all the roads in a land as wide as the air, and surely here as well you can find these dandelions, these larks.

You aren't going to marry a man like that, her mother said and locked her up in the oven for several days. But when it turned out she was already pregnant, her mother let her out of the oven again and said: You could have had the postman, the forester, the head fisheries inspector. In order to earn money for his family, her husband had begun to maintain the equipment and machinery of the farmers, including the clover press. From then on he had played his music only for his own pleasure, and for her, his wife. But after he'd cut off four fingers of his left hand on the clover press, he could play neither fiddle nor accordion. Along with his fingers, the clover press had cut off his music from him. This music that he'd played until his accident came from the Ukraine, from where he'd arrived as a vagabond. After his injury, his hand always felt cold, and therefore she'd sewed a fur-lined cover that he wore year in year out from September until well into May. With this cover on his hand and his hand in his lap, her husband had often sat there in his final years, just as she was doing now, although he was still young. When he died, still in his early forties, she couldn't bring herself to throw away the fur cover. But when she had to flee, she left it behind in the house.

She can go swimming here just like at home, and swimming has remained easy for her, unlike walking, for which her bones haven't been strong enough for some time now. In the evening when she unknits her gray bun before going to bed, her hair is still damp. When she was young, she swam and dove through Masurian lakes in summer, fished in them too, and in

winter she went ice-skating, the blades would be screwed into the soles of her boots. She touched the lakes, washed herself in them, drank from them, ate their fish and scratched up their ice, she'd worked over the lakes the way her daughter, who so loved to bake, later worked over the cake dough she would knead four hundred times with both hands before putting it in the oven. To this day her shins are blue and purple from the lace-up boots, which had to be laced especially tight for ice-skating, blue and purple and shiny as stone from the hours and hours of being laced up, hours and hours of racing across frozen lakes that let out dark cries of jubilation beneath the cuts the girl was carving into them with her skates. Now her crooked legs with their shins that still shine blue and purple lie upon the red vinyl of the ottoman, which is intended for one to prop one's feet on, and they are nonetheless still her legs. She doesn't know what the lake here looks like in winter, the mistress of the house calls it her summer house. In the winter it's just the gardener living in his room, otherwise the house is empty, and then it's closed up for the winter, the shutters are placed over their windows, the night heater turned down to its lowest setting. And then everyone leaves for the city. Her husband went fishing even in winter, he was always one of the first on the ice, when it was still cracking, a small, dark figure crouching there at dawn, motionless. In the winter they heated their house with wood, they would light the stove with pine shavings, but as soon as the fire was burning well they would switch over to beech and oak, the hard wood burnt longer. When the pump in the yard had frozen solid, they would fetch their water from the lake, from a hole that her husband hacked in the ice near the shore. It's quite possible, she thinks, that ottomans for elevating one's feet were only invented after people had begun to choose their seasons. Only here, in this season where she will now be a visitor for the rest of her life.

The youngest of her three grandchildren, who was cross-eyed her entire childhood and had to go to school bald on her first day because of scabies, this most infelicitous youngest child who fell into the water when trying to jump the creek and came home with her clothes all green, this youngest daughter married the son of the mistress of the house and is now, a towel across one shoulder, clattering down the stone steps to the lake in her wooden sandals, humming under her breath and giving a quick wave before disappearing behind the large fir bush. Sometimes she sits down beside her grandmother and chats for a little while painting her toenails red. When her, the grandmother's teeth come unglued during a meal, she feels more ashamed before her granddaughter than the lady of the house. Back where she learned about growing old from the old people, there were no false teeth. When you got old, your mouth collapsed. But nowadays in the place where she is now a visitor, even faces are made ready for winter.

Jenny Erpenbeck: Heimsuchung

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