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Reinhard Kaiser-Mühlecker
Expropriation

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After years on the road, a journalist returns to the place where grew up, but was never at home. He writes for the ailing local rag, begins an affair and works for a pig farmer whose land was repossessed. Ines, Flor and Hemma, his girlfriend, the farmer and his wife, draw him into the conflicts of a life which is being taken from them.

An existential, stirring novel about how a world in crisis alters our feelings and relationships. Reinhard describes a time of deep uncertainty – the time we are living in now.

Reinhard Kaiser-Mühlecker, was born 1982 in the Krems Valley, Austria, and lives in Vienna. He has won many awards for his six novels and short-story collection. *Fremde Seele, dunkle Wald* (2016) was on the German Book Prize shortlist. Siegfried Lenz said of his work, 'It is wonderful, the way you write,' and Peter Handke, 'After Stifter and Hamsun, you're next.'

'I see it as a kind of duty to make the world as I see it tangible to people who don't know it.'
Reinhard Kaiser-Mühlecker

Translated by Steph Morris

It was summer, and for weeks a heatwave such as I'd never experienced had weighed on the land. Only at night came the occasional breeze. Then I would sit with my shirt unbuttoned on the top step to the garden, drink a beer and breathe a sigh in the cooler air.

I only went in to the newspaper's office if it was unavoidable. It was even more oppressive in town, and Parker had been getting on my nerves for some time. He was constantly trying to justify having to work with the right-wing populists; at the recent elections their candidate had become mayor of the 50,000-person town. I got the impression he was trying to justify himself above all to me, rather than my colleagues, and yet I had told him many times he didn't need to; I really didn't care what he did.

'I don't like them,' I said, 'and I never will. But you're the editor, you can do as you wish.'

'You don't understand,' he said.

'Could we perhaps discuss something else?'

'Such as?'

Good question. Nothing had happened that summer. As often as I could, I drove to the airfield north of the city, started up a plane, flew south to the lakes, swung round over the mountains then flew up to the wooded, northern border region. Sometimes I sensed I might get bored of flying, which worried me. What was left? Aside from reading, talking on the phone and Facebook to my friends and acquaintances strewn over the world – colleagues at the newspapers and magazines I had worked at – and my old Ford Mustang, I guess, I had nothing else to while away my time. Then I realised my occasional worry was groundless – that I would lose my buoyancy, which stopped anything really getting to me. No, I concluded, it's just a kind of melancholy unleashed by this enervating heat, which really is bearing down on everything. Nothing more. It will pass as soon as the heat eases.

I didn't go into the office every time I was in town. Sometimes I would just sit in a bar in the old quarter, drink a coffee and make eyes at

the barmaid, a black haired Albanian who always wore figure-hugging clothes, and ask her if she'd changed her mind, to which she would laugh and show me her hand with a slender gold ring holding a transparent stone.

'You still haven't left him?' I would ask each time.

But even this little exchange failed to cheer me up much. I was already thinking of going away for a few days, anywhere it was less hot – I was thinking of heading to the Baltic or even to Scandinavia, having read about southern Sweden in a supplement – when I met Ines.

I'd seen her a couple of times and discovered she was a teacher who'd moved here from the city not so long ago, but I couldn't have said more. And perhaps it was due to my curious mood that I spoke to her, or my need to find anything, any experience at all, to make this ghastly summer pass more quickly. Why else did I talk to her? She was pale and blonde whereas I preferred the darker ones. Moreover, I would never normally have dreamed of starting something with someone from the village.

She was pushing her trolley across the carpark straight towards me. At first it looked as if the man walking behind her, in a suit despite the heat, belonged to her. But all at once he stopped and turned back. It was the man at the council responsible for buildings, who I'd once dealt with, years ago, and sometimes saw at the airfield. His hairdo was unmistakable, resting like a helmet. It was the supermarket's opening weekend. A chicken grill was set up in front – half a grilled chicken and a beer for 5.50 – and next to the entrance droned the compressor pumping air into a red and yellow bouncy castle, placed by the delivery gates. A few kids were leaping around in it. Her car was parked next to mine; the right wheels over the white dividing line. I hadn't seen her in the supermarket, hadn't noticed much at all except that it was busy, especially in the meat and drinks sections; I stocked up on beer myself. There was no reason I needed to talk to her, not even a greeting. Here people did still do that; they even said hello to outsiders, but having lived mainly in big cities for the past few years, I'd got out of this habit.

‘Is that on offer too?’ I asked, pointing to the contents of her trolley.

‘What?’ she said.

‘The gin,’ I said. ‘Is that on offer too? There’s thirty percent off beer.’

She frowned and packed the six or seven yellow-labelled bottles and a pack of tonic into her boot.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ she said.

She shut the boot, which needed two goes, took her trolley back and threw me a brief, non-committal smile then got into her car. I was still leaning against my Mustang, a 1974 model I’d bought in the states and later shipped back. I was very proud of it and missed it as if it were my dog when it was in the workshop, increasingly the case.

It was coming up for six pm and people were still arriving although the supermarket would soon close. The chicken man had started cleaning his surfaces. A couple of chickens were left turning on the spit and seemed to be getting smaller with each turn, although any fat had ceased to drip from them. I considered driving to the river and diving in – the one thing which made the heat bearable for a while. Because our cars were parked so close I was waiting till the teacher had driven off. I checked my phone: no calls, no messages. I put it back. Everyone was on holiday... I knew I would drive back into town later for a drink with the Albanian girl before I called Christina. The thought of her voice made me weary; it would say, yes I’m home... or, yes I’m still awake... This weariness was new too, and again I thought, when will this heat be over?

Someone, walking on the carpark, was calling to me, calling my name, and I caught a hand raised in greeting out of the corner of my eye and said, ‘hello’ without looking up, raising my hand too.

‘Can I borrow your phone?’

I hadn’t noticed she had got back out of her car.

‘Sure,’ I said, took it out, unlocked it and handed it to her. ‘Do you need something?’

‘A mechanic,’ she said, and gave me a look.

‘What’s the problem? Won’t it start?’

She took the phone from her ear and gave it back.

‘No,’ she said.

‘Let me try.’

‘It’s never happened before.’

‘I’ll have a go.’

‘Can I borrow the phone again?’

While she tried the number again, I got into her car and tried the ignition, but nothing happened. I got out again.

‘Annoying I don’t have my jump leads with me,’ I said. ‘I normally keep them in the car.’

‘I have to get home,’ I said.

At that moment there was no-one on the carpark. A young woman emerged from the supermarket followed by another, with a baby in a sling; both were pushing packed trolleys and all at once two black men appeared, took the trolleys off the women, laughing and joking, to help push them and unpack them into the car in the hope of keeping the coins locked inside afterwards. After a second of shock, however, the women grabbed their trolleys back and pushed them straight to their cars, while the two men shouted something out to them, laughed again, and returned to their rucksacks in the shade by the entrance – had they been there all along?

‘But someone is bound to have leads,’ I said, thinking of the man from the council. ‘I’ll go and ask.’

A few minutes later I was standing back beside her shrugging my shoulders. ‘Seems like no-one has any. But I can take you home if you want.’

I glanced once more at the entrance and wondered where the man from the council had gone. He hadn’t appeared again.

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P.49

The heavy rainfall early December had lifted a lot of soil and washed elsewhere. The country roads were coated with a light-brown film of a reddish sheen. On the tenth the frost set in. As every object and every plant was drenched with water, the frost not only made everything stiff, it made it strangely heavy, as if bound to the earth for ever. The stones on the pebbly track leading to Flor's farm failed to fly up and hit the undercarriage as I drove over; just a hard, ungiving crunch, ending immediately it started. The trees lining the track were now entirely bare. Mistletoe hung like colourless, forgotten lampions. The winter furrows had been ploughed and the corn had sprouted; the blackish-green shoots stuck out of the earth like thorns.

I stopped, got out and looked around. It was late afternoon, twilight already, in as far as if was possible to distinguish, given that the days had become little more than continuous twilight interrupted by night. A few hooded crows were standing among some newly planted cherry trees, trunks coated to the first forks with white paint, poking through the manure ringed around them. The barns lay silent and dark, and the house was also unlit. I shoved my hands in my pockets. I was wearing old jeans, an old jumper of my uncle's, a padded gilet and sturdy shoes. I walked to the front door and pulled at the ring attached to a wire cable, which I'd failed to notice on my first visit. It jolted, a brief delay, and a shrill, clipped bell sounded. I had to pull it again before the door, badly weathered yet hardly old, opened and Flor's wife stood in front of me. I hadn't seen her face last time, and even now there were indentations from the dust-mask across it. Her eyes were narrow, but not small; her nose was also narrow, with tiny wrinkles running alongside it. Only her mouth seemed a touch too large, although the curve of her lips was so perfect my gaze kept returning to it. It was an astoundingly pretty face, tough yet gentle, and didn't fit the rest: she was wearing simple work-clothes, filthy and stinking, with an equally filthy apron on top, a back-to-front baseball cap on her head.

‘Good afternoon,’ I said.

She didn’t return my greeting. Instead, turning round, she called over her shoulder to her husband then made herself scarce, vanishing into the darkness she had emerged from. I thought she was older than me, not much, perhaps a couple of years. But then I decided she might just look older and it was even possible we’d been at school together for four years, of which neither of us remembered much. If I’d known her name I could have looked for her in the school photo.

‘Do you need something?’

He behaved as if we’d never met before. Fine. I hadn’t really wanted him to recognise me and had grown a moustache and come in the Seat not the Mustang, which was in the garage as every winter. And I thought it must be true that farmers are highly observant, and have to be, but not when it comes to people. Or did he feel no need to show that he remembered me, or that my face looked familiar at least? I asked him how long he’d been running the business. He frowned, but answered the question: ‘A long time.’ Then I said I was looking for a farm where I could do something along the lines of work experience. With pigs – they had pigs, didn’t they? That’s what I’d heard anyway. I was particularly interested in pigs. I said I’d looked around the area and decided to ask here first, mainly because of the building work, the barn under construction, which they could undoubtedly use help with, couldn’t they? I knew there’d be less to do in winter, possibly nothing on the building site, but when it came to learning the ropes – and I needed to learn, I had a lot to learn about the business of farming – I imagined winter would be the ideal time. I said I’d like to stay six months.

‘What did you train as?’

‘I studied German and English literature,’ I said.

His gaze fell on my jacket, which I hadn’t worn terribly often, and the label: ‘Aspen, CO.’

‘I don’t need anyone else getting in my way,’ he said. He shifted his weight and leant one hand on the door. He looked like he wanted to close it.

‘We could at least give it a try.’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘I don’t see any point. We’re managing as we are.’

For a few seconds I didn’t know what to say.

‘Fine,’ I said, ‘I’ll try elsewhere. Maybe your neighbours won’t be so dumb.’

Shaking my head, I turned and walked off. Part of me was annoyed, another – greater – was relieved. I hadn’t been entirely serious.

‘Wait,’ Flor said. I was almost at my car. I stopped and looked back. ‘What’s your name?’

He really didn’t know who I was.

‘Walter,’ I said. I’d come up with the name on the way there.

‘Perhaps we could try it.’

Could I go back? I hadn’t really been serious. And yet I just had to look at him, standing there in his dirt-stiffened clothes with an expressionless face, to think at the same time about Ines, to know in an instant that I couldn’t go back, didn’t even want to. It would have been too cheap, too simple, too crass and above all too harmless if I’d then said, it was a joke; I was really here to ask something else, namely: does she even know? Your wife, does she know? So I got into my car and kept it all to myself.