

Jarka Kubsova

Marshlands

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Two women separated by centuries, connected by their desire for self-determination.

It is the year 1580. Abelke Bleken lives in the marshlands of Hamburg, where she single-handedly runs a farm, defying seasons and tides, while trying to assert herself against her neighbours in a time that is perilous for independent women.

Almost five hundred years later, Britta Stoeber moves to the marshlands with her husband and children. She has given up her job as a geographer for the family, and her new home is still unfamiliar to her. She takes long walks through the barren landscape, observes nature and learns to read the traces of the past in mudflats and dike lines. In the process, Britta finds out about Abelke's life, with its exclusions and injustices that are alarmingly still relevant. Fascinated, she delves deeper and deeper and realises how much she learns about herself from the other woman's life.

Jarka Kubsova was born in 1977 in the Czech Republic and moved to Germany in 1987. She worked as a journalist for "Financial Times Deutschland", "Stern" and "DIE ZEIT" and as co-author of several successful non-fiction books. Her debut novel "Bergland" (2021) was on the annual bestseller list. For "Marshlands", she dived deep into the history of the city of Hamburg and the nature reserves around it, and researched in archives about Abelke Bleken and her time.



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SYNOPSIS

Britta Stoever, together with her husband and two children, moves from Hamburg to the Vier- and Marshlands, an area of the Elbe region characterised by dykes, orchards, sprawling old farms, storms, and floods. She gave up her work as a geologist long ago in order to take care of the children, but now she nevertheless feels oddly lost in the big new house and finds herself a stranger in the new neighbourhood. She can't even quite bring herself to unpack the moving boxes properly.

Autumn sets in and Britta takes to going for long walks across the misty fields and meadows. She watches the cranes and often has the sense that she herself is being watched from the houses beyond the dyke. She is a stranger here, after all. One day, she comes across a street called 'Abekelke-Bleken-Ring', so named for a woman burned at the stake for witchcraft in Hamburg in 1580. The case of Abelke Bleken presents the only documented case of a woman accused and tried of witchcraft in Hamburg of which the record has survived in its entirety. Britta discovers the story of Abelke's fate, and soon finds her own life beginning to intertwine itself with that of the other woman.

Britta starts to research Abelke's story, first on her own, then with the help of a historian whom she befriends, and discovers just what an extraordinary woman Abelke was. Her story and Britta's are told alternately.

Abelke Bleken, sole heir to her parents, runs a large farm on her own and refuses any and all offers of marriage. Crucially, she is very resourceful and knows a great deal about flora and fauna – something that will ultimately play a role in sealing her fate: just as the All Saints Flood of 1570 (an unusually heavy flood caused by a storm surge) is about to descend on the area, Abelke senses that something isn't quite right. Following a night of storms, the sky clears, and all the neighbouring farmers put their livestock back out to pasture – only Abelke seems to remember that a night like that is often only a taste of what is yet to come. She tries in vain to warn the others before seeking safety in the shelter of her house, along with her livestock and serfs.

The flood proves disastrous. Countless people left dead, crops destroyed, livestock drowned – cows, goats, sheep, chickens, and all. Abelke's neighbours, already mistrustful of an independent woman farming, find it highly suspicious that she alone emerged 'unscathed' from the events of the flood. But for all that, her property was severely damaged by the flood as well: the dyke stretching across her and her neighbour's land was breached by the flood. In accordance with contemporary agricultural laws, 'if you cannot fix it, ditch it'. In other words, if she can't fix her part of the dyke, her land will be forfeit. It is a logical law, because without effective dykes, the whole area is at risk. Ordinarily in such cases, workers and farm hands are allocated to the concerned party to help them in repairing the dyke. Abelke is to receive no such help. Desperate, she attempts to rebuild the dyke herself, but it is hopeless. Some of her efforts are even destroyed overnight. She toils day and night to repair the dyke, which leaves her no time to attend church, where rumours about her are already cropping up and being carefully and industriously circulated. And so it comes to pass that Abelke finds herself expropriated. Her house goes to a wealthy Hamburg city council member, who likewise receives her neighbour's land and joins them together – a practice that,

as described by Karl Marx, was common then (the time of transition from feudalism to early capitalism). Such practices were the catalyst in sparking many peasant revolts and countless other conflicts at the time. The emerging bourgeoisie were appropriating swathes of land by claiming religious justifications to widespread dispossessions through accusations of witchcraft.

Winter approaches as Britta delves deeper and deeper into Abelke Bleken's story. It becomes apparent that Britta's discomfort in the new house is not unfounded: her marriage to her husband, Philipp, has long been strained, and his constant insistence that she put everything else second to the family and children, his refusal to take her seriously in her role of housewife, the escalating conflicts over how to raise their children – all of it leads to arguments and eventually divorce. Britta realises just how little she can call her own, despite the fact that it is only on the back of her work in the home that her husband was even able to go out and work.

Meanwhile, her 13-year-old daughter is being bullied in school. She is socially excluded and condemned for posting revealing pictures on Instagram. Britta is torn – she's glad and proud that her daughter is unashamed of her body, but of course wants to protect her at the same time. She teams up with one of the girl's teachers, but also starts forming connections with people in her neighbourhood. While out on a walk, she discovers an old cottage in which someone has been keeping crows captive, many of which have already died gruesome deaths. Britta seeks out help and finds a friendly ear among her neighbours for the first time.

Britta re-applies for a position at university and finds a new apartment near the house, so that the children can spend alternating weeks with her and Philipp. It

is not a particularly nice apartment, but located as it is in one of the housing developments built after the Second World War, it has already served as (sometimes temporary) shelter for many lost people over the years, a thought which appeals to Britta. As she goes about setting up her new apartment, she also begins to contemplate her new life, so different from her old one and much less planned out, a life with many wounds, but also with ever more hope for a future.

While this is happening, spring arrives. We return to Abelke's story to find out how her life continued. Following her expropriation, Abelke lives in a day-labourer's hut on another farmer's land, together with her old neighbour, now also dispossessed of her land, and a shepherd and his wife. They work hard, often have only little food, and possess no pot in which to cook anything, anyway. This drives Abelke to eventually approach the old house on the farmstead and demand her old cooking pot, a cauldron. Her demand is rejected and she is chased off. This is the moment in which the balance of her fate tips.

From this moment onwards, Abelke is often sighted on her old land, obsessed and distressed by the way the new owner is misusing the land. One night, drunk, sitting around the fire, she and her fellow lodgers in the day labourer's hut start jokingly cursing all those who have wronged them. But in this they are seen and overheard by the village folk, and when the new landowner's livestock dies (because he doesn't know how to care for the animals), two city council members are called from Hamburg. Their job: to try Abelke for witchcraft.

Thus begins a strictly regulated and legally defined procedure which is, in Abelke's case, perfectly documented and preserved. In a so-called 'Processus Extraordinarius', eyewitness testimony (including that of the most dubious and biased nature) is counted as evidence, and so even those who might be unwilling

to testify find themselves under pressure to do so. Abelke finds herself rapidly and inextricably implicated by the accusations and is taken to Hamburg for judgement to be passed upon her. There, she is tortured into providing a false confession.

We receive no description of the torture itself, but she is unable to walk to the pyre or even to stand, come the day of her execution, and has to be bound in place. The number of witch trials escalates in the wake of her execution, as was always the case in witch-hunts, suspicions and accusations serving their purpose in turning neighbour against neighbour. The fear, distrust, and general paranoia eroded solidarity among peasants – and among women – who, instead of banding together or even rising up in rebellion, increasingly accused each other.

Following the scene of Abelke's execution, we rejoin Britta at an Easter bonfire celebration. Naturally, we see how there are traces of the past apparent in present events and life, like in the way in which Britta, as a geologist, engages with the landscape to read in it traces of past floods, famines and droughts – but there is more to it than that. Britta is now in a very different situation to the one we first encountered her in. She is stepping out onto the path towards self-determination, can perhaps even imagine finding love again.

Most importantly, she has formed friendships and found allies – like, for example, the historian who helped her research Abelke's story, and with whom she wants to work to spread Abelke's story more widely. The story comes to a close with Britta standing in a small one-family home development and watches a young mother through the kitchen window. She knows exactly what it feels like to be in that situation: "Britta could read the young woman's life as if it were a book. She knew it well. It was a very old story."

SAMPLE

It was taking longer than usual to build the pyre. The men had been working at it for two whole days. It was supposed to be erected just south of the city gates, on a grassy island bisecting the Elbe. Those were the marshlands where lay the witch's village.

The bailiff huffed and cursed, because the wooden beam that was to constitute the central stake of the pyre would not find purchase and hold in the damp, loamy soil. He directed the workmen to dig deeper into the ground and hammer the supports in with more force to get the stake to stand halfway straight. Obtaining the necessary eight fathoms of wood also proved difficult. They had to haul them in from far away, as lumber was scarce in this area, most trees having long since been felled down to their roots to be used as firewood. The past few winters had been long ones, and some years it seemed like spring never came. It was March, now, still frosty, but there seemed a slow awakening of spring in the air. This atmosphere, despite the circumstances, seemed to spark a kind of reflexive good cheer in the men as they went about their work, whistling quietly to themselves – unintentional, spontaneously invented melodies. Once they had gathered a sufficient number of logs as thick around as arms, they hacked off their branches and set them aside. They hauled in bushels of dry brushwood and demanded straw from the local farmers, who proved reluctant to part with it even after hearing what it was to be used for. Straw, too, was scarce.

In the early hours of the morning of the execution, the bailiff and his workmen arrived to ready the pyre. A heavy fog rolled in over the grassy meadows

and tributaries of the Elbe and drifted up towards the sky, where it met the smoke rising from the thatched roofs of farmhouses and small cottages nestling behind the dykes in search of a safety that was often illusory. The floods would surge over this land as they pleased. The men rubbed at their eyes, but the scene remained hazy. Now and again, the call of a cuckoo echoed across the empty fields. That's the devil announcing himself, some folk had taken to saying, of late. Others ridiculed them: *they're seeing the devil in a cuckoo, now, they would mock, but only ever secretly, in private.* To deny a sign of the devil was suspicious, since convincing people that he never existed is, of course, the devil's greatest trick.

Candles and lit slivers of fatwood flickered to life on the windowsills and niches of the farmhouses and cottages, a porridge of rough groats for breaking fast bubbled away in the pots over the hearth, and the first people and animals were beginning to step out of doors. Milkmaids hauled their buckets, farmhands drew water from the wells, and farmers and their serfs bent over their crops and fields. They, too, felt something of the early spring in their bones, felt it, too, in the cold earth, a long, slow exhale. They gazed out at their plots of land, planned where to plant the cabbages this year and where to grow the beans. On a meadow not far from their homes grew a funeral pyre. They did not cast their eyes that way.

The bailiff and his workmen now had to pile the logs in a horseshoe shape around the central stake, alternating their direction crossways to create a grid pattern. They filled the gaps with twigs and branches, brushwood and straw. They would fill in the open end of the horseshoe with more logs once the witch was bound to the central stake. She would be surrounded on all sides by piles of wood up to her waist. But the worker responsible had built the platform too low to the ground, and the old man now made him redo it, berating him all the while: "The people will want to see her," he admonished. The sinful among them must be

punished for all to see, and it must be done so that the rest be fearful. People turned up their nose at his profession, would trust a bailiff with little more than dogsbody work, but he knew what was written on the picture panel depicting Hamburg municipal law, and that was more than most people knew. Screwing up his eyes, he considered the sky, the dark clouds gathering there. If it really looked like it would rain later, he would have to procure pitch and coat the wood to ensure it would burn even in the rain. "It would be good, for her, I guess," said the boy. "If the wood is damp it'll smoke more and she'll suffocate pretty quickly." But the rain never fell and the wood remained dry.

In the course of the morning, a milky sun broke through the layer of clouds and the meadow began to fill with people. Children with thin hair and pale skin were the first to come, slinking around after the man tasked with keeping an eye on the bellows and the torches soaked in pitch. Now and again, he would stomp his foot at them, and they would run off, shrieking. Soon, the first adults arrived and gathered, standing in groups. Most were local, though some had journeyed from further afield. Some appeared relaxed and untroubled, feeling that victory was near, and confident in the belief that their community would soon be cleansed of the witch, the devil's plan would be thwarted and evil defeated. Others might have had doubts about whether this was really the right way to go about things, but they said nothing.

Soon heads began swivelling, necks craning restlessly while the crowd stepped from one foot to the other, thick clumps of tough, dark, blue-tinged soil clinging to their shoes and their footprints filling with water. A biting wind gusted over the fields, tousling hair and causing dresses to billow out. Eventually the cold began to creep into their bones. This all was familiar to them – they knew and accepted that the wind could not be stopped here. Finally, horses could be seen approaching the edge of the common, pulling the tumbrel behind them.

A sudden silence descended; even the wind quieted. All eyes were fixed on the horses and cart drawing slowly nearer. Finally, they were able to see. One man clapped his hands over his eyes, then another, a cry went up from the crowd, a horrified groan, the first lone prayer rang out, every person gripped by the same sense of horror when they saw with their own eyes what was coming towards them on the back of the cart.

BEFORE THE STORM

There was a figure (or perhaps it was several? Britta couldn't be sure) moving about on the common behind the houses. It was an early morning in late October and the landscape was only just emerging from the darkness, the fog rolling back to reveal wide swathes of flat, marshy meadow and isolated copses of trees with branches already bare of leaves, poplars dotted here and there, looming like narrow pillars out of the flat earth. Mist rose from the fields and the branching streams of the river, as it had almost every morning since the start of autumn, as if to remind one that these were the Elbe lowlands. Britta stood, alone, at the edge of the road. She had watched as her children got on the school bus and had waved them off as it drove away, still waving until it was out of sight, even though she knew that neither of them would turn around to see her. They had moved to Ochsenwerder over three months ago, and Masha and Ben still took every opportunity to make it clear that this was the end of the world for them. "We'll get used to it all soon," Britta promised them constantly. The last time she had said this, Masha had rolled her eyes, clearly annoyed. "Sure, Mum. Do you even believe that yourself?" she had said and stomped away, hair billowing out behind her. Britta had hardly known what to be more offended by: the tone her

thirteen-year-old daughter was taking with her more and more often these days, or the fact that Masha had seen right through her.

Only Phillip seemed to be truly blossoming here. On weekends, sometimes even on weekdays if he came home early from work, he would slip into his workman's trousers with the toolbelt, mow the lawn, scrub the flagstones, or clean out the roof gutter. Sometimes he would pause for a moment as he went about his work, hands resting on his hips as he surveyed the house and garden. He looked so pleased in those moments, more satisfied than she had seen him for a long time.

The bus glided into the fog, only the tail lights remaining visible, glowing like two red pinpricks. And then, in place of the lights, at the same height at which they disappeared from view, Britta noticed movement on the meadow. Dark shadows, stalking, low to the ground, still cloaked deep in the milky mist. She hesitated briefly, then pulled her coat more tightly about herself and followed the street that led out of the housing development. She wanted to know what was out there. The street itself was actually the crown of a dyke, paved over at the top, as were almost all streets and paths here; situated atop the dykes, they gave the impression of railway embankments, so that one often felt one was looking out at the houses and landscape as if from a moving train. Some of the houses appeared to be peering over the horizon of the dyke, the ridge of a roof and two windows like a brow and two eyes, as if they wanted to see what was beyond it or who went there.

A woman in her mid-forties, medium length, dark hair – straight, really, but always curling nowadays in the humid air – shivering with cold, face tense. That's what they're seeing now, thought Britta. Wandering around with no clear purpose

was enough to call attention to oneself around here. Most people drove their cars everywhere or, in rare cases, rode a bike. People walked around on foot only if they were walking a dog. She was glad when she left the last houses behind and the feeling of being watched finally fell away. To her left and right lay only fields, now, most of them freshly tilled, their dark innards turned out and roughed up like a scraped knee. The closer she drew to the field with the figures, the clearer they became, large and grey, pressed tightly together. The thin haze of mist cleared, the picture grew sharper. Cranes. Dozens of them, moving in slow, deliberate steps across the ground like a gathering of ghostly spirits, moving in absolute silence, not a call or cry to be heard. She had seen a few isolated ones already, lurking on the marshy fields or the banks of the Elbe, standing motionless as statues. But there were so many here now, a whole flock of birds. She realised it must be a flock stopping here on their migration south. She kept her distance, stopping some way away and barely daring to breathe. One of the birds looked directly at her for a single instant, its gaze severe, the deep yellow eyes almost menacing. Then it threw back its head, neck extending and, puffing its body up, let out a long, throaty call – a scream, it sounded like –, so loud that she flinched. The other birds took up the call at once, the same sound reverberating from throat to throat, then, with a great jolt, one bird took off, then another, until all the birds had taken to the sky. The echoes of their calls and the beating of their wings remained briefly suspended in the air, until the last sound died away and all of a sudden the stillness returned with such intensity that she found herself wondering whether it had all been a dream. She stood there, aimless, lost, and because she didn't know what else to do, she walked on, ever deeper into the wilderness. Thinking back on it later, it seemed to her as if something had been drawing her onwards.

It was now more than three months that they had been living here, and they still hadn't explored Ochsenwerder or the area around it properly. It was

impossible to tear Philipp away from the house on the weekends, and she certainly couldn't persuade the kids to go for a walk, especially since the weather had turned cooler, now that the wind howled and whistled into one's ears from every direction or hurled rain into one's face.

How different it had all looked the first time they had come to view the area. It had been summer, the countryside resplendent and verdant. "Welcome to the 'Vier- and Marshlands', the Hamburg's vegetable garden," the real-estate agent had said without a single spark of enthusiasm. She had rattled it off like an inventory or details of the energy certificate. There was no need to play anything up or exaggerate a property's best features to prospective buyers: people would take whatever was on the market, regardless of price or condition. Philipp, alone, had remained steadfastly unimpressed and exacting. Except when it came to this house. "We'll take it!" he had exclaimed before they had even gone upstairs to the second floor.

Perplexed, Britta had put a hand on his arm. "Can't we maybe talk about this, first?" But he was already hurrying onwards. "This is it, Britta! This is the one!" His voice echoed through the empty rooms. She hadn't seen him this enthusiastic about anything for a long time. And suddenly she realised that maybe this here *was* the end goal. The search had dragged on for so long already that it had become a kind of ritual: scouring the ads, arranging viewings, checking details, being rejected or deciding not to take it. And then starting all over again, chasing the dream of a house with a garden with a swing for the kids; the dream of something that was all their own. And it would be here, she realised, suddenly, it would happen in this house. But instead of joy, she felt the weight of a heavy stone on her chest.

"A walk-in shower, flawless tiling!" Philipp had apparently discovered the bathroom. "It's perfect, Britta! Come on, you have to see this!" She followed the sound of his voice, contemplating the bare white walls, the open floor plan. It seemed to her much too big, too cold, too empty. Well, true, it was, right now. But maybe once they had all their things here... They had wanted lots of space, a room for each of the children. There was even a spare guest room or study. Who didn't dream of such a thing? And the light! It filtered in through enormous window panes on all sides. She looked out at the garden. A mighty red beech tree stood there, its foliage full and dark. It could certainly take a swing. Though the kids were too old for that kind of thing, really. She paused, looking at the tree. There was something strange about it. It was the trunk. The tree appeared to be composed of multiple individual trunks coming up together out of the ground.

"It's coppiced." She whirled around. It was the real estate agent. Britta looked at her, bemused. "It's an old method of harvesting firewood. Wood was always scarce around these parts. You fell the main shoot and new ones grow up out of it until those, too, are felled and so on. Old tree formations like this are rare on newer properties." Britta nodded, impressed, while the real estate agent continued to watch her with an unmoved expression. Their bid on the house probably wouldn't be accepted anyway, this woman seemed to have no special interest in or liking for them, and the next people waiting to view the property were already outside.

"If you'd like to still see the Elbe while you're here just follow your nose. It's only a stone's throw away," the real estate agent had said at the end of their viewing, pointing to the left of the house. But Philipp still had more questions, a seemingly unending flow of them. Once he had managed to tear himself away, they walked a little way to have a look around. Britta cast her gaze about and, whether she willed it or not, her scepticism began to dissolve. Long rows of

vegetables, herbs, and flowers stretched out on the fields behind the houses – primroses, daisies, and impatiens walleriana. Reflected sunlight flashed on the roofs of countless greenhouses. And then, beyond those, the river. The water glowed a deep, luminous blue, and shrieking children splashed about on the shore. The riverbanks were fringed with tall reeds, lapwings and moorhens squawking among them. She and Philipp both were stunned; they couldn't believe that all this could be found only half an hour's drive from the centre of Hamburg. She might not be as sure about the house as Philipp was, but she had sensed *something*, a connection to the place. It was beautiful, sure, but it wasn't just that, there was something else to it.

And now it all seemed to be shrinking, a waning world. She had the unpleasant sensation of having been duped by nature's sleight of hand – nature, who now presented the truth of this place with a grin: dark, empty fields, almost every living creature hidden away somewhere, birds all flown South, reeds and rushes all dried up, sallow-looking, deathly still, and silent. The trees still held on to their last few shivering leaves, but soon the wind would tear loose these, too, and everything would be left stripped bare to the bone. She was strangely afraid of this, as if it might reveal something which she didn't want to see. Still, she walked on, turned onto a path she didn't know yet. A few scattered houses lay to the right and left of the dyke, gardens left to wither. A faded sign advertised Schnitzel day at the Vogt lodge, but the place looked long abandoned. She passed a number of yellow warning signs, the words 'private property' or 'no public right of way' looming on them. There was a sign on almost every driveway, every dirt track, path and trail across the meadows and fields. Unlike the landscape, the people here seemed to be hiding something.

A car sped around a corner. She hadn't even heard it coming. The driver noticed her and swerved at the very last moment, only narrowly avoiding scraping

along the facade of one house. It wouldn't have taken much, most houses were built directly behind the asphalt on the dyke, some even on top of it, as if they had grown out of it. 'Linear villages', they were called, these settlements, because they stretched out in a line along the length of the dykes. Most of them didn't have a centre or midpoint. Farmhouses stood side-by-side with development projects and old cottages, some of them renovated and remodelled beyond all recognition. The houses seemed to gather together in places, and then there would often be long stretches of nothing. Newly joining the ranks were a few houses of the kind that she and Philipp now owned: square structures, smoothly plastered walls, generous French windows onto the garden, with multiple staggered levels, flat roofs. They protruded from the landscape like an alien body part, particularly in contrast to the old farmhouses dotted here and there, some of which had weathered the centuries largely unscathed. Most of them were long, sprawling plots, ornamented brick facades under thatched roofs that swept down low, grey and organic, taking their place in the landscape as if they were something that had always grown here. 'Hufner houses', she had read they were called, because the land here had been carved up like a cake once, and the resulting individual parcels of land were called 'Hufen'. She always slowed a little, walking past these houses, trying to look at them without staring. Really, she would have liked to stop, would have liked to lay her hands on the scarred, pale red bricks of the house, would have asked it questions: What do you know? How much have you seen? Who have you protected? And from what?

[...]

ALL SAINTS DAY

Abelke Bleken climbed up the floodbank, the better to see the sky – a sky the look of which she didn't like at all. Early this morning the northwest wind had ushered in dark, heavy clouds, but everything was eerily still and silent now, the clouds stood still in their place, no longer moving, the whole of the sky dark and only the distant horizon lit up with a glaring, lurid light, a yellow-green glow. The river lay still in the ditch, unmoving, water the colour of mud, as it had almost always been in October these last few years. Abelke stood there and gazed out at the sky and over the countryside with the farm at her back.

It was a Hufner house, a large, sprawling homestead, two carved horse's heads perched atop the roof ridge where it met the gable at either end, facing each other. The thatched roof was faultless, the pale red brick facade resting on strong beams of oak, so light and straight that they acted as additional ornamentation. Magnificent geese and chickens picked their way across the courtyard, fields spooling out to the south in tidy tracks. The entrance to the house was through a prettily painted door, into a muddy entrance as wide and tall as a hall. To the left lay the living area, to the right the stables, where the cattle and horses stood in their stalls, all of them well-groomed and healthy. In the middle of the hall was the *Flett*, the open hearth and cooking area. Sausages and a few sides of bacon hung in the flue above the hearth, the smell of fresh straw wafted down from the Hille, the hayloft, and the scent of dried fruits and apples drifted out from the pantry. Wherever one looked, all was clean and orderly, everything in its right place. This farmstead was one of the most splendid in the area. Much too big for one woman all on her own, the people liked to gossip. And they especially liked to gossip about Abelke. *Well, I suppose she's managing to run the farm alright,*

some would say, looking at the straight horizon of her fields, not a single mole hill in sight. *Who knows who might be helping her in secret*, others would say. *She's pretty enough*, many said, *but far too stuck up*. Because nobody around here lived the way Abelke lived – a woman farming all on her own, and doing so successfully. A woman who had fallen in love with a foreign man and jilted everyone else. Abelke's land stretched out behind the house all the way to the ditch that separated her property from her neighbours'; now, just before winter, the fields lay bare, crops all harvested. Directly to the left lay the land of her neighbour, Henneke Schwormstedt. He, seeing her standing atop the dyke, joined her and looked up at the sky, too. "I think the worst is behind us." The storms had been raging for days, and the water lay high in every ditch and watercourse. There were rumours that dykes had broken in Billwarder and Neuengamme. The wind had calmed today for the first time in days, and everywhere was felt the relief of having avoided a greater catastrophe. Abelke, alone, felt none of this relief. 'I think the worst is yet to come,' she said, giving her neighbour a serious look – something she was good at, her big eyes dark and her gaze sharp, watchful. He looked about in all directions, scratched his beard placidly until flakes of skin peeled off from a scab and fell. He, too, ran his farm all by himself. His wife had died years ago and he didn't take care of himself properly anymore. "Ain't a breath of a breeze in the air," he finally concluded and began making his way back to his house.

"There's more coming. Something worse than what's been yet," Abelke stated firmly and began making her own way down the dyke. "Trust me, you'd do better to secure your things."

But Henneke just laughed and waved her away. The farmers had put their livestock back out to pasture and gone back about their work when the wind abated. Abelke was doing the opposite. Henneke only laughed all the harder when he saw Abelke's maids herding the chickens and geese back into the granary loft,

raising the rabbit cages back up, her farmhand dragging supplies up the ladder to the hayloft once again. They were all busily fastening ties holding down equipment which they had loosed only this morning, weighing things down with stones. The maids and the farmhand did not laugh, they simply did the extra work, though they remained unconvinced. Even the pigs were to be herded into the house, the only animals that had their pens outside. Nobody could stand living under one roof with pigs. The farmhand had some trouble in trying to round them up. A sow had escaped and he ran after it, tripped, and hit his knee badly. Now the beasts had to be driven up and over the narrow doorstep and they did not want to go, so he struck at them. He only dared do this because Abelke was not present, for she did not tolerate her livestock being mistreated. But she was on her way into the Spadenland to see Leneke and so would know nothing of it.

Abelke, at this moment, was running along between fields, past watery ditches, and the moment Reymers's farmstead came into view she called out, still at some distance: "Leneke! Leneke!", hoping that her friend would hear her shouts before her husband did. He would surely just say, "Leneke is busy just now." And there he was, coming towards her, Hein Reymers, one of the men who never looked her directly in the eyes, but rather always seemed to look past her, his gaze sliding off in a slant. "Leneke doesn't have time for you," he called out to her.

"Strange that you always do," Abelke returned. "Maybe Leneke never has time because she's busy doing your work?"

He clenched his fist and took a step towards her. *That's all they can ever think to do*, Abelke thought with a sigh.

"Alright, there there, Hein. Nobody toils more than you do," she said. "Just tie everything down well tonight, the storm isn't over. It could be big trouble."

"You're the only trouble I can see," was all Hein said, and he spit a glob of mucus onto the ground beside him. She paid him no heed, trying, instead, to peer past him in the hope of catching sight of Leneke somewhere on the farm. But it was in vain. "As you like," she replied. "But tell Leneke I came by. Get the children and your belongings up in the loft, I tell you!", she called to him once more before turning around and running back, passing by Dirick Kleater's farm on the way.

A new house was still under construction next to his rickety shed. Clearly he wanted everyone to see how much better off he was now that he had been promoted from Hufner to Vogt, a local governor. Weary of hard work but greedy for the rewards of labour; a boastful braggart who liked to drink and chase skirts, hers included. Everyone knew the sort of man he was, but they all laughed it off. They would tip their glasses of Kruuten, the cloudy, locally distilled herbal liquor, at each other; they kept together. People liked to be around someone who cracked jokes and bought everyone a round. First, they had made him dyke reeve, and then, last year, had elected him governor.

She considered whether she ought not to warn him, too, at least for the sake of his sickly wife, who couldn't help who she was married to. But a dyke reeve ought to be capable of reading the signs of a rough storm on the horizon. It should have been him coming to warn people, him and his people, not her! *The weeds will withstand the frost*, she finally thought, and moved onwards.

She ran on to see Castern Dührkopf, the old craftsman and day labourer, in his tiny cottage. Then to Willem Harder, the grim-faced Hufner whose land abjured hers to the south. Then on to Henner Knecht's wife, Mette Köppke, who lived in a cottage not far from the Schwormstedt farm. Then the fisherman, Hayn Boye, and his wife, Elsche. She went to the Burmesters and tried to talk some sense into Ilse, who paid her no mind at all. One of her children had fallen and was wailing

dreadfully. Ilse picked it up and rocked it soothingly. "Ilse," Abelke pleaded, "tie everything down and see that you get yourselves up to the loft in good time, the storm will return." "But the storm's passed," said Ilse, and rushed after the two other children, who had begun pulling each other's hair and were now both crying.

In the end, Abelke had been to warn everyone in the neighbourhood. But it was the evening before All Saints Day, the storm appeared passed, and people were preoccupied with other business: they laid out clothes for the church service, prepared dishes in celebration of the day, filled their oil lamps and fed their animals. Nobody would heed Abelke's warnings.

Come six o'clock, Abelke sat down to supper with her serfs, all of them sullen and mute. Above them, the animals clomped and scuffled about in the granary loft and soon the shit was dripping down between the floorboards, all while the air outside remained utterly calm. The farmhand sat rubbing his knee and grumbling to himself, exchanging covert, meaningful looks with the others – not so covertly that they would go unnoticed by Abelke, but subtly enough that she could not reprimand them.

And yet, no sooner had they clambered into their alcoves all laid out with straw for sleeping than the storm roared to life outside; it began from one moment to the next, as if some invisible hand had given the signal. Wind whipped around the house from all sides, tore at the roof, howled like a sick animal, and hurled branches about. Then came hail, thundering down on them as if it were raining boulders. The cattle bellowed in their barn and tore at their chains. The sheep and the goats brayed and cried in such a way as nobody had ever heard, nobody had ever known they *could*, screaming like lost children. Everyone was up now, having jumped out of their beds, and hastily pulled on clothes. They kneeled on the floor, hands clasped together in desperate prayer, distinct at first but soon

losing the verses for fear, until all Abelke could hear was a mingled cry of "God have mercy on us!" But it seemed He was not so inclined. The crack of thunder echoed suddenly outside and the whole house seemed to shake, the copper pots and pans rattling in the cupboards. "It's the end of days!" cried one maid. They were no longer praying, sitting instead with their hands covering their heads, eyes squeezed shut. "We're all done for!" another maid wailed.

Abelke, too, faint with worry, was pacing in the hall, listening to the creaking and groaning of the house, the howling wind, and the distant rushing noise drawing ever closer. Unable to stand it any longer, she grabbed the lantern and, knowing it was a mistake, she opened the door, which the wind instantly tried to rip from her grasp, and stepped outside. She made it only a short distance before the light in her lantern went out. But even so, she could still see what was scurrying across the land from the direction of the dyke, rushing towards her and scampering over her feet: a furry, teeming, pelted cloud of rats, moles, and mice. They were fleeing from the dyke, fleeing their warrens and nests.

Abelke fought her way forward, doubled over against the wind. Ragged clouds raced across the face of the moon, which hung enormous and full in the sky. That was how she knew it would be a spring tide coming. The water frothed and seethed in the riverbed, roiling as if it were being boiled in a pot, only it was cold as ice. It slapped up against the dyke in huge waves, like greedy tongues licking up its side, sucking at its ridge. As she watched, the first rupture appeared, water forcing its way through, first with some difficulty, then in a triumphant rush as the dyke broke in other places, collapsed in on itself, crumbled, and was swept along towards dry land as muddy earth.

Abelke ran back into the house, slammed the door shut, drew the heavy beam across it into place and collapsed against it, knowing there was no point.

She stood there a moment, wet clothes sticking to her body, hair hanging loose about her in dark strands, her whole body rattling with the cold. But the first wave was already washing in under the door, slamming against the windows, bursting in with force, with great strength and a blustering howl, putting out the fire and lifting the furniture and crates off the ground, pushing them about on waves. "Get yourselves up!" Abelke shouts, shooing the others upstairs to where the pigs are shrieking shrilly and the chickens flapping about wildly. The maids and farmhand are already clambering up the ladder when, with a mighty crack, the door flies off its hinges in pieces. The wind blasts through the room in a gust, blowing out the last oil lamp and drowning everything in cold darkness. Abelke wades forward through the icy water, hands outstretched and fumbling to feel her way, she calls out and hears a faint response. She finds the tomcat cowering in a niche, picks him up and carries him up the ladder. The others all press themselves against the wall, away from the cat, whom they hate even more than the pigs. He simply appeared on the farm one day, and nobody knew where he came from, large as he was with his fur of three mottled colours. He wouldn't let anyone near him except Abelke. Opening the door to bad luck when you let in a cat, the maid had griped. The only thing he'll bring in is dead mice, Abelke had scoffed. Now she climbs down the ladder once more, wades back into the cold water as if she doesn't feel its icy grip. This time she grabs hold of the great pot on the *Flett*, drags it upstairs. Once back in the granary loft she peers through the small hatch under the gabel where owls often slink in at night to hunt for mice. There are no windows on this level, only this gap left always open to them. And now, looking outside, she sees a picture wrought in grey and silver, flood and torrent, death and destruction. Beautiful and terrible at once. The squall has cleared the sky of all clouds, the moon gleams gloriously bright and proud, as if it pleases her to see that which she illuminates below, the silver waves rushing everywhere like streams of liquid metal. Henneke's chickens float past, some still flapping wildly about with

their wings until, eventually, their down is soaked through with water and they are dragged below the surface. She sees the bobbing heads of turnips and tubers in the waves – the entire first harvest, enough to last a winter. Cows and oxen are carried off, their legs sticking up into the air. A lone bull is left still standing, engulfed up to his neck, bellowing, eyes rolling. One of Henneke's farmhands is yanking at the rope leashing the bull, trying to get it untied, when behind him a tree is uprooted and falls on the man, killing him. A wooden beam, likely one that has only just come apart from a house, is now being battered against the wall of pale red bricks, again and again. Abelke is not sure if the wall will hold. She sees the Boyens, who have climbed up onto their roof and are clinging to each other. A cradle sails past, the screaming child still in it, then capsizes, and the crying falls silent. Only the tempest will not quieten. The moment it seems – the moment one dares to hope – that the storm might be abating, one realises that it was simply gathering its strength for a renewed squall, and it all begins again. Water surges, waves crash, the wind rages. Only with the new light of dawn calm gradually descends.

Abelke does not want to go outside to see it all, but she must. In the distance stand the remains of the Burmesters' house, only half of it left, as if the rest has been bitten off. Bodies lie scattered across the fields, pale and cold, hands clenching nothing but air, as if they had been holding tight to something that slipped from their hands. In the garden she can see an overturned trunk, a wardrobe, a shoe sticking out of the morass. All manner of debris is strewn and bobbing in the mud, the thatch that only yesterday adorned roofs is flapping about listlessly. Ilse Burmester is standing in front of her door, which is hanging crookedly off its hinges, screaming hysterically for her children. She takes off at a run, lifting planks of wood, looking under fallen fences. Others, too, are roaming about aimlessly, stumbling about, faces pale and eyes wide. Abelke stakes her

way through the wreckage, wades through the mud in the direction of the dyke. Then she sees something that makes her knees go weak. Between her land and the land belonging to the Schwormstedt farm there is a gaping pit, full to the brim with water and huge as a lake.

At the edge of the lake that was farmland yesterday, she sees the figure of Henneke, standing and staring into empty space. Abelke breathes a sigh of relief and makes to move towards him. But he turns swiftly away from her.