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Steffen Kopetzky

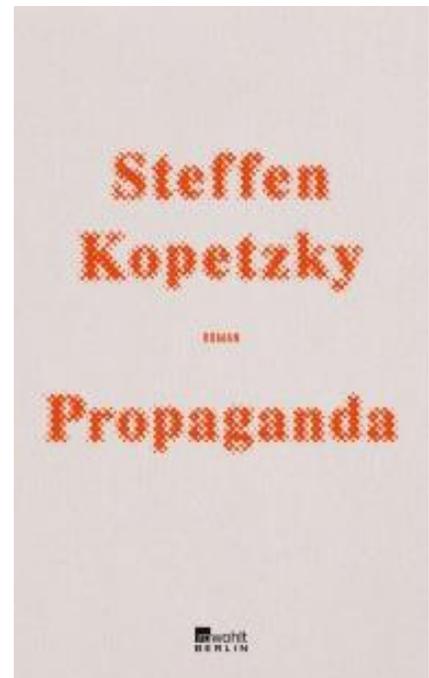
Propaganda

Rowohlt·Berlin

496 pages / August 2019

It's 1944 and John Glueck is at war, deep inside Germany in the gloomy Hürtgen Forest. It seems only a few days ago that he was a student in New York, full of love for the German culture of his ancestors. Then he was inducted into Sykewar, the US Army's propaganda unit. In France, he meets his idol Ernest Hemingway, on whose orders he goes to Hürtgen Forest, a seemingly unimportant area nevertheless bitterly defended by the Wehrmacht. He discovers a secret in the forest just as one of the biggest catastrophes of the war begins. The Battle of Hürtgen Forest ultimately claims over 15,000 lives. What can save John Glueck? His friend Van, a Senecan Native American with deep knowledge of woodlands? His broken German? A miracle?

No one who went into the "Forest of Blood" came out unchanged. The ignorance of the generals was a warning sign for future wars. Twenty years later in Vietnam, John Glueck discovers that politicians are as cynical and dishonest as ever. He is determined to make a difference and embarks on a path that leads from the terrible forest battles of World War II directly to the Pentagon Papers.



Steffen Kopetzky, born in 1971, is the author of novels, stories, radio plays and theatre plays. His novel *Risiko* (2015) was on the *Spiegel* magazine bestseller list for months and was nominated for the German Book Prize, while *Propaganda* (2019) was nominated for the Bavarian Book Prize. From 2002 to 2008, Kopetzky was the artistic director of the Theatre Biennale Bonn. He lives in his hometown Pfaffenhofen an der Ilm with his family.

- “I enjoyed Steffen Kopetzky’s *Propaganda* a great deal. It’s a fast-paced and exciting novel about World War II and the 1970s, and a tale about how a young idealist becomes a jaded agent of psychological warfare and propaganda. And the novel offers the added layer of a highly lauded German writer examining the American psyche and character.” – Viet Thanh Nguyen (winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and author of *The Sympathizer*)
- Rights sold to Italy (Einaudi).

Steffen Kopetzky, *Propaganda*

Translation © Daniel Bowles, 2019

(pp. 9–36)

When I think about how it all started, I picture myself standing in front of a truck that had driven nonstop for two days. It was October 1944, and we were in the northern Eifel, a rugged expanse of low mountains that our army command's maps dubbed Huertgen Forest because nobody knew what the German name for it was. Not even experts like me were aware that this wooded area was really just called *Staatsforst*, National Forest, by the locals. Right in the middle of it was Hürtgen, a town we knew the name of, so it became Huertgen Forest, just like back when we'd simply call a new territory after the first Indian tribe we fought there.

"I'm staying here," I told Technical Sergeant Washington. "Thanks a bunch for the ride."

"My pleasure, John."

We shook hands. What incredible hands that guy had! Big but not pudgy, just long and shapely, sinuous, silky like a woman's, palpably dexterous and strong. A pianist's hands.

"John, consider whether you don't just wanna ride back with me. I mean, take a look around at this place ... Am I right? Here on the Siegfried Line, I mean."

To this day I still recall the gossamer web of little red blood vessels running through the whites of his eyes.

"I've been driving the truck, as you know, for quite some time now. I know what the guys upstairs are pumping in down here. And I also know what makes it out of here. I've

seen the coffins from the Huertgen Forest, in Cherryburg. Soon, there's gonna be a whole cemetery of 'em. John, you don't have to stay here. Nobody can make you. Come on back with me. These hills here, this forest: damn. The dying's only just started, if you ask me."

"That's exactly why I've got to stay here. But thanks!"

He shook my hand once more, but when he sensed I'd made up my mind, he let it go.

The first snowflakes were falling to the ground.

"Farewell, John, and God help you!"

"See you later, Moon."

I watched him until the truck came to a halt at the end of the dirt road. After a while it merged into the convoy of the Red Ball Express, which wound nonstop across France, Belgium, and Luxembourg, day and night, to satisfy our army as it surged eastward, wide as an ocean wave, with its fathomless need for every sort of material. Inanimate and animate.

We were outside of Germeter, in the sector of the 28th Division, which had relieved what was left of the 9th. Oddly enough, the 28th was from Pennsylvania. My roots are there; my mother was Pennsylvania Dutch. I hurried to make it to the company commander of this division, an Italian guy from Philadelphia named Captain Oleandro, whom I showed my special marching orders, explaining that I'd have a look around his joint and stay a couple days, too.

"You wanna vacation here?"

"Any objections?"

"Not in the least." He was gnawing so forcefully on his pencil you could hear it cracking.

“No problemo. The Jerries have got enough shells for all of us. Nobody’ll come up short. You’ll be sure to dig up some great stories for your newspaper.”

“We’ll see each other later,” I said, then left my bags in the captain’s tent and mingled with the newly arrived men. I stumbled upon a band of honest-to-goodness Pennsilfaanisch Deitsch about to enter the woods.

“One hour,” the sergeant shouted in Deitsch, “and stay together.”

The privates followed him, rifles at the ready, like a little company of Boy Scouts on field exercises.

I’d walked this route hundreds of thousands of times in my mind. Germany! Now I was taking my first steps in the mythic land of my ancestors.

I’d crossed the official border to the old Reich in the truck with Sergeant Washington. We’d passed large warning signs for the troops:

You are entering Germany!

Now, though, I was not just standing with my own feet on German soil, but also walking through a German forest that obscured a rugged but not all too high mountain chain, the North Eifel, south of Aachen. Beyond the dim wood lay the Rhine, and on it the German city that meant the most to me: Cologne.

We were walking for about twenty minutes before we discovered the section beneath shredded trees and in bombed-out clearings that had been the battlefield. It was already noticeably dark.

What had occurred here just days before still surpassed our powers of imagination. The havoc shells had wreaked, tattering hundred-year-old spruces into a rain of splinters that mowed down anything under them. The panic that tree snipers could unleash, or carefully arranged fields of anti-personnel mines. And in the end, the battle of man against man, amid the dense thicket, in a grotesquely confusing low mountain range.

Those who knew their way around here always had the advantage. This was the Huertgen Forest, a wrathful German wood. And the last but also most battle-hardened troops of the Wehrmacht were the ones defending it against us.

I followed two carefree privates who seemed like old friends. They'd slung their rifles over their backs and were running around like children collecting snails or mushrooms. After picking up this or that from the ground, they suddenly hit the jackpot.

The muddy, half-frozen forest soil put up some resistance, and so they yanked with their combined strength on something they'd identified as the arm of a member of the German Wehrmacht. Hard to say how the grunt had been killed. The treads of some heavy vehicle, maybe a Sherman tank, had squished him deep into the earth amid the clearing that mortar and shell impacts had churned up.

I can remember the names of the two Pennsilfaaners well: Kirschfang and Showalter. Kirschfang leaned over the dead man and tugged at the wet, gray coat fabric over the left upper arm, together with his comrade. He picked up the ice-cold, mud-covered hand of the

fallen soldier, feeling its horrible doughiness, then held tight and pulled as hard as he could. With a deep sigh, the earth gave way, releasing the torso. They flipped the corpse onto its back. The trooper's arm fell into the mud with a big squelch. Panting, Kirschfang drew out a flashlight. For a second its light flitted across the head of the deceased, covered with a steel helmet, and we saw his face. Or what was left of it.

Most everything was gone beneath the nose, no more jaw, just a few teeth poking out of the skinless meat on those bones. The dead man looked like Red Skull in the flesh. A shudder went through us.

Private Kirschfang said nothing, but Showalter did. I can still see his face. That long nose. The reddish brows. An ache of belated empathy shot through him. Sobbing more than mumbling, he uttered some sympathetic obscenity. Then the tightly focused beam of the flashlight wandered over the collar of the coat, sodden and black with damp. The uppermost button on the collar was open, the light drifting up and down the button placket, and Showalter knelt down and started to unbutton the coat of the fallen soldier.

"Jesus Christ, some crazy shit rearranged his face," he mumbled in Pennsylvania Dutch, while systematically cutting the buttons off the coat with his knife. Wehrmacht uniforms were collected. If I hadn't been there myself, I wouldn't have thought it possible. I was horrified and transfixed at the same time. This was the very spot Hemingway and I had been looking for. I'd made it.

Showalter opened the coat, and the light danced over the fabric of the uniform jacket underneath. Metallic flashes. He made for them immediately, skillfully removing the three decorations from the dead man's uniform and holding them to the light.

"Whadda we got there?" Kirschfang asked.

“Duplicate clasp, the flash for participating in the Winter Campaign of Kursk, and an Iron Cross Second Class. No swastika. Just a swastika on the clasp.”

“Didn’t I tell you?”

“Yeah, you’re such a clever boy,” Showalter confirmed, dropping both flashes into his sack where a clasp for close combat and three infantry assault badges, one in silver, had already disappeared. Now added to the loot, the Russia veteran’s Iron Cross, though obviously from the First World War, was the most valuable one so far. They’d have to discuss who’d get it to be able to show it to their family at home. Perhaps they’d flip a coin.

In the forest around us, we heard the others whispering. And the snapping of branches. Everybody was looking for trophies. After they’d arrived this morning, this was their first venture into an area where heavy combat operations had very recently taken place.

The sight of their predecessors from the 9th Division, those who were still alive at least, had elicited incredulous amazement among the new arrivals, as it did with me, too. Completely covered in filth, the soldiers returning from battle had heaved themselves onto the trucks their replacements had just driven up on. The departing men, all with absent looks, indifferent, seemingly not even happy to be pulled back.

We new guys viewed this evacuation of our own spent men with disbelief. Some didn’t even comprehend that they were actually looking at American soldiers who’d just suffered a devastating defeat; none of the young Pennsilfaaners now combing the German forest for souvenirs had heard of Americans ever having lost a battle.

They were products of the ninety-day miracle, that astonishing ability of their instructors to turn college boys, freshly licensed dentists, and untrained farmhands into

soldiers, fully ready for action, over a short period of three months, into members of one of the largest military organizations there's ever been on the planet earth: the army of the United States of America.

I was also a member of that army. Lieutenant John Glueck, Department for Psychological Warfare, or PSYWAR for short.

Everybody else called us Propaganda.

Part One

March 1971

Being stuck in a skin you no longer recognize as your own, that you find hideous, is like being walled in alive and still being around people. They stare at you, and what you'd like to do most is scream at them "It's not me, believe me, you're looking at someone or something that's not me."

This hideous skin has nothing to do with me, because I've only had it for a short while, this molting skin, peeling off in scaly flakes, the result of a sickness brought on by chemical shock. For over forty-five years I was a guy people liked to look at. Women told me so, and I also often got the feeling that they thought I was attractive. Or at least good-looking.

But then I had an accident with highly concentrated defoliants and got this chronic skin disease. That was a few years ago. Whoever sees me today without having known me then would never imagine that I'd once had a flawless complexion, that many women of all ages would casually presume to lay their hand on my forearm for a moment, or exchange kisses on the cheek to say goodbye. Men liked saying hello with a jovial handshake or a slap on the shoulder. Nobody does that anymore offhandedly.

That chemical shock left my skin hanging in shreds, but it never really healed properly, and instead developed sores, calloused and weeping at the same time, occasionally itching like hell. In the end, after it went on like this for maybe four or five weeks, I was left with some sort of gigantic scale of skin in my hand after a nasty bout of

itching. My doctor had never seen anything like it. He predicted that the best dermatologists in the world would fight over my skin.

Beneath the scale that had come off, the next one seemed to be forming already, and it was unfortunately starting again already right next to that one. The disease spread, and aside from my face has now enveloped almost all of my skin. Red. Scab-like. Scaly. An abnormal form of scale-producing psoriasis. That only things about my appearance that remind me of before are my nails and hair. Which is why I file and tend to my nails and don't let anyone near my hair, which is silvery gray and pretty long now, but otherwise still just exactly as it once was. It's as if through it, I were able to immerse myself in a better time. And it better stay that way. Could be that it'll cause me trouble still with what's due to happen.

"Your car is parked in a guarded police garage. Officially confiscated. All doors locked. So you don't have to worry about the car." Kaetlin Lambert is the attorney appointed by the state of Missouri to defend me. Kat.

I think about telling Kat straight out what's in the trunk, but then I pass on the idea so as not to confuse her any further. One step at a time.

"Please go back, though, from the beginning," she says, once more scanning the two-page-long statement from the officer of the Missouri Highway Patrol who arrested me. Am I wrong, or is she avoiding looking at me?

"You were going much, much too fast. Since Governor Hearnes introduced the speed limit, that's no laughing matter in Missouri."

"I know. Hearnes is a tree hugger. Progressive."

“Progressive or not: he’s still the governor and makes the laws. Anyway. Then you didn’t stop for the police flashers.”

“After a while I let him get closer and then slowed down.”

“Okay. So when he pulled you over and asked you to hand over your license and registration, you claimed you didn’t have a driver’s license but did have a loaded weapon, which you then pointed to.”

“It was secure in the shoulder holster. Not a threat.”

Now she lifts her head, uses her right hand, which is also holding the pen, to brush a few strands of hair behind her ear, raises her eyes, and looks at me straight on. She may not have gotten enough sleep, making fine shadows appear beneath her eyes. She supports her chin on her hand with the pen and regards me pensively. Leans her head back with interest. How long will she be able to stand looking at me directly?

“You mentioned before that you were in Vietnam not too long ago.”

“That’s right.”

“When you brought up the weapon in the car ... did that have to do with Vietnam?”

“In the broadest sense. But referring to the weapon was of course tactical in nature.”

Now she squints her eyes shut and skeptically, with the trace of a smile, shakes her head. What’s that supposed to mean? she seems to want to say.

“What’d you do in Vietnam, Major? Combat operations?”

“I did research.”

“Research? Intelligence?”

“Evaluation and qualitative market research.”

“How am I to construe that?”

“Interviews. Conversations. Questionnaires. I tried to find out what the Vietnamese think about us.”

“And what do the Vietnamese think about us?”

“That we don’t know who we’ve gotten ourselves mixed up with.”

Kat ponders my answer for a few seconds. She smiles.

“Why did you draw the weapon?”

“I was only making clear that I have one.”

“You could easily have been shot. Why take such a risk?”

I think Kat is a good lawyer. Very dedicated. I nearly feel that she wants to give the freak with the skin disease who was arrested yesterday in an officer’s uniform behind the wheel of a sky-blue Ford Zephyr, without a driver’s license, but with a loaded gun, a fighting chance. I’m accused of being an offender, but in Kat’s eyes I’m also a victim. She’ll defend me earnestly, that feeling is clear. She’ll do more than her duty. She’s an ally. And maybe she’d also like to understand a little bit about who I am and what I actually did. I am a highly decorated officer of the U.S. Army after all.

If I told her the truth, however, which is that agents of the federal government secretly doped my dinner with LSD to make me crazy and finish me off, that it wasn’t until this involuntary acid trip that I got the idea with the Zephyr, she’d ask: Are you sure these agents didn’t perhaps succeed? So I don’t say a word about it.

Then the deputy sheriff enters the room and wants to cuff me.

“Please,” she says, “give us one more minute.”

“Fine. But not a second more. I don’t like keeping the judge waiting.” He closes the door behind him.

My attorney bends forward a little, and the Indian jewelry she’s wearing over her ruffled blouse clinks. She now seems truly interested in the case.

“I can get you off. But something tells me that you don’t even want me to. That business with the pistol, you did that to escalate the whole thing. Didn’t you?”

“I just need a little time.”

“Time? In jail? The judge will set bail. I could help you get ahold of the money, if that’s the issue. I know somebody.”

“I’m not going to post bail. Not yet.”

“And your ...” She looks down at me a little, with a slightly worried expression.

“You’re just. Badly ...”

“Disfigured? Yeah, I am. But there’s no cure. Doesn’t matter where I hole up.”

“You’ll be taken to a state prison. Probably here in Hannibal. That’ll be no picnic. We don’t hear good things about it.”

“I’ll manage okay. But if you want to help me, then please take this locker key and don’t tell anyone you have it.” And with these words, I overcome my reluctance and put the key in her hand. It’s a typical key, like the ones you find at train stations. Number 261. Though there’s nothing that indicates the location of the locker.

She’s a little bit scared and casts a sharp glance at me before putting the key into her suede purse without saying a word about it. I’ve just handed her my most important trump card.

Then the deputy walks in and up to the table. He nods to the attorney, and I stoically hold out my wrists to him. He turns up his mouth faintly and tries not to touch my skin while locking the handcuffs around it.

When I was still a boy of eleven or twelve, in New York of the early thirties, at the time of the Great Depression, we actually pretended to be gangsters a lot. Besides ambushing, collecting protection money, acting out hold-ups, and being chased, I especially loved being thrown in jail.

Sometimes we were imprisoned in Fol-som Pri-son: four syllables of caprice and oppression. We puffed away on cigarette butts we'd collected, pretending they were opium pipes. Then we'd escape one more time more from that steel-gray star among American prisons, the brand-new Alcatraz. Our favorite, though, was Sing Sing, an obvious choice for local patriots. Not infrequently did our summer-afternoon games of gangsters lead through the whole neighborhood and along the river and end up in contemplation at that most gloomy of buildings upriver on the Hudson, that militarized fortress of crime.

For me, Sing Sing's walls were particularly creepy because they'd been erected by the inmates themselves, too; they'd walled themselves in by their own hands, as it were, thereafter to spend, when taken together, thousands, even hundreds of thousands of years in incarceration.

Doing time.

While Egyptian grocers in the Bowery watched their lettuce wilt, the prisoners sat in their cells or jogged in a mindless duck-march through the yard, an accumulation of years of life, afternoons and evenings, thousands of hours served there and elapsing in the course of one normal hour of local New York time.

Not that I'd felt the need to dedicate my life to crime when I was a kid, to be a career criminal even or get to know the inside of a prison as soon as possible, but I felt myself ripe and ready to brave any blow, any injury, any injustice, and I wasn't able to imagine any fate so bleak that I wouldn't ultimately have triumphed over it.

I had a vivid fantasy of spending a couple of years as an American Count of Monte Cristo, not on some remote Mediterranean island, but up the river, for no reason, of course. In the end, muscles steeled, familiar with every form of combat known to the New York underworld, and with an important manuscript for a novel in my bag—since it seemed obvious to me that aside from the daily fights for survival and my workouts, I'd do nothing there but write, telling the story of my adventurous life—I would leave the iron gates of Sing Sing behind me. First, I'd take revenge on my enemies, then become a celebrated author who'd move into an apartment in the Dakota, at some point later traveling to Hamburg in a luxury steamer, into that mysterious land of my ancestors. There I'd board a sleeper car to Southern Europe, see Madrid, Rome, or Istanbul, and purchase a villa on the sea to make my mother happy.

Exercise, hand-to-hand combat, writing, all while also leaving childhood with its hindering restrictions behind me: that was the formula that stimulated me to act out pursuit and imprisonment with my neighborhood buddies as often as possible. Edges of buildings, vegetable crates, and fish stands were the walls of the prison we'd been locked

behind. There were nasty smells with stories to tell. Corners with history. Backyards full of inner life. We huddled among tossed oyster shells, forged plans to break out, and were happy when one or two cops actually walked past with swaying truncheons, who'd then play the guards we'd soon con.

A lot of times I was still acting out my role late at night when I'd long been lying in bed with carefully scrubbed knees, fighting against approaching slumber and imagining that the conversations my mother sometimes had on the stoop at night were her attempts to get me out of jail. She was negotiating with the prosecutor, when in reality she was arguing with a handyman who insisted on being paid up front and didn't want to come back the next day to finish fitting the new water line. Since she didn't allow herself any irregularity in spite of our financial straits, she was inexorable. God gave her a few dollars but a lot of staying power, she'd always say.

"Just because you're a single mother, and a widow on top of it all, a lotta people think they can pull one over on you. But not with me. I know what a plumber makes. Honesty is the best policy, John, my sweet boy, don't forget it!" she was wont to add. In general she concluded every warning like that. Honesty is the best policy.

I always tried to follow that advice, and whenever I've had to lie it's been for honorable or vital motives. That precisely the attempt at radical honesty is what's sending me to prison now is an irony of our time and a punchline in my own life story. As is the fact that the first regular prison I became an inmate of was on the Mississippi and not on the Hudson.

Or at least for the time being, because who knows when the specialists from the White House will demand my transfer to a federal prison? Until then, I, John Glueck, born

on June 13, 1921, in New York, and so now forty-nine years old, divorced, employed by a non-profit organization called the RAND Corporation, a resident of Santa Monica, California, will wear the jaunty green-orange-colored garb of the Missouri Correction Authority.

The room is clean and welcoming. Hanging on the gleaming white wall is the newly issued official poster from NASA of Apollo 14, dedicated to the paranormal thought experiment of astronaut Mitchell, who on February 8 and 9 had sent psi signals to earth that were actually received on four continents by four sensitive persons.

The prison director himself hands me my clothes; Hunerwadel attends each and every formality of my incarceration because a real U.S. Army major is something special among the shoplifters, rapists, drug addicts, and those conscientious objectors, called drafties by the normal inmates and recently multiplying in number, who have neither the chutzpah to flee to Canada or Mexico, nor parents with enough influence, and so have to go to prison.

There have never been so many possible means of being sent to jail as there are today.

Warden Hunerwadel, clearly too young to be a veteran of the Second World War himself, looks at my identification papers for a good long time, then asks me where all I served.

“England. France. Then on the Siegfried Line: Huertgen Forest.”

“The Huertgen Forest, really ...” he realizes, internally almost standing at attention.

“So you’ve seen some stuff, huh?”

At this point it’d be the proper thing to gaze seriously into Warden Hunerwadel’s somewhat swollen but loyal looking eyes (a large, protruding wart on his left cheek, the

sight of which automatically makes me picture how awful it'd be to lather it up while shaving and accidentally lop it off) and inform him truthfully that without the Huertgen Forest I probably wouldn't be standing here before him, that it was the Huertgen Forest in fact that made me into the man I am today. That's where I was forged into shape.

"You could say that." I nod and try to smile, which the giant corners of my mouth only just intimate.

I turn in my wallet. Per regulations, Hunerwadel asks the guard to remove its entire contents: four hundred dollars in bills, what remains of the one thousand five hundred I began my escape with about a week ago. In the front there's a folded piece of paper as well as some change the guard sticks with the bills into an envelope on which he writes the total, which he then also enters into the intake form. Then he unfolds the paper, reads it, and hands it on to Hunerwadel without a word.

The wording on it is as carefully and cleanly written as a certain John Fitzgerald Kennedy was able to manage, a man whose varied sufferings had deposited themselves on his character as they had on the disjointed trace of his handwriting, which is why he'd always taken the greatest pains with it, to conceal his weaknesses. The result was an easily legible line, and so Hunerwadel only needs a few seconds until he's deciphered the verses:

*Bullfight critics ranked in rows
Crowd the enormous Plaza full;
But only one is there who knows—
And he's the man who fights the bull.*

Then he studies the dedication on the reverse, which stops him in his tracks:

For Major John Glueck!

John F. Kennedy

“That’s can’t be right, can it? You knew President Kennedy?”

“Knew him? No. Ran into him once and did him a favor. This poem was his motto, and he always had a handwritten version of it in his wallet so he could give it away when he got a chance. It was for that favor I got the autograph with the poem. JFK was of the mind that writing down the memorized lines frequently would keep him mentally fit. There must be hundreds of these slips of paper. If you like, you can keep it.”

“But it’s dedicated to you,” the warden replied.

“I saved it because I always thought it’d make a good beginning for a novel, but at this point I know it by heart. Keep the paper if it makes you happy.”

“Did ... the president write it himself?”

“No, it’s by Domingo Ortega, a Spanish matador. Pretty famous at one time, the man was, into the fifties.”

Hunerwadel has the same reaction I did after Kennedy presented me with the poem he himself had copied down and shook my hand, a complete surprise, as if we’d agreed to meet soon to go sailing; he is a tad bit overwhelmed, takes the JFK autograph, and says thank you.

It's obvious we're now down to brass tacks. Hunerwadel and his men are afraid. Nobody wants to be the one who has to touch me to give me the obligatory shave. That's just fine by me.

"I'm not gonna make any other sort of trouble for you, Warden," I say to Hunerwadel almost in a whisper. "But whichever of you touches my hair I'm gonna put six feet under. I don't care who. That's a promise. Even if you drug me. I'll find out who did it. So let me keep my hair. It's got to do with my disease."

I'm a living, breathing nightmare, a chimera from some bestiary. I promise peace by threatening murder. An American amphibian.

"Did the Germans do that to you?" Hunerwadel asks, swallowing, with almost a touch of hope again. That's what he'd most like to hear: a monster from the Huertgen Forest.

"No, that was us. An accident."

He mulls it over for a second longer, then lets his subordinates know that they are to make an exception for "Major Glueck." I am allowed to keep my hair and am thus the only wearer of long-hair among six hundred shorn prisoners. For that I am grateful to Hunerwadel—and because he assigns me a single cell, lined paper, and an arsenal of writing implements.

There is—as will soon be plain to see—no better image to describe my origins than that of an old, gnarled apple tree onto which a young shoot of the same genus is grafted, such that my family history on the one stocky side reaches to a depth sufficient to occupy an entire team of chipper genealogists willing to research every new sprouting root and all branches

until they stumbled at some point onto those unavoidable entries in mythic sailing logs, extolments of God, that HE—despite the most terrible storms with which He was pleased to churn up the Atlantic puddle, despite the sighting of whales and other dread creatures of the deep, despite disease and pestilence on board and all manner of infirmities and sorrows that imperiled the seafarers and especially the common passengers of the eighteenth century—had been so extraordinarily merciful to allow a young married couple, the Torstricks, to live. Like their shipmates, the Torstricks were religious free thinkers who called themselves Friends of Truth. When they finally reached the southern coast of Pennsylvania they were all the more grateful that their precious companions had also weathered the journey very well. To wit, Gelbe Borsdorfers, Ebelborsdorfers, Martens Sämlings, Seestermüher Zitronen, Englische Spitalrenetten, and several other reliable species: apple saplings with good pedigrees. These Torstricks, Gotthilf and Elisa, purchased seven and half acres of land in today's Adams County from a Prussian Quaker, and in the town of Berlin to boot, on the initially unpaved but liberal streets of which you went to the *Bader* and bought *Schrippen* and *Hippen* from the *Beckmeister*.

The Torstricks—supporters of the GOP, as it was still quite young—always abhorred slavery, but after Gettysburg, or so the family legend goes, wounded Confederate soldiers were nursed to health in the house, which gives me pause more than ever because I'd forgotten that until just now, and only through the struggles of writing was it fished up out of my memory.

Then later—not just the town, but the Torstrick farm had grown considerably—the Pennsylvanian precision of postal bureaucracy called for our Berlin to be distinguished from the one in Somerset County farther west. I don't know why our town was affected and

not the other one, maybe they drew straws, maybe the town fathers thought emphasizing our proximity to the coast would be propitious—in any event, Berlin was renamed East Berlin. Even the hillbillies there have presumably realized that twenty years ago the fickle spirit of history made a joke out of placing them alongside a dismal, giant little sister of the same name in Germany’s Soviet zone. I haven’t been there in a long time. In East Berlin, Pennsylvania, I mean, not in Berlin (Ost), capital of the GDR. I’ve never been there. But I do want to go to West Berlin next, when Hannibal is put behind me.

One thing still puzzles me, however: how my mother, the youngest of a half dozen sisters, ever managed to escape her mother’s gravitational pull at all and leave the *Pennsilfaanisch Deutsch* homeland without falling out, since “mer sott em sei Eegne net verlosse, denn Gott verlosst die Seine ach ned”—“We shouldn’t ever abandon our own; for God does not abandon His.” Her cheeks like two apple halves and with an impressive corpulence, my grandmother was the strongest woman I ever met. When I was little it always seemed to me that I spent the whole time we stayed in East Berlin on her left arm, while she went about her chores without the slightest impairment, herding the sheep that grazed in the fruit orchards during summers, hauling water and firewood, and stoking up the fire in the large oven on which she’d then fry slices of green apple with bacon. With them we’d devour warm bread with finger-thick smears of butter melting on it. The bread was *Deutsch* bread, as dark as Mother Earth, since it was baked for fourteen hours from whole rye grain. One of my earliest memories of all is about how my grandmother would use a giant bread knife to liberate the slices designated for me from the hard crust. After the meal I was allowed to feed them to the rabbits behind the house. The white-and-black *Rieseschegge*, which weighed up to a good eleven pounds, hopped back and forth like crazy

in those straw-scented stalls, thumping with the velvety hammers of their hind legs, slinking timidly into the wooden corners of the stalls, only then to inch their way toward the proffered crusts hesitantly, their heads stretched far forward. When their whiskers grazed my fingers and they began to nibble, I also went mad with excitement and joy. Wherever my grandmother went, she spoke Pennsilfaanisch Deitsch with everything, be it animal, plant, or mineral, calling it by name and giving it its proper place. As she held me, I learned that “es gebt viele schwatze Schof, awwer sie gewwe all weissi Millich, dass es Schnee gebbe wead, wenn sich da Hund auf sein Buckel lecht, und dass man immerzu fleissig sein müsse, denn alle Daag umhersitze macht em faul”—“there are lots of black sheep, but they all produce white milk so that it snows when a dog licks its udder, and that you always have to be hardworking because sitting around all day makes you lazy.”

After East Berlin’s sheep, the rabbits, and the dutiful carriage horses who transported us back to the train station in Harrisburg (May God bless you!) came the train rides back to New York that were colored by my mother’s melancholy. Our compartment, filled by the scent of the apple crates stacked to the ceiling on the luggage racks, moved through the woods, which Mama watched so intensively, her pretty head propped on her wrist, that she seemed to be expecting an acquaintance to step out of the distant thicket of her youth there and wave to her.

At the end, we both anticipated with excitement that unearthly traversing of the tunnel beneath the Hudson, a place where darkest midnight reigned even on summer afternoons. Those few minutes the compartment windows revealed nothing but black, and the whole time I couldn’t help but think of the ice-cold waters of the river flowing above us,

with the most enormous ships sailing on them, and how that could even be: the ships in the water above, and us below in the train.

The biggest miracle, however, lay at the end of the tunnel, for out of the darkness we finally reached a cathedral of the railroad age: Penn Station. The Architects of all eras seemed to have had a hand in its construction, like animating spirits. The basilicas of Christendom, the elegance of the Roman Empire, and Egypt's thirst for immortality, all this seemed recreated here, repeated, staged on a larger and more tremendous scale than in the originals, a hub spiraling to the heavens on good old American soil. The granite that draped every surface of its entry halls fascinated me, and I often crawled around on it bare-kneed in my shorts, intoxicated by the shimmering of those sparkling plates, which when viewed from afar gave off that grayish rose color I've never seen anywhere else since—and probably won't ever see again, because a few years ago the united forces of New York's real estate speculators, under the leadership of that unscrupulous Fred Trump, who as we all know made his money after the war building shabby subsidized housing on Coney Island, finally succeeded in tearing down Penn Station and cannibalizing the site to turn a profit.