

Wolfgang Büscher
Homecoming
Rowohlt Berlin
208 pages / August 2020

In the middle of the woods, in the middle of Germany: Wolfgang Büscher's fascinating journey into its very core.

Night after night, a boy stands at the window of his parents' house and watches the sun as it disappears from view behind the rolling hills in the west. He roams through the woods with his friends, building wooden shacks which the foresters destroy. It's the early sixties. Decades later, Wolfgang Büscher makes his childhood dream come true. He moves to the woods and experiences spring, summer and autumn there. An aristocratic family on the border of Hessen and Westphalia where Büscher grew up allows him to stay in a hunting lodge in the middle of the woods, in the middle of Germany.

This is where he puts up his camp bed. He has no electricity or running water. He prepares himself for quiet times alone, chopping wood and making fires, the odd hunting expedition, hiking, a marksmen's festival, extreme loneliness and a nighttime blackness never seen in the city. The year takes an unexpectedly dramatic turn as storms, heat and plagues of beetles kill half of the woods. And something else happens which turns everything on its head: Büscher's mother dies that summer, meaning the house he grew up in is left empty, but full of memories. This is a homecoming more existential than he could have imagined.

A book far removed from the deafening din of today's world. An exploration of a nation, floods of memories and a "sentimental education" all rolled into one - literary, perceptive and overwhelming.

Wolfgang Büscher born in 1951 near Kassel, writes for *Die Welt*. He has published several books, among them the bestselling titles *Berlin-Moscow* (2003), *Germany, A Journey* (2005), *Hartland* (2011) and *Spring in Jerusalem* (2014). Büscher has won multiple awards for his work, amongst others the Kurt Tucholsky prize, the Johann Gottfried Seume prize for literature and the Ludwig Börne prize.

- His travel reportages were rated as upcoming classics of travel literature - even before Bruce Chatwin's books.
- Rights for Büscher's works were sold to 11 countries.
- English sample translation available.
- "Büscher's works are milestones of the genre 'narrative non-fiction'." - *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*

Wolfgang Büscher



== H E I M K E H R ==

WOLFGANG BÜSCHER

HOMECOMING

THE BOY

Once again, I went through the house, now it was almost empty. Once again, through the familiar rooms, the big kitchen where life played out, the rooms facing west, the ones down below, the ones on the upper story, the view far into the countryside, of forests and hills; one room had been mine long ago. I saw the house as I had never wanted to see it, stripped, the halls, the walls naked. Where the pictures had hung, dark frames of dust.

One picture was still hanging. A boy with a side part, full lips, staring straight at me, a pure gaze without the smile that people usually demand of children being photographed – the portrait of an eight-year-old in a sweater vest, probably knitted by his mother, the suspenders of his lederhosen pulled taut over his shoulders as if they were holding him together, this skinny kid. His gaze stopped me in my tracks, held me fast; it was intended for me, who else? There was no one else here, just him and me.

When I was a boy, the house I was now leaving was on the very outskirts of town. The fields began right behind the garden gate, behind them the forests, and behind them the beautifully staggered blue chain of hills in the west, where the sun sank in the evenings. We were the semi-free. We had to go to school, but what we did after that was our business. Come the great expanse of summer vacation, we were completely free. We roamed where there was no one to bother us, smoked in the bushes, spent our days in the shells of the houses that were under construction, for there was always construction going on. Often, we went into the forest. Once, at night, in complete darkness, a test of courage—did I really go in first? In memory, yes. In memory, everything is just fine.

We were at war with the forest ranger; we built lean-tos, he discovered them and ordered his workers to tear them down. Usually we wandered around the Gypsy forest, just because we liked the name. We would've liked to have heard whatever scary story had taken place there to give rise to the name, but there was no one to tell us; no one alive could remember what happened. In all reality, they had probably named the pine forest after a traveling band that had once camped there. We never went home before dusk; it was then that we realized how hungry we were and attacked our dinner, which was waiting for us. If somebody asked what we'd been up to all day, we'd say, "nothing much."

We wasted the time that wasted itself on us, and it gave generously. Boredom was the stuff that nurtured us. The days, the afternoons, the Sundays stretched out endlessly, the summer, the winter stretched out. When the TV told us that the cherries and magnolias were already blooming

further south, Old Man Winter was still shuffling over our frozen fields, there was still frost. How can I explain that it wasn't a bad life? I suspected that it would end, that something loomed on the horizon of my quiet world. On the other side, things were faster, louder; one day I would be there, and of course my heart pounded when I thought about it.

On a white, windless winter day, on the village street, I saw pillars of smoke wafting from the chimneys and climbing soundlessly skyward – a forest of smoke-pillars, the red light of the low-slung sun caught in them and I felt as if I were taking a last look before leaving, seeing all of that for the last time. Or I lay in a haystack on a June day, smelled the warm, dusty grass, saw the clouds pulling away from one another, saw them floating, gliding in front of the sun and their shadows strafing the meadows, and I jumped up and chased after the shadows.

I thought back, and what else would I be thinking about while walking through this house; my childhood seemed unfathomably free. Grown-ups didn't bother us; they worked a lot and lived in their sphere, as we did in ours. We were two tribes that were at war with one another; I belonged to the smaller one, we were seldom more than three. We built three lean-tos in the forest. The first lean-to was supposed to be like the ones in the adventure tales we read; the point was to defend it from inside a wooden palisade.

One day, during one of our rambles through the forest, we found pine saplings that had been cut down, spindly like boys' arms, lots of them, wonderful building material for a palisade fence; we would build lean-tos behind the fence later. We procured an axe; it wasn't hard to do. Tools were everywhere in town. Now we could strip the branches from the saplings and cut them lengthwise.

Toward evening, our palisade fence was three or four paces long. Before we went home, we stuffed moss into the cracks, like they do in adventure books. But when we returned, we found our day's work destroyed. It was the forest ranger or his workers. The ranger himself kept an eye out for us and threatened to punish us if we did it again.

We decided to build higher up, so high that no one could reach us unless they could climb. We found four trees standing in a perfect rectangle; we swiped a hammer and nails from somewhere and first built the platform, so high up that even the tallest worker wouldn't be able to reach it. Four thicker branches formed the frame, we nailed the floor together from the thinner branches. The work went quickly; by evening the platform was finished and we had even nailed up a piece of rough wooden wall. We were prouder of this structure than of the fence, as real as it had looked with its moss-stuffed cracks; this, we told ourselves, was a more sophisticated construction.

In high spirits, we arrived back at our forest construction site the next day, and once again, the enemy had destroyed everything – our star-gazing house in the pines was gone. But if the forest ranger thought we'd give up he didn't know us well enough. We went underground, building dug-outs. Shovels were quickly procured, we dug a hole, large and deep enough that the three of us could crouch in it, though we botched the roof. It was the first lean-to that we completed; we celebrated by singing a song that our teacher had taught us. But we hadn't even finished the first stanza of "From Gray Cities' Walls" when the roof caved in. We scrambled out from under the branches, earth, and leaves and knew then that this was our last lean-to. We stood for a moment, regarding what remained of our dream, wordlessly, uneasily, suspecting that something had ended

and something new had begun, something that would take us away from here and change us. Then the three of us left the forest and each went his separate way, even the boy whose portrait hung on the wall, still regarding me steadily.

No one could pull him away from the sight, when he came home after a long summer's day, bypassing the kitchen, calling out "I'm coming!" and leaping up the stairs in order to watch from the highest window how the day was fading into the beautifully staggered blue chain of hills in the west. He watched the sun, how it set half the sky on fire just because it had to disappear for a few hours. Transfixed, he followed the blazing adieu, but the best part came last – the sun-ball sank ever faster toward the horizon, then it bounced, and the impact was so hard that it crushed the ball and the sun seemed to burst. Then it slipped away, and that was that.

Now the light turned gray and the world grew a few degrees colder, there were no more shadows. He asked himself, "And what if I set off, if I followed the sun to where it's glowing now?" In these secret minutes at the window, he felt something pulling inside of him, an electric shock, gentle, but exciting enough. He waited for this pull evening after evening, it came; and then at some point it didn't come anymore. He had seen enough of what went on. He climbed back down the stairs; it was time for dinner.

I tore myself away too. I had been far away, yet I still stood in front of the picture. I took it off the wall, brought it with me, left the nearly empty house, pulled the door shut behind me. It was the first door I ever went through in life, and I returned to the forest, to the hunting shack I had moved into, on a clear blue day, still winter-cold and glistening bright. Maybe I would hang up the picture in the hut.

AROUND THE FIRE

From the house, I took the old path west; I could have found it blindfolded. It led out through the garden gate and down the street, with the Gypsy Forest on the left and over it the highway overpass, which made the forest of our adventures seem even smaller than this sobering reunion did anyway. To the right, the black rock with the ornate coat of arms, the border of the principality, then a downward zigzag. Over the castle hill – we spent the night after our high school graduation in the ruin – a crucifix in the fields to the left, then the little town in which I was born. From there, it wasn't far to Kassel, the Landgrave's city.

And then suddenly the Landgrave's castle, another wonder, an apparition. Nothing announced its presence, it wasn't built high up so that it was visible from afar, instead it was lower than its surroundings. I rounded the last curve, and although I'd been coming there since childhood, it was as if someone had pulled a sheet off the world, and before me, suddenly, stood the magnificent castle.

Then, finally, the forest where the hunting shack stood.

The weather changed suddenly. Fog rose up as I neared the forest, first thin like gauze over the fields, then thicker. I reached the hunting shack just as dusk set in, then collected brush and woodchips from under the tall beeches that surrounded the shack. I hauled logs, stuffed some paper between them, and made a fire – not inside, but outside in the fireplace under an open-air

roof. I sat there as I did every evening and watched the day fade. Today with fog—that old magician, how it made the world around me disappear. First it slunk down the forest path that ran right next to the shack, into the white distance. Then across the wild meadow, which I watched early in the morning while taking my first sip of coffee brewed on the gas stove, and in the evenings while I drank my last sip of wine from the same enameled cup. Soon the whole forest had become invisible.

We moved closer together, the hunting shack, the elephant-skinned beeches that surrounded it, and I. The fog seemed determined to put on a show. It made everything disappear but lit up anything that was covered in moss. Mossy tree trunks, roofs overgrown with moss, the greenish walls of the shack – all of it glowed a fantastical neon green in the milky twilight. The shack's roof looked like an illuminated hat, the beeches all around it shimmered. Noises emerged from the fog, a cracking of dry branches, a scampering across the forest floor. Sometimes I felt like someone was watching me, the man around the fire under the giant, glistening, poison-green mushroom.

By daylight, this was the open-air roof over the fireplace, a roughly timbered octagon made of eight thin trunks with a smoke hole in the middle; but there wasn't much light left. It was that time of day when the forest goes quiet. It is never completely silent, but there's a moment when the last person in the forest feels exactly this, intensely – life, bustle, celebrations, and then, all at once, it's gone, and out of the darkness all eyes are upon you. In the treetops, the birds' evening song ceases, the night takes over the forest completely. Only the dripping of the wisps of fog can be heard, a rustling in the leaves every now and then. These made the silence even more silent. My fire was burning low, and I went to fetch new beech logs; they were stacked in several rows in front of the hunting shack. One last time; when they burned low again, I'd head inside and go to sleep.

Another noise: when I turned around, the boy was sitting by the fire, a stick in his hand; he was stirring the coals with it. The side part, the lederhosen, that stare. I passed my hand over my face and he was gone.

NIGHT

The stove had long since gone out. I lay awake, listening into a darkness that is completely unknown in the big city. The darkness called out its questions, its mockery, and I couldn't think of a snappy reply. One day the decision to do this was there and I'd done it. That was it, I'd known nothing else. If I'd been able to think of an alternative, I wouldn't be here now. We analyze and justify the small things in life, not the big ones; we make big decisions from one day to the next, when no one expects it—not even ourselves. I got up, sleep wasn't a possibility, pushed open the barn door, grabbed my broom, and swept the sparks my stove was spraying out into the cold, and with them my questions.

A couple of minutes, and I was so frozen that I shut the door again and crawled back into the cot under the much-too-thin blanket. I wanted to doze off, but then something swiped across the pane—a branch, I told myself, the big beech is swaying in the night wind, its low-hanging branch

scratching the window. Again I lay wide awake, listening, and truly, a night wind came and threw everything it could pick up against the hut. Leathery leaves from last fall, insect larvae from the windowsill. The coldest hours of the night were beginning. This was why I had the thick logs, for nights like these, when winter returns again. I got up several times to put new logs into the cast iron stove, hoping the embers would last until morning. Listening to the crackling of the fire, the little detonations in the wood every now and again, seeing the blazing and flickering behind the sooty pane in the stove door, the slight reflection on the dusty floorboards, and falling asleep atop them sounded nice.

However, when the logs' murmur grew softer and softer and fell silent with one last hiss, when complete silence descended – the silence after midnight, when it got colder and colder and even curled up on my cot I couldn't simulate anything approaching warmth – then the winter had won. Encountering no more resistance, the winter blew through all the cracks; there were enough of them in the walls, the floor, the roof. Get up again, blow some life back into the fire in the stove, shove some brush in, paper underneath, logs, thin ones this time so as not to smother the young flame, until it was time for a big log; that's what I should have done. But my new fire also would have died unless I'd stayed up and tended it through the night. I was too tired, so the stove stayed out.

I put on everything I had: jacket, pants, pullover; draped everything else (towel, sleeping bag, and an old blanket stiff with dirt that I found somewhere) over me, maybe I'd fallen asleep, somehow. But as I lay there, curled up like an embryo, thoughts came to me not from the city, but from the forest. *Now you're here, alone, freezing to death in your makeshift campsite. It's after midnight, on foot it's an hour to the ranger's house, two to Kassel. It's so dark you can't see your hand in front of your face, you can only listen to what's going on outside. If you'd just set up your cot in the hunting lodge, where the door locks; but no, it had to be in the other house, the one people call the barn, where you can pull the door shut from the inside but not lock it. Do you hear the night wind, how it tugs on the door? Do you hear the barn door shuddering on its hinges? At any second the wind could tear it wide open just like it does during the day – what would happen then? Don't be so sure it was a branch beating against your window.*

Now a cry split the night, bright, plaintive, louder and more urgent than anything else blowing or creeping around the hut, in it, or out in front. All of that movement was busy and entirely unto itself and its nightly hunting; it was not meant for me, there were inhabitants with prior claims to the barn, little raiders who didn't care a bit about the guest on the cot. But the cry was meant for someone, maybe me. The idea wasn't so far-fetched, not tonight. I groped around in the darkness beside me, found my knife and flashlight and even the field guide. With a flick of my thumb, the blade folded out and locked, it was sharp. In the flashlight beam, I used the tip of the knife to browse through the bird section of the field guide; I stopped when I reached the owl. That's what it had to be, this bright, proclaiming call. I heard the cry a few more times, each time farther away, then no more.

I can't say how I spent the hours between the owl's cry and the first glimmer of dawn; I know only that time passed. At one point I saw something bright in the darkness of the barn; a gray square rose up, a window to the east. I dozed off, and when I looked up again, an abstract image of winter branches filled the frame, then finally colors. A gentle red glowed, day had arrived, the night was over.

Straight away, that morning, I hauled a big load of firewood into the barn and found some warmer blankets, but soon the days and even the nights got milder, the winter went away faster than expected. The beeches didn't trust the promise of spring just yet, the buds hesitated in their little brown spindles. But the day when they'd explode was not far off. Then my shack would disappear into the spring camouflage.

THE SHACK

I owed the fact that I was here to sheer generosity. I'd learned about the shack in the fall – a hunting shack in the middle of the forest, in the middle of the countryside, in the middle of the world where I was born; the place where I grew up, albeit in a different era. I couldn't stop thinking about spending time there, perhaps spring, summer, and fall. The shack belonged, as did the forest in which it stood, to the Landgrave's family; they'd lived there for nine hundred years. For the first eight hundred, they'd ruled over their large, not terribly rich, and predominantly agricultural properties. Then the family had had to surrender its power and the lion's share of its forests, goods, and land holdings, as the last German emperor fled to Holland and the Republic was proclaimed; it also surrendered its castles. However, the Landgrave's family still lived in one of the castles; they were granted this privilege way back when, and they lived in the most magnificent castle of all.

A friend of mine knew the heir to the Landgrave's fortune, a young man whose father had recently entrusted him with management of the forests and family matters. This friend offered to introduce me. That same fall, I went to the castle to express my admittedly strange desire. The Landgrave's heir did not seem that surprised, or if he was, he hid it well. However, he seemed concerned that his guest from the big city was overconfident – someone who expected comfort in a lonely shack in the forest. His family's hunting shack, he explained, was really just that, used only during hunting season for a few days at a time. It was not intended for longer stays, especially a stay of several months.

But this was exactly what I wanted. He described to me what I would find there. Everything was exceptionally spartan, no running water, no light, no electricity at all. A latrine. He looked at me inquiringly, and I could see that he had his doubts. I told him I didn't want to spend the winter there and that I'd be fine with a cot and gas stove. He said there was one more thing: I would have to vacate the shack a few times for his hunting parties. The young hunters, the young princes of the family and their friends, would come in May, when deer season begins. A few weeks after that, the older hunters would come. And on one weekend in early summer, the whole extended family would gather in the hunting shack, all the living members of the Landgrave's line. Hunting was an old passion in the family, and it persisted.

Are you a hunter? People often asked me, that summer. I wasn't, I told them. My reply was acknowledged silently each time, with a nod – and with quiet regret that devolved to me. Like when someone asks if you've ever seen the ocean and you say no and know right then that you don't know much about the world and may be missing something really great.

The Landgrave's heir asked me one or two more questions about my work and my intentions, then we said good-bye. He promised to let me know soon. A few days later, without further ado, he invited me to move into his family's hunting shack. And he asked me to contact the forest ranger whose territory included the shack.

When I went there the first time, I saw the shack from a distance, in the bright winter forest, and I didn't like the idea of being so visible, so exposed; that's not how I'd imagined my forest hermitage. My disappointment vanished when I reached the shack. I knew that places had always triggered a strong reaction in me; either they disgusted me, or they attracted me. I opened the gate in the picket fence, stood in the yard, and all was well. Whoever had built the fence of split tree trunks had a sense of fun and knew children. He had built three gates: one for the big people, crowned with a weathered pair of deer antlers; a smaller one for smaller people, with a deer skull at its peak; and one for the littlest people and the dogs.

The hunting shack was pleasing to the eye, with three white-framed windows shining like beacons in the forest. Beside the shack was a barn and a firepit area with an open roof. The three structures stood in a rough semi-circle around the yard, which was little more than tamped-down leaf-litter. Tall beeches screened the structures, I counted twelve; the tallest ones stood in the middle of the yard. Their low-hanging branches embraced the shack's roof. They had dropped beechnuts in the fall, which all went to waste, there were thousands on the bare ground. I knew their nutty-sweet flavor well; during our forays into the forest, we'd pried open their shells with our fingernails and eaten the seeds. Even if only a few of them had successfully taken root here, soon there would be swarms of verdant seedlings in my yard. My yard? It didn't belong to me, nor did the shack. But that didn't matter. I was here, truly here, that was the good, strong feeling that had set in as soon as I walked through the gate – I was here, and even if I wasn't the lord of the shack, I was the lord of my time in it. I had to gather water and the necessities; otherwise, I could do, or not do, whatever I wanted.

When I sat down on the bench in front of the hunting shack – a thick plank weathered by many summers and winters, cut from a tree trunk – I wasn't alone. The Ancient One, sitting next to me, introduced himself with a simple rhyme:

“I am the forest. I am ancient.

I house the stag and doe,

Protect you from storm and snow,

Stand up to the frost and defend the spring.

I'm always here, through everything.

I build your house; I heat your stove.

Therefore, Mankind, show me love.”

The verse hung in a wooden frame next to the shack door, and this much was clear: The Ancient One was not a romantic, as some assume. He didn't whisper any forest wisdom in my ear, he didn't want to be honored as a higher being or be treated like a human, like you and me – he certainly didn't want to be hugged like a brother. He would have thought that was foolish. He spelled out what he had to offer us humans. My stag, my water, my air, my wood. A little respect, that was all he asked for in return.

Being here, truly here; this feeling filled the first few days. In the evenings, I would make a fire, stretch out under the stars with one arm under my head, and then – alone in my shack – listen to the night wind. I was no longer someone who went into the forest, I was someone who came from the forest.

A car approached. The forest ranger was coming, and I liked the idea that now I had a shack in the forest, and finally the forest ranger was on my side. He brought water canisters, asked if there was anything else I needed, and suggested that I use the barn. The hunting shack was shaded and damp at this time of year, but the barn, with its southern exposure, got more sunshine, it had larger windows and a better stove; I would learn to appreciate this.

I took his advice. As homey as the hunting shack seemed, with its overhanging, moss-covered, pointed roof, first I stayed in the barn. One half of the barn was an open shed where extra firewood and tools were stored. This was also where, once upon a time, they'd processed the spoils of the hunt. There was still a rack for this, its boards bloodstained. I set up my quarters in the closed half of the barn and relied on the cast iron stove despite its rusty stovepipe. Soon I'd unpacked my belongings. Cot and blanket, flashlight, binoculars, gas stove, spare cartridges for the stove and batteries, a few items of clothing, shaving supplies, writing materials, lighter, knife, water, coffee, a few cans of food. I found lots of candles and a case of beer, left over from the last hunting party.

I also tried out the hunting shack, with its more elaborate, prettier stove. I found a good supply of firewood under the eaves, stacked in three rows, chopped just small enough for the stove. Because it wasn't a large stove, it was a kitchen stove. I recognized it right away—it came from my childhood kitchen, the kitchen where supper awaited me, the kitchen I ran past when I ran up the stairs – an unexpected reunion with my iron comrade, decades later, in the forest.

The stove was the same model but in miniature compared with the big stove in our kitchen. Otherwise, it was exactly the same. The curves, the clawed feet, the white enamel surfaces. Three flaps, the upper one for the fire, the middle one for air, the lower one for the ashes. And the oven. Cake tasted best warm right out of the oven. It even had a water tank, that silver anchor on the cast-iron stovetop. Wintry images filled my mind. We'd always made sure that the tank was filled up to the top and that there was hot water available. On winter days, we'd poured the hot water into a tub, mixed it with cold water, then Mother had plopped a frozen child into the tub, right in the middle of the big kitchen. It had been a long time since I'd seen one like this. A modern stove had been brought into the house, our white friend banished to the cellar, to the laundry room, where the women made jam in the summertime.

It was a test of courage to fish the glowing iron rings off the stovetop. In those days, the round iron burner covers weren't all one piece; they consisted of four or five concentric rings. The idea was to pull the cover off with the poker, one glowing ring after another. If a ring fell off the poker, you might get burned. Anyone who managed to get the rings off could look into the open fire. The black poker, which we found spooky as children, hung from the thin silver railing that ran around the stove; it was the same in the shack. Nobody had ever touched us with the poker, but the threat that someone could take it in hand if we were really bad still hung in the air in our kitchen.

Our stove's little brother heated the hunting shack up surprisingly quickly, but with its cute little fire compartment, I would've had to put in more of the small, specially chopped firewood every fifteen minutes to keep the fire alive and keep the shack warm for a few hours or through the night. The shack consisted of a single room, containing a table that was long enough for hunting parties, chairs, a bench, and a discarded kitchen cabinet from the 1960s. On the wall hung a few old targets, painted with hunting motifs and peppered with well-aimed shots. Porcelain plates, a colorful assortment of them, were stacked up high; there were beer glasses – some of them filled with silverware, ketchup, paper plates, grilling forks – liqueurs, ashtrays, two or three cases of beer. It was a men's club. And I found all kinds of useful items for a few days' stay: stocks of lighters, playing cards, candles, oil lamps.

Before the forest ranger left, I commented on how very visible the shack was. He looked at me with amusement. "Don't worry, no one goes into the forest." He knew that nature was trending in the cities, but that didn't matter here; the forest was devoid of people, at least this section of the forest was. He couldn't offer the Sunday strollers an easy hike, something they could do in twenty minutes. He said it without regret, like someone who had set up his territory just the way he liked it.

"And that one there?" There was a hiking trail right next to the shack, marked with a white cross. It even had a name, the Bonifacius. The English monk Bonifacius, reportedly a remarkably tall man, had moved from the Christian-Franconian south to the heathen forests here. To protect his Franconian warriors, he'd chopped down an oak dedicated to the cult of Donar and used its wood to build a chapel for the lords—the first church in free Germania. That was thirteen hundred years ago, and yet it seemed a short time. It had happened here, in these forests, two days' march from my shack; the path next to the shack was the one that St. Bonifacius had supposedly taken with his axe. And fifty years later, Charlemagne came and conquered the empire of the heathen Saxons. The mountain where that had happened was closer to my shack than was the Donar oak – two or three hours away on foot, and I would be there. Yes, a lot had happened in this area, even if it was a long time ago.

The forest ranger waved off my question. He'd been there for twenty-five years and only once had he seen one or two pilgrims on St. Bonifacius' path—he wasn't even sure they were pilgrims. "No, you won't run into anybody here. You'll find the most beautiful solitude that you could ever wish for." Then he whistled for Elsa to come out of the underbrush—she was his three-legged dog. He lifted her up into the bed of his mud-coated pick-up and drove away.

Good, I said to myself, a forgotten pilgrim's path, a forest that people avoid. This should work for you; oblivion will be your patron saint. A holy trinity of oblivion – aversion to the forest, forgotten origins, and the frugality of the here and now.

SIXTY SECONDS

I often thought about the forest ranger as I sat around the fire in the evenings. I was long past the age when every interesting encounter led me to question my path in life and dream of the different directions I might have taken. It wasn't like that. And yet there were a few things and

people here, certain agents that began to affect me, gently, not urgently, but in the evenings around the fire, the world was quiet enough that I noted a slight pull in my solar plexus. The question “are you a hunter?” was one such thing that began to affect me. The forest meanderings, the conversations with the forest ranger were another.

The shack is not a mystical place. It might seem so, when looked at from the longing perspective of a city person – someone who believes that his life is a trial and that the forest, so close yet so far away, is an idyll where he can escape reality. However, the forest was most certainly not an idyll, characterized as it was by plagues and violence. I would come to know all of these that summer – the forest that I’d moved to in the spring would be a different one when I left in the fall.

A good week before I’d moved into the hunting shack, the first plague had raged: the storm. I didn’t hear anything about it in the city, the city knew nothing of what happened out here. But everything here turned upon the latest storm, that much was unmistakable. There was a racket in the forest, roaring, screeching, bursting. It was there early in the morning, when I woke up on my cot, stiff and twisted from the hard bed that I wasn’t used to yet. It was there when I bathed outdoors, splashing one handful of cold water on my neck, two on my head. It was there when, shivering, I brewed coffee on the gas stove and cut myself a piece of bread from the bag that hung from a nail so the mice couldn’t get to it. And things remained this way all day long – there was a racket in the forest from early in the morning to late at night.

The roaring came from the forestry harvesters, giant wood-cutting machines. The screeching was the tireless felling of tree trunks, and the crashing and bursting the incessant stripping of limbs. The idea was to clean up the forest, to pull the dead wood from the chaos, saw it into pieces, remove its bark, stack it. Trees that had taken decades to grow lay strewn all around, the devastation was spectacular. The forest through which I wandered – early, when there was dew; in the shimmering dust of midday; in the cool evenings – I saw its misery, it had been laid low by the March storm. I climbed over trees while walking, trunks tossed one over the other, as wantonly as if a giant had played pick-up sticks. Thousands, tens of thousands of trees complete with roots, yanked from the red earth as if they were straws. The storm had cut swaths of destruction, mown down entire hillsides, shaved off knolls, left bald spots the size of small villages. Where once spruces had dimmed the light – the forest eternal – now, dead wood lay drying in the sun, unshaded. Roots as thick as arms pointed accusingly up at the sky, straining across the battlefield like amputated limbs, the smaller root-fingers flailing futilely against the azure mockery. Images of aerial warfare arrived unbidden. This is how the forest had looked after a bombing attack, except that this time around, the air itself attacked, not men. Not like in the old days, when we’d found craters in the forest. We knew from older people’s stories what had caused them. To make their flight home easier after an attack on the nearby industrial city, returning bombers had dropped anything they hadn’t been able to drop earlier onto the forest. Twenty years later, as we wandered, we’d discovered the pits in the forest floor, filled with leaves and branches so they were easy to miss. We recognized them because we’d heard about them and their unnaturally regular spherical shape. Ignoring the warnings, we climbed down into them and felt a little eerie. We’d all heard about the boy, only slightly older than we were, who’d lost his life in such a crater. He’d touched something that blew up.

I tried to imagine the power of the storm. What it had been like when it traveled through the forest. I asked forestry experts and people who worked in the forest if they'd ever experienced anything like it. All of them said no. Anyone who stayed in the forest when a storm was brewing must be off their rocker; none of them wanted to be killed by a tree ripped from the ground. The towering spruce next to my shack gave me an inkling of how powerful the storm must have been; it had been torn from the red earth complete with its roots and thrown across the forest path. The tree was probably fifty meters tall. Its massive crown, cut off and lying beside it, discouraged me from approaching it unabashedly and touching its needles. The needles hung in bundles from the crown, plump as the needles of a tree on a cuckoo clock – the shaggy, wild head of a giant that you'd normally look up at, now lying in the dust. The crown had been sawn off to clear the path, and the perfect trunk had been pushed to the side. But as sublime as the spruce looked in death, just as sublime must have been the base of its fifty-year life – the trunk had approximately the same number of rings as the number of years I'd been alive. The giant had lived flat-footed; it was easy for the storm to pluck it from the earth and toss it around. "Root plate," the forestry term for this, was very accurate. The tree had stood on a root system that was flat like a fired clay plate.

I learned my first law of the forest. A storm will take trees with flat roots; trees with deep roots usually remain standing, at least most of the time. I ran through a forest full of clay plates – the forest ranger warned me not to come too close when work was being done on them. The four- or five-meter-high, gaping root systems were under tension; the fallen trunks held them fast in an unnatural position. If the trunk were sawed off, the roots would slam back down into their muddy crater. Anyone nearby would, best case scenario, be hit by a load of mud – if he were unlucky, he'd be struck by the muddy roots themselves. The lumberjacks joked about all the things and people that they could make disappear forever in those craters. No one would ever reopen those holes, made by root monstrosities ripped out by a storm and then tipped back in. Anything buried underneath them would stay there.

The storm had hit so many forests, so many parts of the country, that there was a forest harvester shortage. Nevertheless, the forest ranger had successfully obtained six of the giant machines. They appeared everywhere, not just on the trails – and always in the middle of the forest. The hulking machines could even take on steep slopes. How deftly they worked their way up hills on their huge tires, which were taller than a man and ringed with chains. They chewed, apparently effortlessly, through untrodden underbrush, hip-deep swaths of mud. The sight of them reminded me of ancient creatures, their ungainly shapes like long-extinct prototypes of current animals. Atop their squat bodies sat a much smaller brain-box, the cabin. From it, the operator controlled the overlong dinosaur neck with the dangerously agile biting head, which tossed in all directions. Now, its saw-mouth snapped up another fifty-meter spruce. A crushing crack, and the branches were gone. The steel dinosaur ran the trunk crosswise through its mouth just once, as if gnawing the meat from a monstrous bone; in the process, it cut the trunk into precisely measured sections. Sputtering, it proceeded; one trunk after another was stripped and sliced up. Sometimes a branch on the trunk was too thick or stubborn; then the mouthful of blades had some trouble. It would bite down again, angrier this time, and start over. By the end, it had stripped and sliced up every tree. Then the steel dinosaur calmed down, and almost cautiously it took up the glowing

white wood, stripped of its bark, and placed it with the other trunks, satisfied, insofar as a beast of steel can be satisfied.

The machine also came to the storm-felled birches by my shack. I went out and timed it, several times, for I could hardly believe what the clock told me – how fast it was. Sixty seconds, that was all, never more than sixty, even if the storm hadn't done the prep work and a birch first had to be cut down before it was stripped of its branches and sliced up. Sixty seconds, and the fifty-year-old spruce, with all its pieces – trunk, roots, branches, crown – was a pile of wood, destined for the sawmill near the forest. Or cut to container size, eleven and a half meters, to be sent on the sea route to China. That empire beyond the steppes, behind the highest mountains, was always hungry for wood.