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LONGING

English sample translation by Sean Gasper Bye

[pp. 7–12]

Let's say that Erwin Piontek opened his eyes.

It was dark in the bedroom, only the square of the window shone with the gray, feeble
light of early dawn.

Let's say that Erwin lay on his back, covered by a down quilt, holding his hands on
top, as if lying there, he were standing at attention. He slept without moving, always waking
in the same position in which he'd fallen asleep; in the morning, the quilt was laid just as
evenly as the night before, when he'd smoothed it down over himself with his hands.

And that's just how I see him, though I'm not there. This is Erwin's bedroom, after all,
why should I be there?

“Bydzie ćwierć na piōntō...” *Almost quarter past four...* said Erwin to himself, and
kept lying still, staring at the ceiling, where delicate cracks formed a map of strange,
fantastical rivers, seas and islands. He lay and waited, and did not have to wait long.

Sleeping beside him, in an alert slumber as always, was Marika, his wife, whom he'd
wed forty-six years earlier in Pilchowice's Church of the Beheading of St. John the Baptist;
her hair was carefully wrapped in curlers.

Over the bed hung a gold-framed oleograph depicting Jesus, his heart aflame, beside a
green-and-black-tasseled miner's sword and an ornate miner's pick and miner's axe. A
miner's sword is not for stabbing people, though it resembles a sword that serves to stab
people. An ornate miner's axe is not for chopping wooden pit props, though it resembles one
that formerly served to chop wooden pit props. The same with the pick. It resembles, but does
not serve.

Further along was Marika and Erwin's wedding photo, in which Marika and Erwin looked like the Marika and Erwin later sleeping in bed, but only a little; then another photo, a memento from a trip to Crete, also showing Marika and Erwin, but thirty years later, on the deck of the Athens–Heraklion ferry; in this photo, tanned Marika in a pink blouse gazed at Erwin lovingly, while Erwin gazed lovingly at the sea. In this photo, Erwin and Marika looked more like the Erwin and Marika sleeping in the bed underneath it.

With an unpleasant racket, the alarm clock on the nightstand went off. Erwin glanced at its electronic display: 4:15 a.m. It was Friday. *Piontek* in Silesian, like his name. Next to the alarm clock were small photos of his daughters and grandchildren.

“Nō toć,” he muttered to himself, pleased that, just like every day, he'd awoken just before the alarm. He said up in bed, quickly crossed himself, and his feet searched on their own for his slippers, which should have been on the small rug by the bed. Yet his slippers weren't there.

“Marika, kaj mōm lacze...?” said Erwin, asking his wife where they were.

Marika rolled over, turning her back to her husband.

“Mariczko, sam niy ma moich laczōw, kaj ône sōm?” asked Erwin, insistently. *Mar, my slippers aren't here, where are they?*

“W rzici sōm, Erwin, zawrzij tyn pysk, jō śpiã,” replied Erwin's wife, not opening her eyes. *They're up your ass, Erwin. Shut up, I'm sleeping.*

Let's say that Erwin sighed, seeing he was going to have to do without his slippers. He got up, walked barefoot to the bathroom and sat down on the toilet, reaching for yesterday's issue of *Przegląd Sportowy*. He did not acknowledge sports news in any form other than a newspaper. He checked how the Ruch were playing, but nothing had changed since yesterday, when he'd last checked in the same newspaper.

The Chorzów Ruch were still in the third league.

The Chorzów Ruch were still in the third league at the moment when Erwin was reading *Przegląd Sportowy*. As I write these words, the Chorzów Ruch are back in the top league, but I don't know where they'll be in the soccer hierarchy as these words are being read. Nor whether the Chorzów Ruch still exist at all, though actually Erwin Piontek fervently believed the Chorzów Ruch would exist forever, even if he didn't express that conviction in words.

Erwin pondered the fate of the Chorzów Ruch, who in their warrior quest seemed to him like the fate of man on earth and how his days were also like the days of a hireling. He sighed for the second time that morning, now with great sadness, then rose, went to the mirror, washed his hands, brushed his teeth, took off his undershirt and rinsed his pot-bellied torso with cold water; he washed carefully under his armpits, then set about shaving. With a brush, he applied thick foam to his cheeks and neck, inserted a new blade into the safety razor he'd gotten from his father for his eighteenth birthday and scraped the stubble from his face, leaving an ample, though graying, yellowish mustache. Neither Erwin's adult daughters, Ana and Magda, nor Marika could stand his mustache, but without a mustache Erwin didn't feel like a man, so why shouldn't he wear it? If they didn't like mustaches, then they shouldn't

grow one. He rinsed his face, patted his skin with the shaving-water and reached for the clothes he'd laid out the day before, the Wrangler jeans dating back to the Mazowiecki administration, a flannel shirt, a sweater, everything size XL, because Erwin was a burly man.

He hadn't gotten fat in old age, he'd always been this way.

So he got dressed and buckled to his left wrist a thinly gold-plated Bisset watch inscribed with a *pyrlik i żelōzko*—a crossed hammer and pick—and the words “25 Years of the Knurów Coal Mine.” The watch was fairly cheap, battery-powered, but dear to the heart of Miner First-Class Erwin Piontek, for the director himself had given it to him personally, the

same man who five years earlier had awarded Erwin a miner's sword.

Whenever he glanced at the bright watch face with its date window, he felt he hadn't wasted that quarter-century underground, but only briefly, for three jumps of the second hand, or maybe five, then the feeling passed and he was left with ordinary futility.

After getting dressed, he went to the kitchen. Out the window was a rainy September. On the windowsill was a model of the yacht *Opta*, which years ago Leonid Teliga had sailed around the globe. Erwin Piontek had been twenty-five at the time. He used to read about Teliga's journey in *Sea* magazine, read and daydream, already many years into laboring underground, and underground he would stay.

That's not what he thought about now, instead he opened the refrigerator and made breakfast: four small frankfurters, two slices of buttered bread, a dollop of mustard, a few slices of tomato, salt and pepper, and finely chopped onion. He also brewed tea, with honey and lemon, ate it all up, and washed it down with the hot, sweet drink.

“Trzi ćwierci na piōntō,” *a quarter to five*, he said out loud and only after saying these words did he glance at his watch.

The thinly gold-plated Bisset showed 4:45.

“Nō toć,” said Erwin, pleased, and made himself a second breakfast, for work, humming an old Silesian blues song by Jan Skrzek.

“Jak coś robisz, to je rzecz śwyntō.” *When you make something, that thing is holy*, he muttered, placing slices of ham and cheese across two buttered rolls.

He wrapped them in tin foil and put them in his bag, slipped on his shoes, and donned a light, gray-colored jacket, whose pockets held an old Nokia 6310, a wallet, and the keys to his Opel.

“Tōż jadā do roboty, dziōbecku,” he said. *All right, honey, I’m going to work*. He said it quietly, so that Marika wouldn’t hear, since he didn’t want to wake her.

He went outside.

It was chilly and dark, and raining.

The first wintery night of the year, he thought. It was Friday, *piontek*. Piontek picked up a ceramic, hollow garden gnome with a shiny red cap, white beard and the joyful grin of a pedophile working in an orphanage. From inside the gnome he pulled a Ziploc bag holding a pack of white Marlboros and a lighter. He fished out a cigarette, lit it, replaced the bag and took a deep drag, then he listened to the rush of blood pumped by his suddenly accelerating, nicotine-jolted heart. He smoked for moment, savoring the flavor of the cigarette, then put it out and threw the butt into the compost bin, where he hid it under a little grass from yesterday’s mowing.

Let's say he got into his car, started the engine, turned on Radio Piekary, switched on the rear wiper and shifted into reverse, turned around in his seat to back out through the gate, then through the rear windshield spotted Marika, wrapped in a beige bathrobe, furious and gorgeously lit up in the rain by the red of the brake lights, which transformed the rollers on her head into the crown of a menacing queen.

“Co ty zaś sam wyprawiösz, mamlasie?” snarled Marika. “Zaś mie budzisz, zaś ci sie zdöwö, co do roboty jedziesz?” *What the hell are you up to, you jackass? Waking me up again, thinking again that you're going to work?*

Erwin had already known something was wrong, but he hadn't yet been able to name it or put his finger on it.

“Mariczko, jo...” he moaned, squeezing the steering wheel. *Mar, I...* Then suddenly, in a painful paroxysm, he understood, he understood the mess he was in just like a man being electrocuted does.

He understood there'd been no point making his second breakfast, no point getting up so early, no point shaving, there was nowhere to go or any reason why, because he'd been retired for many years.

“I co, gupielöku jedyn, ty se myślisz, jö niy wiym, co we tym cwergu cygarety chowiesz? Aże mi na wyrchu kurzyniym wōniało!” *And what, numbskull, you think I don't know you hide cigarettes in that gnome? I could smell the smoke all the way upstairs!*

Erwin nodded, humiliated. Marika, furious, went back into the house and slammed the door behind her.

Erwin put the car in neutral, turned off the engine, pulled up the emergency brake, but
didn't get out of the car.

They happened to him less and less, but they did keep happening, these wonderful,
hopeful mornings, when for a half an hour of his life Erwin was headed somewhere, he had
meaning and worth, and order.

Erwin Piontek, mining shot-firer first-class. A *szishajer*. A burly man.

[pp. 67–91]

Back then, I thought Erwin Piontek might have been someone else entirely. After all,
Erwin Piontek didn't have to be born where he was, or be raised the way he was; Erwin
Piontek could have been born earlier or later, been raised by someone sort of like Paulek
Piontek, or maybe nothing like him. But then would he have stayed Erwin Piontek? If he'd
been born the same, exactly the same, but been raised differently, would he be the same sort
of human being? Would he be the same human being?

And if he'd been born the same, raised the same, but at some point his life had divided
itself into two lives, would these two Erwin Pionteks be the same sort of human being? The
same human being?

This is an important question, because in the end the world can't exist without human
beings; I learned that from Heidegger, but no, it isn't a declaration of solipsism.

*Die Welt kann nicht durch den Menschen, aber auch nicht ohne den Menschen sein,
was sie und wie sie ist.* "The world cannot be what and how it is through human beings, but
neither can it be so without human beings."

So let's say that Erwin Piontek is the same human being, but the world that exists to him exists in a different way, since Erwin Piontek exists in a different way.

So let's say that Erwin Piontek is lying on the ground, and the ground is red, but not with blood.

Erwin exists in the world, and the world exists thanks to him, because each world exists thanks to someone, but this is a different world, a different time and a different place. In a different way.

So let's say that he's lying there. It's Friday, but a different Friday.

The sun burns the skin of his face, now unshaded by the brim of a hat, but Erwin doesn't feel it.

The skin of Erwin's face is already sun-darkened.

Let's say that Erwin is unconscious because he hit his head on a stone that's been sitting in this spot for a few million years, since nothing much changes here; wind-borne sand had smoothed the stone into a shape deceptively similar to the kopje faintly visible on the horizon, as if this rock were a model of that distant rock, scaled down a hundred times. A kopje is a solid, rocky mountain rising above the surrounding terrain, the way an island rises from the sea. In German a *kopje* is called an *Inselberg*. In Polish it's called a *twardzielec*, but Erwin doesn't know that word and I've never heard it before, nor have I ever heard anyone ever use it, and I had to use a dictionary to figure out the Polish word for kopje, besides which it sounds awful, so I'm not going to use it.

It's a complete coincidence that the stone Erwin hit his head on is shaped like that distant kopje. No one has ever hit their head on it before. You'll have to trust me on this — trust who? — but it's true.

No one had ever hit their head on it before.

I look at him, at Erwin. I'm standing next to him, it's really hot, because it's January and the temperature is forty-one degrees Celsius. I feel uneasy, because I know I shouldn't be here, so I at least try to remain invisible as I look at Erwin, and if I try, it's not so hard, so I am invisible, so much so that I'm practically not there.

Then here's the red ground, the darker stone and the skinny gray horse, the yellow, now-stinging, dry blades of sparse grass. Erwin is wearing riding boots with spurs, as well as jodhpurs and a corduroy uniform jacket, light brown in color, a belt with attached shoulder straps, and eight cases of rifle ammunition. Next to Erwin lies an old hat, now very dusty, with its wide brim bent upward on one side and fixed to the crown.

So let's say that standing over Erwin is an old man, short in stature, very slight, with light brown skin, prominent cheekbones and slightly slanting eyes. His name is Hendrik Witbooi. Erwin is middle-aged, a decent height—is there such a thing as an indecent height?—he has a yellow handlebar mustache, sparse stubble on his cheeks, a large nose, and if he were standing next to Witbooi, the even the top of the latter's hat would only barely reach Erwin's shoulder; but now Erwin is lying on the red ground, and Erwin's skin is light pink, only his face is sunburned and peeling, and his hands and forearms are peeling too.

The man standing over Erwin is wearing a dark khaki jacket, buttoned only at the top, along with white pants and a shirt, riding boots, and a hat, the crown of which he's wrapped

very carefully in a white cloth to form a protruding crest at the very top. The thumb is missing from his right hand; he lost it long ago, in a war with the Herero. Nearby stands Hendrik Witbooi's horse, whose reins Kaptein Witbooi has hitched to the branch of a tree, which is basically a large aloe; of the two languages Kaptein Witbooi uses from day to day, this tree is called a *kokerboom* in one and a *choje* in the other. Kaptein Witbooi's ancestors used to make the branches of this tree into quivers for arrows, but the Kaptein doesn't, because for a hundred and fifty years the Witboois have been shooting guns, not bows. Guns shoot better than bows.

"I think differently about weapons than your White people, who have the skill and knowledge to make the necessary and useful things for a comfortable life. But I look at the issue of weapons as follows: guns and ammunition should be free articles for everyone's use. You cannot keep it to yourself and regulate its sales with sanctions. Let weapons be freely available to anyone in the country. We live by the gun, we are hunters, and we need to protect ourselves against our enemies and against wild animals. A man who is alone in the field needs a gun; on every farm, settlement or holding; if only one person is living there, he needs a gun," said Kaptein Witbooi.

This is indeed what he said, though he didn't say it now, if by "now" we mean the moment when he stood over Erwin Piontek, lying on the red ground.

These are the real words of Kaptein Witbooi, spoken on June 9, 1892, thirteen years before he now stands over Erwin Piontek. The Kaptein spoke them in Hoornkrans to Curt von François, in the presence of a few other people who heard their conversation. But now it's 1905, in spring; now he's also in the territory of Deutsch-Südwestafrika, that is, German

South West Africa, in the south of this South West Africa, in the valley of the Auob river,
right in its channel, which water flows down once every few years, but not right now, even
though it's spring.

Reichskommissar Curt von François comes from an old Huguenot family and is a
Prussian officer, just like his father. At this moment he's no longer in Deutsch-Südwestafrika,
he's been gone for ten years; now, when Witbooi stands over Edwin Piontek, Curt von
François is with his second wife on his estate in Zernsdorf, sitting in a wicker armchair in the
garden, reading Heine's epic poem *Die Nordsee*, smoking a pipe and watching two of his
children play in the grass—they are a blond boy and an auburn-haired girl, both in sailor suits.

He had two other children with his second wife, but they died in infancy. She will
divorce him in 1911, because of von François's utter inability to conform to the social
obligations of the upper-middle class, from which his wife Margarethe comes and whose
status she will want to maintain.

With his late first wife, Curt von François has a daughter named Josefine !Gawaxas,
who now—that is, in the spring of 1905—is alive. Curt von François's first wife was a
Princess of the Damara people, Amalia Gereses; Amalia Gereses's skin was dark brown.
Currently, in 1905, German soldiers and settlers are banned from marrying women with dark
brown skin, or very light brown skin, or even with yellowish skin like that of Kaptein
Witbooi.

In 1905, soldiers are permitted to marry only women with pale pink skin like Erwin Piontek's, yet there aren't many of those in Deutsch-Südwestafrika, because women aren't eager to come here from Germany. Male soldiers and settlers wish to copulate with women and don't mind the color of their skin. They like women with dark skin just as much as Curt von François used to like Amalia Gereses, so they copulate with them in secret, while some men like women with dark, nearly black skin so much that, despite the ban, they don't dismiss their companions and don't conceal this one bit.

German officials worry that the children of these unions will spoil the white race. Human race is a concept without a designatum, but most concepts belong to that same category anyway, such as "God," "human rights" or "Superman."

Curt von François's daughter Josefine will marry Cornelius Nunuhe, known as Komondjira yaKahandja, and in 1925 he will have a daughter who will be named Verona !Gawaxas.

In 1925, my grandfather Jorg Draga was five and lived in a house ten kilometers' distance from the home of Erwin Piontek's parents, who'd had no word of their son in years. But that's a different Erwin Piontek (though also the same one) from the one whom Jorg was meant to visit not quite a century later, but given that's nearly a century, maybe my grandfather isn't quite the same either.

Curt von François's German children, white-skinned children, didn't consider their sister Josefine their sister, though Josefine's skin was very light, so light that her mother Amalia darkened her skin with charcoal so she wouldn't catch the attention of German officials, who didn't want men with white skin copulating with dark-skinned women, and

children with ambiguous skin tones were, in the officials' opinion, indisputable proof of such copulation.

Verona !Gawaxas grew up among the Damara people, in a place called the Royal House, as befitted the granddaughter of a princess, then married Martin Nangombe and bore him eleven children, who called her "oma," which I also called my grandmother, and she subsequently died on November 1, 2021, less than a year after my grandfather Jorg Draga, who also died, but on December 14, 2020.

In 1965, when Verona !Gawaxas was forty, in Windhoek, the capital of South West Africa — as the former Deutsch-Südwestafrika was called then, when it belonged to the Union of South Africa — a memorial was erected to her grandfather, Curt von François.

Verona wore a light pastel-colored dress modeled on the nineteenth-century dresses of missionaries' wives, while on her head was a cap formed into a shape vaguely reminiscent of cows' horns, a symbol of female fertility, abundance and wealth among the Damara and Herero peoples.

In Windhoek on November 23, 2022, the monument to Curt von François was taken down, because representatives of Namibia's ruling party, SWAPO — mainly members of the Owambo people who live just on the border with Angola — no longer wanted a monument to Curt von François to stand in the capital of a country that they — following Hendrik Witbooi and his ancestors, then the Germans, then the Boers and the British from the South Africa — considered theirs.

“God gave the people the skill and knowledge to make weapons as part of his great plan,” continued Kaptein Witbooi to Curt von François on June 8, 1892 in Hoornkrans, when von François demanded that he hand over all the weapons the Witboois possessed. “He made war to punish the sins and injustices of the nations. The sins and injustice of a nation cannot be driven out with a whip, God is perplexing one nation with the help of the neighbor, and firearms are his rod. It is therefore wrong for you to ban firearms. I think firearms should be as freely available as the rain that falls where it wants to fall today, on any ground and on any person, and that cannot be stopped. You are wrong to think stopping firearms will bring peace. It is not a healing plan, not good or right. Someone who wants to ban firearms is like one who withholds another from water.”

Kaptein Witbooi didn’t intend to hand over a single one of his guns to Curt von François, yet Curt von François didn’t know that yet, because Curt von François was stupid. He belonged to the type of person who was deeply hurt if they weren’t addressed with the proper title. Sometimes this quality is also possessed by people who aren’t stupid, but Curt von François was stupid. That’s why he answered Kaptein Witbooi in this way:

“Have no worry, dear captain, for your gun. No one in the territory will be allowed to own a gun. No one will need to defend himself with a gun, since the Government will protect all. Firearms are, after all, a recent invention. In the past men managed quite well with bows and arrows and with assegais. Man does not live by guns alone. In this country firearms are being used without good sense for nothing but mischief and murder.”

Small Kaptein Witbooi listened to von François’s words and still couldn’t believe the Germans were sending such idiots to his country.

“Those people you mentioned who lived by the bow and arrow and assegai, had no guns in their day: that is why they lived as they did. We are men of today, and live in the age of the firearm. Besides, commissioner, the Government will defend everyone, but who will defend us against the Government if we hand over our rifles to you?” he asked.

Curt von François kept talking, but Witbooi was no longer listening; he rose from his chair, one of his men held his stirrup for him and he mounted his horse.

The child of hate conceived at that meeting will be born nine months later when, without declaring war, Reich commissioner Curt von François’s men attack the house where Kaptein Witbooi lives with his family. Yet Kaptein Witbooi will escape at the last minute, rifle in hand, and never forget what Curt von François did.

The ancestors of Kaptein Witbooi include those who first brought guns to this place—known now, in 1905, as Deutsch-Südwestafrika. They brought them from the south, they got them from the Boers, and the guns were still flintlock rifles. Does this matter? As much as everything else. Everything matters, and everything matters equally. The trees, or who the ancestors of Kaptein Witbooi were and who the ancestors of Erwin Piontek were, or who Verona !Gawaxas was and who my grandfather Jorg Draga was, or who I myself am.

So now let’s say that the ancestors of Erwin Piontek were farmers who worked land belonging to someone else who saw himself as their lord. This also matters, just like the fact that Hendrik Witbooi’s horse is a mare and will live four more months, until she’s killed by a bullet.

So let's also say that now, twenty meters from where Erwin lies on the ground, are twelve mounted riders, armed with rifles. They all have white cloths tied around their hats, just like Hendrik Witbooi tied a cloth around his hat, they have rifles and bandoliers full of ammunition across their chests, and not especially dark skin, light brown, apart from one named Izaak, whose skin is very dark, because he's one of the Damara people, just like von

François's first wife. The Germans call them the Bergdamara, because such is their preference. Izaak joined Witbooi's men twenty years ago as a seven-year-old orphan. He's an excellent shot, he likes hunting springboks and also likes his wife's large bottom, which also matters just as much as anything.

The Bergdamara speak Khoekhoegowab, the same language the Nama speak, but they have completely dark skin because, let's say to ourselves, that sometimes happens too.

Kaptein Hendrik Witbooi is seventy-four years old.

Reiter Erwin Piontek is thirty-seven years old.

"Hand me a canteen," says Hendrik Witbooi, but in Nama, meaning Khoekhoegowab, not in English, so he speaks different words than the ones written here, yet ones that nevertheless mean "hand me a canteen," and those words of Witbooi's possess the power of shaping reality, so one of the riders hands him a canteen. The words he spoke to Curt von François in 1892 he also spoke not in English, but in Dutch. For his part, Curt von François replied to Hendrik Witbooi not in English, but in German, speaking loudly and clearly, the way you speak to children, and then Hendrik Witbooi defeated Curt von François, because Curt von François was stupider than Witbooi, but thought he was smarter. People like that are very easy to defeat, much easier than a stupid person who knows they're stupid.

“The hardest thing is to defeat a smart man who thinks he’s stupid,” said Witbooi
once, but that was a completely different time.

I sometimes put words in my books from languages I don’t know, but in the case of
Nama, meaning Khoekhoegowab, I don’t even know anyone who might know the language,
which is why I’m only putting the Polish equivalent of the words in Nama, at the same time
assuring you that Hendrik Witbooi spoke them in Nama.

So let’s say that’s how it was.

Hendrik Witbooi pours water over the face of unconscious Erwin Piontek, though
water is very precious, then slaps Erwin Piontek in the face.

These stimuli make Erwin Piontek’s brain slowly return consciousness to Erwin
Piontek, and so he once again becomes Erwin Piontek, rather than just his body. Above him,
Erwin sees the face of Hendrik Witbooi, which he recognizes because, in 1905 in Deutsch-
Südwestafrika, everyone knows Kaptein Hendrik Witbooi; Erwin sees his hat wrapped in
white cloth, he sees horse hooves and pasterns, and then whole horse bodies, and the men
sitting on them, their rifles, their bandoliers bristling like combs with the sharp tips of
ammunition, their light-colored clothing, their hats and the white cloths tied around them.

Chyciło mie hottyntocke kōmando, thinks Erwin, *I’ve been caught by a Hottentot
kommando*, thinking in Silesian because in moments of great agitation Erwin thinks in
Silesian, since in such moments we revert to our childhood, we go back to being children, and
our fear is a child’s fear, and our anger a child’s anger.

When Erwin is calm, he thinks in German.

But now he's not calm, now he's a child. *Chycyli mie*. They've caught me. I'm done
for.

Let's say he's not surprised either. Let's say Erwin knows Germans don't know how
to fight on the veld, not even the ones people here call "alte Afrikaner," old Africans. Erwin is
alte Afrikaner, since he arrived here by ship a little over twenty years ago and, not counting
the Africans themselves, there's hardly anyone here who's been here longer. Why not count
the Africans themselves?

Let's say that's just what people say.

Erwin arrived in Deutsch-Südwestafrika seven years before Curt von François did.
Erwin ist sehr alte Afrikaner. So Germans don't know how to fight on the veld, not even alte
Afrikaner, not like the Nama do, so Erwin is not surprised to meet such an end. Erwin doesn't
know how to fight on the veld either, not like they do. He expected nothing else. This is
exactly how it ought to end, thinks Erwin. No other way. Erwin is alte Afrikaner. How was it
going to end, if not just like this?

It's an honor, thinks Erwin, to be caught by old Kaptein Hendrik Witbooi himself.

An honor and a relief.

Let's say it's a relief because Witbooi doesn't torment his enemies, he simply kills
them; this is also good news, Erwin thinks, but he's very afraid, because he's afraid of death.
He thinks of the dark skin of his lover Anne-Marie, whom he sometimes visits in Windhoek.
He's sorry he'll never touch her again. He likes the smell of her skin. He doesn't want to die,
despite living in proximity to death for twenty years, though the death hasn't usually been his.

He's only sometimes lived in proximity to his own death, but even that was enough to get used to it. And to keep not wanting to die.

Hendrik Witbooi's ancestors, who called themselves the Oorlam, learned mounted guerrilla warfare from the Boers, who'd enslaved them on their farms. From the Boers they also learned to shoot rifles, as mentioned, to speak Dutch, to raise horses, and to read the Bible, after which they'd had enough of being the Boers' slaves, so they got on their horses, loaded their possessions onto ox-drawn wagons and headed north, crossing the Oranje River, and then, fighting and cattle rustling, they mixed with the local Nama people, who were cattle herders, but without access to firearms or horses. The Oorlam intermarried with the local Nama and became the armed élite of the whole Nama-kwa, the land of the Nama, and started robbing everyone else who had cattle, but not horses or rifles. For instance the Damara people, whom the Germans called the Bergdamara, from whom Curt von François's first wife and Izaak came.

Or the Herero.

"Herero" and "Damara" are actually concepts without designata, like "the human race," "God," or "human rights." The Herero, whom the literature says Hendrik Witbooi and his father Moses Witbooi used to rob, had no idea that they were something called Herero at all. They thought they were just people. The subject is fairly complicated.

Erwin only has a vague concept of all this, and it's not what's on his mind now; now he's only thinking about how for six months Hendrik Witbooi's Nama have been at war with the Germans, after many years of peace. Witbooi never gave up his guns, so he's waging war on the Germans, and he himself, Erwin Piontek, came here in the ranks of cursed, unfortunate

Hansheinrich von Wolf's division, to kill Hendrik Witbooi, which, as we can see, didn't worked at all.

Erwin Piontek raises his right hand and tries to cross himself.

"Im Namen des Vaters..." he begins.

Witbooi shakes his head. Another stupid German.

"Ik zal je niet doden," he says in literary Dutch, slowly and clearly, so that the big German lying on the ground — which, let's say, is red, but not with blood — understands that this means *I will not kill you*. I don't know literary Dutch either, but I know someone who does, which is why I could put those words here in literary Dutch.

For the moment, Erwin Piontek doesn't believe he'll be allowed to live. Unlike me, he understands Dutch and speaks it well. He's spent enough time here to learn the language. Hendrik Witbooi has known the language since childhood, he's bilingual; he also understands a little English and German, but not everything. Erwin Piontek spoke Silesian at home, German at school, and has spoken the local Dutch for more than a decade. Yet unlike me, Erwin isn't fluent in literary Polish, because he never had any need for it.

Did I break my watch? Erwin wonders in German, since now he's calmer.

On his left wrist he's wearing a Girard-Perregaux watch, a model designed specially for the German navy. He bought it from an officer of that same navy, who besides being an officer was also an alcoholic and a gambler, which meant that Erwin won this watch for a fraction of its value from a desperate drunk and felt no guilt because of it.

The very concept of wearing a watch on the wrist is considered by Erwin's comrades to be an extravagance, and even a sign of femininity; a true man should carry his watch in a

vest pocket. The custom of wearing watches on wrists would become widespread among men only after the First World War, since only then would it start to be the mark of a well-dressed soldier, or rather an officer.

Erwin's Girard-Perregaux is one of the first watches made for that purpose; its glass is covered with a grille of thin, metal wires through which you can barely see the hands, but is of course meant to protect it. The grille can be opened, like the case of a pocket watch.

It's probably about twenty past three, thinks Erwin, though he doesn't know how long he was unconscious for, and he glances at his left wrist. His watch is intact. It shows twenty past three.

"Take his ammunition and his gun. Put him on the horse," says Witbooi in Nama, which Erwin recognizes by its pops and clicks, but which he doesn't actually understand, apart from a few words and basic expressions. "If he tries to escape, shoot, but aim so you don't wound the horse. That's a good horse."

Hendrik Witbooi's men jump off their horses and pick up Piontek, but Piontek weighs a hundred kilos of Piontek alone, plus the weight of his clothing and gear, and Witbooi's men are short with very slight builds; Erwin had a similar physique when he was twelve, meaning in 1880, and by then he'd already outgrown his father Paulek, a man whose short stature, like his grim temperament, stemmed entirely from the fact that he'd grown up in the late forties, in a time of heavy rains and famine as well as diseases followed the rains. His mother thoroughly boiled linden bark, clover and pigweed to feed him, but somehow that wasn't enough to make Paulek Piontek, born in 1842, grow. The Nama are a similar size to him, but much healthier, because instead of bark and clover, they eat meat and milk. Yet it takes four

of them to finally lift Piontek, who is swaying on his legs, and help him clamber up into the saddle.

Once finally in the saddle, Erwin touches his head — a large lump is forming on the back of it. One of Kaptein Witbooi's men gives Erwin his hat with a the turned-up brim, a Südwestershut.

Witbooi struggles a little getting onto his mare. By now he's seventy-four years old.

"Don't run away," says Witbooi to Piontek in Dutch. "I'm old, my arms and hands are very tired now and heavy with blood, and I don't want to kill you. Our Lord and God will judge me, in Him I place the hope that you won't try to run away. The Sandveld would kill you anyway, but I wouldn't regret a bullet to stop you getting away with that good horse. If you want to run away, then go now on foot, you'll die in three days. I won't let you go on the horse, because that's a good horse and I captured it, so it's my horse."

"Why didn't you kill me right away, Kaptein?" replies Piontek, also in Dutch, but more colloquial, a language that will later be called Afrikaans, though now no one calls it that yet. Some call it Cape Dutch, to differentiate it from European Dutch.

Hendrik Witbooi doesn't like when someone speaks so colloquially, and in his opinion incorrectly, in Dutch, but he doesn't demand too much of the Germans, whose intelligence, as we know, he has a low opinion of.

"Izaak saw you at Waterberg," he replies, pointing at one of his men, though the whole unit moves, setting themselves up in marching formation without a command. "You were easy to recognize, you're so big and you've got that yellow mustache and long hair. We call you 'Xammi.' Do you know what Xammi means in Koehoegowab?"

“I do, Kaptein. It means lion,” replies Erwin.

“Yes. A lion, male. Because you’ve got that mane and you’re lazy. I know you, although we’ve never spoken, because you’ve been here a long time. I remember you. I’ve seen you here often. I don’t know the new soldiers, the ships have brought so many of you here. A new soldier I’d have shot right away, but you I remember, Xammi. You’ve been here a long time. And Izaak saw you at Waterberg, he saw what you did then, and through his mouth the Lord told me: ‘Spare that German, just as I spared Lot and his daughter before I rained fire on Sodom and Gomorrah. Izaak said that at Waterberg Xammi behaved like a human being, not a wild beast, not a hungry lion. Izaak says he didn’t shoot women or children, and I think it’s wrong to shoot women or children, the way the Germans like to.

That’s why you’ll live. March!”

They move at a walk, so as not to tire the horses.

Let’s say that I have a horse too, a large, bay gelding, who like me will remain invisible, and since that is my wish, so it must be. I’m not good at riding horses, I can keep myself in the saddle at a canter, but nothing more, I definitely wouldn’t be able to change leads while cantering, even though the horse does it for me without me even noticing. I could ride better, but it’s me, so I ride like myself, badly. Actually, I can barely stay in the saddle at a canter. For now, though, while we’re riding at a walk, I can easily keep up with them, my horse is strong, well fed and watered, stronger than Witbooi’s men’s skinny horses.

Erwin knows well who Hendrik Witbooi is. In 1905 in Deutsch-Südwestafrika, everyone knows who Hendrik Witbooi is. Erwin has seen him many times; he also served shoulder-to-shoulder Hendrik Witbooi’s men, who spent ten years on the side of the German

governor, Leutwein, after Witbooi agreed a peace treaty with the Germans. Erwin remembers clearly the days when there wasn't a single German soldier in Deutsch-Südwestafrika, and even after Hoornkrans, where in April 1893 von François tried and failed to kill Kaptein Witbooi, this time with 240 soldiers, Hendrik Witbooi was still the most powerful man between the rivers Oranje in the south and Kunene in the north, which marked the borders with the British Cape Colony to the south and Portuguese Angola to the north.

Now Hendrik Witbooi is no longer the most powerful man between the rivers Oranje in the south and Kunene in the north. Now Hendrik Witbooi is a guerrilla, fiercely hunted, who nonetheless keeps managing to slip away from the Germans and snipe at them.

Nonetheless, Hendrik Witbooi is still kaptein of the Witboois. The Witboois arrived here a hundred years ago, when their kaptein was Kido Witbooi, Hendrik's grandfather. The word "here" in the last sentence once again indicates German South West Africa, Deutsch-Südwestafrika, which will later have the English name "South West Africa," which means the same thing, but in English, and then, eighty years after Hendrik Witbooi came across the unconscious Erwin Piontek, it will be renamed Namibia, from a word in the Nama language that Witbooi speaks meaning "desert"; and that is still how it's described as I write these words, invisible in the January sun as I observe Erwin Piontek.

Erwin meanwhile doesn't know what on Earth Izaak, one of Witbooi's men, saw at Waterberg.

Erwin doesn't know what he himself saw at Waterberg. He was in the 6th Abteilung Volkmann, commanded by a lieutenant of that same name; they were attacking from the north and stopped at the edge of a cliff, amid red rocks. There, the whole unit lay down among

stones, and the order came: “Feuer frei!” So they fired until their hands were numb from reloading the rifles. Each platoon had one man for bringing ammunition from the convoys; they kept shoving five-round clips into their rifles and firing. Next to them rattled a Maxim machine gun, and behind them thundered mountain guns, without which Erwin thought they wouldn’t have been able to defeat the Herero. The Maxim was good against African warriors who, like the Zulu, wanted to attack en masse, rushing into the assault, while the Herero were clever fighters.

So at Waterberg, Erwin saw the tiny figures of Samuel Maharero’s soldiers, their light-colored, European clothes and broad-brimmed hats, and the clouds of smoke where they fired, because many of them were still using ammunition with black powder that smoked badly when they shot.

Erwin and the other Germans killed very many Herero there, but every time one fell, another ran up, picked up the fallen man’s rifle and kept shooting, until finally retreating. At the time, the Germans had eighty of Witbooi’s men on their side, since the kaptein had a grudge against Samuel Maharero, but Erwin hadn’t seen Izaak among them. Still, if the kaptein said Izaak saw him at Waterberg, that meant Izaak was there.

Now he was riding at the back, and behind him was the same Izaak, holding his reins in his left hand, and his gun, a captured German M88, in his right, with Erwin’s gun on his back.

“The time has come, the time has come,” says Hendrik Witbooi, bringing his horse even with Erwin’s. “You understand, giant? You understand, Xammi? God, our Lord and Father, has decided the time has come to liberate all the Nama, and I am a sword in His hand. You understand? This was God’s will. A prophet told me that, and I didn’t believe him, but then I saw how it pleased the Lord to destroy all the Herero at the hands of the Germans. And then I understood the Lord wanted me to liberate all the peoples of Africa. The prophet also told me that. Now I am a sword in the hand of the Lord, the sword of God. I knew this time would come. Were you at Hoornkrans? Ten years ago. So long ago now.”

“No, kaptein, I wasn’t,” replies Erwin, feeling relieved that was the case.

“You weren’t. Good. Few Germans lived here back then. You could have not been there. But do you know what happened at Hoornkrans?”

“Yes I do, kaptein. I was living in Windhoek at the time. I got sick, I’d been in the north and caught malaria.”

“You do know. You’re right, you must have, since I used to see you here before then, I remember, before Hoornkrans. But you weren’t there?”

“No, kaptein,” repeats Erwin.

“My son was wounded there, he’s paralyzed to this day, one whole side of his body. But that doesn’t matter. I saw the Germans kill a mother and the baby she had on her back, with one bullet. We escaped, but some of our women and children stayed behind and the Germans killed every single person there, they shot children the way you’d shoot a springbok on the veld. And women. They killed my son’s wife. They killed my wife’s mother. I saw the soldier as he was aiming, she was running, she was an old woman, and he followed her for a

moment with the barrel of the rifle, keeping her in his sights, the way you follow a running kudu, he was compensating for her running, he aimed in front of her and fired. He was a good shot, I saw, he hit her cleanly, in the head, she fell in fire, like a well-shot animal. And he was pleased, he reloaded. I wanted to kill him, but I didn't have time, I only had four bullets, I didn't even have time to take my bandolier as we fled. Did you hear about that? Do you know about all that?"

"I do, kaptein," replies Erwin, although he didn't know that in particular, but he's fearing for his life, so he says he does.

"I never kill women. It's not right to kill women. Men are for killing and men are for doing the killing. As you know, in October last year I decided that I wouldn't be subordinate to Major Leutwein any longer, and then I wrote to Holzapfel, the merchant, saying he probably knew what times we were living in, that God wanted me to punish the Germans for their sins and by doing so He would expiate our sins, and so he, Holzapfel, had to hand over all the ammunition and gunpowder he possessed. I wrote to him and if he'd done what I'd wanted, I'd have spared him, because he was a merchant. But he didn't obey my word, and my word was the voice of the Lord. And he was about to flee. So we caught him and I ordered him shot on the spot. Do you know that?"

"I do, kaptein. I knew him."

"You knew him. All right. On the place where I ordered him shot I also ordered a grave dug for him and for him to be buried like a Christian, do you know that? And then my men took his widow and his children, and his servants, and brought them to the German

garrison, their honor and bodies intact. Despite the fact that twenty years ago Commissioner

von François's Germans shot my son's wife as if she wasn't a human being."

"I'm sorry, kaptein. I've never shot a woman either," replied Erwin after a brief examination of conscience, in which he truly didn't remember such a situation.

"But that doesn't matter. That was God's decision, God turned away from us because we'd offended him with our sins, and the Germans became a sword in his hand, you understand?"

"I understand, kaptein," says Erwin, though he doesn't understand anything.

"You don't understand anything. Do you read Scripture, German?"

"I'm Catholic."

"Ah, so you're practically a pagan. Catholics aren't true Christians. They believe in magic, like pagans. In Mary as if she were a goddess. Like fools. Scripture doesn't say a word about that. But listen. Do you know what my man, Petrus Jefta, saw there? He told me, and his word is true. There Petrus saw a German soldier shoot a mother, and when her child ran to her screaming, he shot the child in the head and laughed. And what do you say to that?"

"That that's a crime."

"He was a sword in the Lord's hand. Do you understand?"

"Petrus Jefta?"

"No. That German soldier who shot the child in the head. He was a sword in the Lord's hand."

"A sword in the Lord's hand? But what could God have against that child, kaptein?"

Hendrik Witbooi smiles under his sparse, completely gray and short-trimmed mustache. Gray stubble surrounds his mouth and gives him an aged dignity.

“And did the Lord, when He wanted to test Job, not send the Sabeans and Chaldeans to wipe out his herd and his servants with the blades of swords? And the house of the eldest of Job’s children, where his daughters and sons were eating and drinking wine, did He not loose whirlwinds upon it, and did He not bring their house down upon them, and did they not perish?”

“So He did,” said Erwin assuredly, though he couldn’t remember anything from the Bible.

“And what did Job do then?”

Erwin says nothing.

“You don’t read Scripture. Not good. Do you know how to read?”

“I do, kaptein.”

“You know how to read and you don’t read Scripture? Then what do you know how to read for? Well then listen, listen to me, German. When the Lord sent the Chaldeans and the Sabeans, and the whirlwind, and killed the servants and Children of Job, then Job rent his garments, shaved his head and fell to the ground, bowing down before the Lord. So I battled the Germans in Naukluft for as long as I could, and then I bowed down before the Lord. I made peace and for ten years I was a faithful comrade-in-arms to Major Leutwein. No man is a man, merely a tool in God’s hand, do you see? But I remembered what the sword was that the Lord brought down on my neck in Hoornkrans. And when the Lord sent General von Throtha here, then the prophet Skipper Steuermann came to me from the Ethiopian Church

and revealed God's word to me. And my people came and said what happened to the Herero people, and they also are a tool in the Lord's hands, but the Lord wants the Germans to allow us, the Nama and others who are still alive, to live here. And now I will be a sword in the
Lord's hands.

Erwin says nothing. Witbooi smiles warmly; he has a very warm smile and generous eyes. He kicks his horse with his heels and moves forward, to the head of the unit. He's seventy-four years old, but he sits in the saddle with a lightness as if he were twenty, thinks

Erwin. Though he had a little trouble getting on.