

Svenja Leiber  
KAZIMIRA

Novel

336 pages, Clothbound  
publication date: 16 August 2021  
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Sample translation by Samuel Schulenburg  
pp. 7-26; 41 to 46; 139 to 140

**Extract 1: Pages 7 to 26**

»Living beings are, from an energetic and entropic point of view very improbable entities.«

*The Strasburg Textbook of Botany*

She stands on the shore, the waves licking at her feet, the now worn-out storm still tugging at her. She is young, seventeen on the verge of eighteen. Her hair is wet and heavy, like seaweed. The sea rolls on. But it's not really the sea, these are, as far as the eye can see, forces. She knows that, and she is waiting. Waiting. Waiting. For this feeding trough of time, fuelled by the life of the mainland, stores its memories in the water. Now and then a real find washes up on the shore and she reaches for it and puts it in her bag.

## Part I Blue Earth

*Jantarnyj, 2012*

It will be said that a pit is silent, that a pit does not speak, that a pit is nothing more than a pit. If you're hearing voices, you need to put the bottle down, stop drinking.

But Nadja Vladimirovna Semjonova did not drink and yet she heard something, on her way to work, above the mouth of the pit, where the ground slopes steeply without stopping. As if the landscape had betrayed its muteness for a moment, the slightest of cracks forming in its ceaselessly silent façade. And this is not just any landscape. Here, where peace has reigned for decades, but the land nevertheless looks as if war had been invented there: a colossal wound surrounded by a trembling young forest, gaping, divided into steps and paths, scraped out, an implausible juxtaposition of dust and mud, the type only some wretched hellscape could produce. On the last step before the bottom of the pit, between rusty pipes and carelessly laid planks, is a cable excavator which was once her workstation. But that was years ago now.

Nadja Semjonowa holds her daughter's hand and lets her eyes wander over the open pit.

»Did you hear it? « She whispers. The child looks up at her mother. She looks like her, only smaller, a cloud of red hair around her face. She shakes her head. She could not have heard anything. She is not scared. Only Mamutschka gets scared sometimes. Nadja looks around again. If she were to call out, nobody would hear her here. Neither from down there, nor

from up here. She moves quickly along, following the path down towards the road, pulling her child behind her.

They are in the Kaliningrad region, a few hundred metres east of the village of Jantarnyj. The name means amber, or ambering. As though everything there was made of the stuff. But it's mostly concrete, and in any other context, an onlooker would probably call it godforsaken.

It is a Saturday in autumn. The sky looms grey over the desolate region, the rain is heavy. Nadja holds the collar of her coat with her left hand. People spoke a lot about such things. She had never wanted to know. Now it is settling itself around the back of her neck. She will later say it is like a murmur. One would only have to replace the world murmur with another, one that meant there was still something to be found. But it was something like a murmur.

The old amber cooperative is from another time. They used to get eight hundred tons of raw amber every year. A few years ago, they went bankrupt. Half the workers were fired, and the rest were sorted by gender: the men stayed in the pit, working the machines, like Nadja's colleague, Anatoly Mikhailovich. The women were sent to the processing or sales departments. Nadja would have preferred to stay with the machines. On the old excavator, which obeyed her like a puppy. But they said she was lucky to be selling jewellery in the pavilion, which was clean. Lucky, she had scoffed, holding back tears. Anatoly took over the cable excavator. The cooperative became a private enterprise, got a new name, was refurbished for a few million roubles, modernised and is now monitored by cameras. But the same old problem remains: the mine's stores were filled with a huge amount of raw amber. The issue was the demand, or lack thereof. The stuff was out of fashion. That's how it is with fashion, Nadja thought. Hopefully people won't fall out of style one day.

As she walks, she looks for the cigarettes in her bag. She knows

they're in there somewhere. She briefly looks over at her daughter and then decides to smoke anyway. Forgive me, Ika, she thinks. Her collar blows open, the damp wind penetrating through her coat. The first houses are coming into view, ramshackle prefab buildings, a petrol station, the workshop building that was turned into a brothel, where a few soldiers can always be seen standing around.

The women should be awake by now, Nadja thinks and walks along the edge of the street, with little Ika now in her arms and her eye on a concrete mermaid caught forever in the stone waves that surrounded her, the landmark at the entrance to the village. A better god will one day send all women to earth as mermaids, with their legs fused together. Nadja takes a deep drag from her cigarette and coughs. The smoke blows into Ika's face. As she wafts it away, it looks as though she were waving. The soldiers look over, one whistles. Nadja stares straight ahead, she feels sick, she hugs her child tighter and throws the cigarette butt into a ditch. There is not much keeping her in this place, despite the fact she was born here. Her family came after the Great Patriotic War, a mother and a hungry half-orphan, on a train filled with widows, part of some political resettlement program. They were given an abandoned house, a piece of land, some money, tax relief – in this place that meant nothing to them, to anyone. Neither Kaliningrad nor Jantarnyj nor the German brick housing on the edge of the pit, where Nadja and Ika still live, meant anything. They will live there till the house was gone, and that would be soon, it will slide away, be swallowed up by the all-consuming pit.

So Nadja too occupies this land on a rather provisional basis, and although she is not yet old, she already feels like the house, as though she is at the end of something, not at the beginning. In the end, she thinks everything in Jantarnyj finds itself in the pit, in the hole.

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The first hole is dug one hundred and forty-one years earlier by Instmann Roganzky. He is a man with a hunch, dragging a ladder into a field and digging, hoping to find something in the depths of the earth. The ladder only has fifteen rungs. Lodged in the ground, it can only ever go down, never up. Stuck in the field on the West Beach, above the steep bank, latitude  $54^{\circ}$  north, longitude  $19^{\circ}$  east, almost Baltic and about forty metres above sea level. The spars protrude a little out of the ground, just about visible in the morning light.

Maybe Roganzky found something there, or something scared him off. Either way he suddenly started running across the field a little too hastily. At the edge of the plot, some distance away, there is another man, a gendarme, not quite so sturdy on his feet, more suited to the use of a rifle, who calls out to Roganzky. The curious sight of a frantically running civilian has him wanting to ask questions. Roganzky turns to him, terrified, and lets him come closer, but instead of identifying himself, or even giving his name, he suddenly becomes erratic. A sense of desperation. Having found something. The gendarme now has to get involved. Roganzky turns back on himself and runs across the field. The gendarme follows, almost agile on the uneven ground now. He locks his gaze onto the man. It is now light, and the land up here is as clear as a judge's table. The gendarme has him firmly in his sights, until Roganzky suddenly, without warning, disappears.

The gendarme stands still like someone who needs to collect himself. He tries to let it go, cautiously moving on. It must have been the sea mist and whatever else goes on up here - it has only been a short while since he was transferred to the area. He reaches into his coat for a folded sheet of paper. A military honour roll, with eagles, skulls, angels of victory and cannons, a violent, pocket-sized portrait. Little does he know that he should not have stopped. All of a sudden it is silent.

There is a possible point of suspect everywhere. One's senses seem jumpy.

But the one who jumped was actually Roganzky, down from the steep bank to the beach, a risky move to get away from the gendarme's line of sight, to whom the end of the field appears to be the horizon. There is nothing to suggest that there is a world beyond it. The bewildered gendarme stumbles along and almost falls over the ladder rails.

»What on earth? «, he says to himself. He now understands why Roganzky was running. The offence in question: the unauthorised mining of amber. And unauthorised means it is forbidden. This is Prussia, you cannot just start digging wherever you please. He climbs down the ladder. There's no light in the hole, so he can not see how the walls at the bottom have already been washed away. The sand is wet and drifting, underneath there is diluvium, then mica. Steeped in icy water, the hole barely holds long enough for him to get to the bottom of it before collapsing. The gendarme has just enough time to cover his face.

He remains down there, the military honour roll of Mother Earth pressed to his heart. A human enclosure, only with mud instead of resin. Roganzky, meanwhile, walks unscathed along the beach, then back up onto the land and down a path to the estate buildings where he has an interview with his master. Late that evening, he leaves the estate on horseback and takes the road east to the lagoon and the spit. He will ride for two days.

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*The Split, 1871*

The hut on the spit has no chimney. It is grey on the outside and almost pitch black on the inside due to the smoke. Eels hang from the beams like heavy braids, their oily skin gleaming in the twilight. Below them are a table, a bench and a few basic



necessities, a pot, a place to sleep. An occupied smoke house in a dilapidated state.

Kazimira, born Morautene, whose hips are narrow like those of a tall boy, pulls the door of the hut shut. Last night had been stormy and today she had collected the wash-up beach sediment and pocketed it, even though it is forbidden to do so. Between her skirt and apron, she carries half a kilogram of amber. She goes to the table, puts down her collection and sits down with her legs open on the bench against the wall. She pulls her hair, sticky from the salt water, over her shoulders, re-ties it and only then turns her gaze to the man with whom she lives here.

Antas sits by the window and carves. Three cuts. Pause. Three cuts. Like a waltz, only slower. When he is not carving, he sits at the lathe, driving the wheel and the belt, fashioning beads. He is thirty years old, but his back has already grown crooked, like his legs, which had always been that way.

Kazimira waits. She is in no hurry. She counts the flies and waits. But he continues to look onwards without looking up, absorbed, as usual. A silent man, like a tree for which the rustling of its own crown is enough.

»Antas«, she says finally, her rough voice emphasising the second A. »Here. For you. « She leans forward, reaches into the bag, in which it is even darker than in the hut. Her hands working like eyes to search through the stones. She pauses once more, looks again at Antas, whose rhythmic carving is now out of step and asks »What's in it for me? «

Antas coughs, »What're you after? «

»No child, « she says.

»Now a child? « Antas coughs again.

»No child. «

At this point he looks up. »E'ry woman wants children. «

»Not I. «

Springs is just beginning. Antas is carving a pawn out of

amber. Next to him, on the chessboard, on which Kazimira has placed her findings, are other pieces, already in place. Only the last pawn is missing. It passes through Antas's fingers like the thoughts through his head. Why does she not want a child?

When he gets back from the night fishing he does for extra money, the first thing he looks forward to is seeing Kazimira. Spending every noon together out there – no one else to be found – just him and Kaz, who had been raised by her elderly relative Morautene, a weathered old Prussian woman, unchristened like her, not registered in any church book, it was as if she had never even existed. She had been pelted with dirt by the village children for being too strange and chased away by the village woman for being too beautiful. In the end, she had been working for the Hirschberg family in Schwarzort when he found her and took her with him. She has since followed him through thick and thin, with a peculiar loyalty, finding him all the best stones, helping him sort the fishing nets, and at some point, moving into this house together, out of the wind, with the smell of warm wood and smoked fish. Kazimira shot him a telling look, do not say anything now, do not disturb me.

Or in autumn, when the storms come, when the sky fills with clouds, just above the lagoon, and the migratory birds share their calls, and they are the only two people here, engulfed in nature's elements.

But she does not want a child...

Kazimira doesn't yet know what exactly she wants. But she doesn't have much choice either. For although Antas Damerau is the best lathe worker in the area, all they have is the small boat and the hut, far away from the nearest fishing village, so far away in fact that explaining how to get there, let alone the journey itself, proves tiresome. That's all old Damerau left them when he died. He had not been allowed to collect amber either, since none of them paid any rent. At least now they no longer had to

swear an oath of allegiance to the local landowner in order to be allowed to walk along the sands and take a boat out on the water. Anyone who goes out on the water, or along the sands, looking in the shallow waters, perhaps with a lantern in hand, could come across a precious find. And because they have not sworn the pledge to the landowners, those findings must be hidden away, till winter comes, when they are then fashioned into figures, translucent, light and warm in the hand, as if they carried the remnants of ancient summers past. And these figurines, once Antas and Kaz have played a few rounds of chess with them, are put in boxes with the smoked eels to be sent to Mr Hirschberg, an amber dealer in Schwarzort, who buys them along with the eels.

In fact, Hirschberg himself has been having amber collected from the lagoon for years. He had once been a poor man from Gdansk, with nothing more than a vendor's tray and a mind full of ideas. He worked for a while at the inn in Schwarzort, getting up every morning before anyone else, never complaining and always ignoring any snide remarks, until one day he began to look for amber in the shallowest parts of the lagoon. And so over the years he had been able to make something of himself. Every day now, you can see his floating steam-powered chain dredgers that plough through the bottom of the lagoon. Hirschberg keeps the channel clear at private expense and is, at his own risk, the official tenant of the amber extraction in the state. All this means that Antas should have to hand over all the stones that he and Kazimira find to their rightful owner. However, Hirschberg likes their carvings so much that he overlooks how the amber is obtained and is even willing to pay money for stones that he in theory already owns.

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»On the West Beach they found a missing gendarme in the field, « Hirschberg says, when days later he counts the money for fish and figures into Antas' hand. »Did you know about that? «

»How'd he get in field? « Antas says, acting clueless. But Hirschberg doesn't let up: »First they find a gendarme in the ground, and then they dig up the field and find a lot more than just buried gendarmes." He looks at Antas attentively, who only puts his finger to his cap: »I don't know about no gendarme, sir," and he and Kazimira head off.

They travel home via cart, sheltered by the pine forest. The horse and cart are borrowed. It is warm at home in the hut. Antas sits down and smokes. Then he holds out the pipe to Kazimira. She takes a puff, sits down on his lap, leans her head back and blows the smoke up to the roof.

»So why no children? «

»I'm no mother. «

»Not yet. «

»Not ever. «

»You'd have to learn. « He says, his dialect roughly carving away at the words.

»I don't want to learn. «

Antas takes the pipe from her and takes another puff himself.

»Then what d'you want? «

»To learn to craft, like you. «

»Two wishes already that is. « Antas takes her plait in his hand.

»I been counting my bleeding. « She pulls her head back so that the braid is stretched and looks at him.

»Why's that? «

»What? «

»How's you bleeding stopping a babe? «

»Old Morautene said you need'a count right. «

»And how's your bleedin' now? « Antas puts the pipe down on the table.

»Right now," Kazimira pulls up her skirt, »there's nothing to worry about. «

And so begins the strangest and oldest of all activities in the animate world, and although Kazimira is laughing, she is at the same time quite serious, and even if she had imagined it differently, because one always imagines it differently, and every person imagines it, her imagining means nothing now. Their searching bodies find only endlessness, they have power where words fail or are only enough for hasty pleas.

As they still lie together, under the greasy eels, and trace each other's movement, large and small, Antas says softly that they should think about going to the west beach.

Where is it, Kazimira wants to know.

Seventeen miles away.

»That's far «, she whispers, resting her head on his arm.

They are both lost in thought. No, she does not want to go – not that far anyway. Everyone has a place where they belong, and besides... she contemplates a thought that should not exist. Besides...

Kazimira's head presses hard and increasingly heavy on Antas's arm. He pulls it back before it goes completely numb. Outside, the wind picks up, driving in spurts into the crumbly thatched roof, whistling two notes at a time on the ends of the stalks. To the northeast, it rages on the brackish water and sweeps it up from the lagoon in veils of wisps.

Antas is now thinking out loud: »Days ago this Pole, Roganzky was his name, came through 'ere from the West Beach, wanted to go to Hirschberg he did. Had a load of stones in his pocket, which he wanted me to look at. He wanted to know if they were worth mining or not. I told him that it depends. Depends on what, he asks me. And I say, a lot of things. I never said more than that. «

»What kind of stones? « Kazimira says, already sleepy.

„Rough ones. But big and far from the water. Interesting.” But Antas had not told Roganzky that part. Even for him, his answers had been limited. It was for the best if Roganzky would move on elsewhere. But since then, Antas has been thinking. He stopped speaking so Kazimira could sleep, but his mind is still focused on the curious Roganzky story: If there was a gendarme in the field on the west beach, then that can't bode well. Gendarmerie and amber shouldn't be mixed. With them, everything has to be done properly and in the open. But if it's in the open, it has to go through officials. And if the office get their hands on it, there'll never be a deal, at least not a good one. So someone has to give Hirschberg a hint, which Roganzky, possibly on behalf of his master, has probably already done. Let him buy up a field and mine it. Maybe not the one the gendarme was in, but there are plots of land all around in no short supply. It can be assumed that the amber deposit extends somewhere underground over a large area. »Damned if it's just in one field. It'll be all over. It's already in the sea, « Antas says quietly, leaning on his elbow and looking at Kazimira. But she has closed her eyes and is breathing evenly, so he lies down again too and only murmurs, »Hirschberg best hurry before someone ... «

Antas is lying motionless in the bed. His body does not betray whether or not he is dreaming. Kazimira, on the other hand, is tossing and turning. She is wandering through a wide field, getting heavier and heavier and sinking deeper into the ground with each step until she disappears completely into the earth. She reaches a cave full of toads, each cradling a child and humming sinisterly.

When Kazimira wakes up, the wind is still whistling on the roof. She gets up, washes herself, crouches over the bucket, steps out of the hut and looks long and thoughtfully at the dark lagoon.

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**Extract 2: Pages 41 to 46**

*The Spit, 1871-72*

When Kazimira, after weeks of slowly surrendering herself to silence, gives birth to her child, winter is at its darkest point. The lagoon is frozen over. There is no midwife to be called. Antas holds her hand, in part so that she can't hit him. And because she cannot hit him, she is screaming. Kazimira is screaming up to the eels. She presses her lips together, screams inwardly, begs, whines. The child has to come out? But how, Antas!? Kazimira feels the head as she curses. It is far too big. There are not enough curses for this head to be too big. She curses anyway. And she hates Antas. She hates motherhood, birth, reproduction. Damn it! Damn all aprons and braids and bridal bouquets! Damn all silent encounters, on the evening summer air, on all men and all moustaches and all tails! Damn Antas! Only this pain is true, this filthy bedstead, only this wretched blood! She never wanted a child! Then she tears. Antas, with trembling fingers, lifts out a boy: Ake. He kisses the wet child's head. His face is wet too. Kazimira closes her eyes, does not move. Antas lays the child on her bare chest, throws new wood into the stove, the logs whistling in the flames. He cooks soup. In the corner of the hut the chickens cluck. In the bucket lies her afterbirth.

»Now, my lovely little chickens, « says Antas softly. His fingers and breath have calmed down. »If I have one of you in the pot, the baby'll grow strong. And strong'll only come to those whose mother's little ruffle is strong. «

Kazimira suddenly starts to cry. She is not strong, she is in pain, she is sore and empty and broken, and for the first time the smoke and the stench in the hut are bothering her. Maybe they will have to leave here after all, she thinks, as if it were possible to leave this life along with the place.

Antas had taken her to the pit in late summer. With her round belly like a melon on her lap, she had sat next to him on the cart. So they had driven down the spit, through the mildewed forest, through dry sand, right across the Samland. A long journey, all the way to the pit on the west beach. A journey so that Kazimira would be distracted and so that she would acquire a taste for it. But she didn't get anything out of the sight of the torn-up earth, only unpleasant thoughts.

Piles of wood and sheds of wood everywhere, in between this crater that seemed to her like a vaginal chasm at the bottom of which the workers were digging. And above it all, the pounding of steam engines and pumps, bewildering constructions, iron rails and grids and towers such as she had never seen before. Terrible and beautiful, repulsive and attractive at the same time.

Kazimira had stared into the abyss for half an hour as if she were peering into an incomprehensible future, inwardly divided by two violently arguing voices, and had finally turned away with a shudder. She had herded Antas back to the carriage and shouted to the horse to hurry up. It seemed to her now that the pit was only eerie, the worst part was on the surface, where the world was torn open and exposed.

She didn't spare a glance to either side on her way home. Cornflowers and poppies beckoned from the billows of the rye fields, the afternoon light made the white meadow grass in the woods effervesce between the pine trunks, but Kazimira saw none of it. Instead, she sat lost in confused thoughts, running her hands steadily over her inhabited belly.

At home, days later, she asked Antas to carve her a toad out of wood, to appease something. She paced in circles around the house with it and then knelt for over an hour by the old willow tree by the forest: »Mother of the evening, mother of the midnight, mother of the day, mistress of the pools and ponds, of the birds and toads, of the pots and pans, mother of mothers, hear

me! « For a sinister coil seemed to wrap itself around everything, encircling them in an impenetrable layer of darkness. And the wooden toad she held out to the old goddess like Christians hold out their communion wafer, illuminated nothing at all. The beast of birth and death, with which her ancestor still had contact, lay mute and dumb in her open hand. The willow did not let the wind harp of its branches speak, standing rotten and only groaning, and the wooden toad was only small and ridiculous. Kazimira too: small and ridiculous. For what was growing there, what was born or dug out of mud and rock, was something new, something of a different nature. And perhaps already here a thought began to ripen in Kaz, a plan, an escape ahead, out, out of all supposed nature, but the thought remained in her body, in her guts, and did not rise to her head.

Now Antas sits down with her on the edge of the bed, holds the bowl of chicken broth to her side and, first carefully blowing and checking the heat with his upper lip, feeds the mother of his new-born son. Again and again he sets the bowl down on his leg and looks at the child as if practising being a father. Or being proud.

Kazimira is not proud. Even if the babe next to her smells good. Her eyes keep falling shut. She listens to the howling that goes around the roof of the hut, she tries to breathe slowly and deeply. The smell of soup floats through the hut. The scent of the child swims through the hut. Life swimming through the hut. A life that cannot be denied. And a thought emerges, the conclusion of which suddenly seems like a wall to her: she will take care of herself from now on. And that means: she will be in the hut. She will no longer be anywhere else.

Kazimira opens her eyes, looks at Antas, pulls on his arm and says, »Take the boy. «

Antas puts the bowl down, hurriedly, taking the child and holding it tightly.

Kazimira turns to the wall.

Antas says something to her and to the child. But Kazimira does not allow herself to be distracted. »Trapped now, « she whispers to the wall.

The three of them spend the winter almost entirely by the stove. They cling to each other as the hut clings to the dune, while storm after storm rages over the area, cutting back all the nature surrounding them to nothing. Antas only gets up to work on the lathe in the few light hours. Kazimira sits with the child in her arms and looks at it with an alienation in her gaze that makes Antas shudder.

They do not touch each other until spring. During the nights, Kazimira feels her body as if she is looking for something without knowing what. So, they lie together, body to body, and yet apart, only just united in keeping Ake warm. They themselves are cold, for the hut is old, the stove is small, and time passes so slowly, and there is nothing romantic about it.

In the spring, Antas tars the boat. In the evening he goes out. It looks as if he is sailing into the future. He sits in the black box like in a big coffin, as if the future were death. But Antas is alive. He doesn't think about death. He sings and now and then thinks about the West Beach and moving, but his face does not betray his thoughts.

Kazimira has strapped the child to her back and gone to the sea. Ake sleeps and squeaks in his dreams. He loves this back, this smell, this tickling hair, without knowing it. He takes it all and loves and needs and grows. Just a child. Kazimira may not love the child. She has it. She would protect it from anything. But she would rather not have it. She walks with him step by step along the shore, thinking with a heavy conscience. In the process, she collects half a sack of amber in a single morning.

When she gets back to the hut, she puts the child down, grabs a stone from the sack and holds it in front of Ake's eyes: »Look,

she can't leave either, « she says. »But her place is beautiful. « The stone has been home to an insect, a fungus gnat, for millions of years. Kazimira knows nothing specific about the mosquito and nothing specific about the ancient time. Her memories span fifteen years at most. She knows only the effect of the stones, not their history. She knows the beach, the ravenous giant dune, the sea, a few villages, and from stories the insignificant seaside resort of Craz, whose name also just means beach, most recently the West Beach. That's all she needs. She is simple. Whenever possible.

But it is not always possible. Sometimes something happens that you have to deal with. There are forces.

Five hundred years before she was born, the forces were already stirring, and something happened, her elderly relative told her. The one turns into the other, and the other turns into the one. Something moved, set out somewhere in the west. It set out to conquer, even against the Prussians, for in the Holy Land they had learned nothing of love, about which they so loved to preach. So they rode forth, killing many and suppressing the rest.

Again and again the relative recounted this tale. And so Kazimira passes it on: »And the little men disappeared, body after body after body, destroyed and never seen no more, seeped into the ground, for the man's name is life, his deed is death. «

Kazimira is now looking at the stone once again. »And imagine, « she says thoughtfully, »victims seeped into the murderers, and now they call themselves Prussians.“ She turns her head towards the child, the child looks at her. It flaps its little arms, then laughs.

»Why you laughing? « Kazimira cannot help laughing as well. Her white teeth are magnificent. »No respect for your ancestors and their German murderers? « But Ake just chuckles and laughs some more, without any teeth at all.

Then Kazimira turns serious. »You're a Prussian, Ake, you must know. You don't quite belong. «

### Extract 3: 139 to 140

*Westbeach, 1883*

Once Henriette has written a short note to her sleeping daughter and finally left the Dameraus' house, Kazimira puts on some water and offers Jadwiga some tea. Ake has carried little Ilse into the garden and is showing her around.

The two women sit at the table. »We practise drinking tea now,« Kazimira says at some point quietly. Jadwiga looks at the cup as if it were indescribably precious.

»Gladly, « she says even more quietly. That's all.

Maintaining eye contact, they sip their tea. There is a nicety to their embarrassment. They listen to the children in the garden. Kazimira stirs her tea for far too long. She does not have fine gloves like Jadwiga. Her hands are yellow from the mustard porridge, her fingernails still black from gardening. Jadwiga looks at her hands. Then she removes her gloves and places them next to her cup on the table. Kazimira stares at the gloves for a long time, then at Jadwiga's fingers.

Once she has finished her cup, Jadwiga stands up and says goodbye.

»You coming again? « asks Kazimira at the door.

»Certainly. «

And so every now and then, when possible, Jadwiga comes for tea. And each time it becomes increasingly pleasant.

There is still some time before the Kowaks go back to Königsberg. And so there are often careful and sometimes hurried knocks at the Dameraus' cottage. One afternoon the door opens and Jadwiga looks down in embarrassment, sees only two trouser legs and goes to leave, but it is clear that there is the wearer is not a man. Jadwiga lifts her eyes and meets Kazimira's mischievous countenance.

»Sometimes it is good when you can sew, « says Kaz and quickly pulls Jadwiga and the child through the doorway. Not everyone has to admire the tailor's work.

How slight she is, Jadwiga thinks. And then she asks, »But why trousers? «

Kazimira grins at her: »For big steps. «

Jadwiga laughs.

Ilse is being looked after in the kitchen by Ake, who is completely infatuated with the child and feeds her cocoa and sugar, while the living room goes quiet. The scent of the forest wafts through the open window, along with the salt air from the sea. Kazimira fetches a chessboard from the cupboard, a gift from Antas, and they play until evening. The bats are already hovering over the hedge, so the two women go for a walk in the darkness along the old clay path, only returning in the broad moonlight, at which time Jadwiga has to carry her sleeping daughter home.

Around midnight Antas comes home. He reeks of drunkenness and lies down still in his shirt and trousers to Kaz. He wants her now, because he has worries. People are talking.

»And what are the leaders saying? «

»They see you walking with Mrs. Kowak. «

»And the issue with that? «

»They see you wearing trousers. «

»They imagine things. « Kazimira opens Antas's shirt and makes him forget the people's talk. And Antas does forget and goes to work the next day reassured. He sees the grass on the side of the road turning yellow. Soon it will be September, with its spider's threads, its elderberry, the other, colder dew, and then the Kowaks will leave.