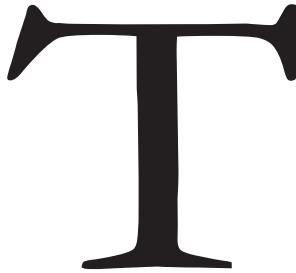


T

Sarah Kirsch



Translated by Wendy Mulford & Anthony Vivis

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INTRODUCTION BY ANTHONY VIVIS

The strongest presence in Sarah Kirsch's work is her own sense of being a woman writing, a gift of isolation she welcomes as a source of creative energy. Like Crusoe in her poem of that name, Sarah Kirsch goes on cultivating her fields — especially the field of poetry. She knows that her “green prison” will go on bringing her joy, even though — or especially because — the civilised world fades as it sinks over the horizon.

In the landscape surrounding the small community of “T”, that horizon is long and low. As in *The Brontës Hats*, published by Street Editions in 1991, many poems in this dual-language collection depict the Schleswig-Holstein landscape, which Kirsch knows intimately, as cold and bleak. Yet Michael Hamburger wrote in his 1977 *TLS* review of her “excellent new collection”, *Rückenwind (Tailwind)*, that her love poems are “unashamedly personal and imaginative”. Transfigured by a poet's vision, snow can generate heat, just as a poet famous for her intellectual rigour of expression can, as a person, be warm and engaging.

This was certainly our experience of Sarah Kirsch when she visited Britain for a reading at Emanuel College in 1992. After reading and having supper in Cambridge, where Wendy Mulford then lived, Sarah Kirsch visited a thatched cottage at Westley Waterless, in which I lived at the time, on her way to Suffolk. Her walk with Wendy along the Devil's Dyke is the subject of another personal poem, “Two Magpies”, in *Erlkönigstochter (Earl King's*

Daughter). Walking and talking with Sarah Kirsch reinforced an impression the poems give of someone both determined and sensitive.

This sensitivity makes animals, birds, plants and everyday objects take on independent life. Whether it is snowdrop bulbs by a ditch, as in “March”, or a tortoise encoffined like a vampire, as in “The Onset of Winter”, Kirsch invests even what is apparently dead with implicit, latent life. How much more alive is her individually perceived bestiary — from the black herds grazing to a curlew shrieking.

A reader approaching these poems in English need not shrink back from a syntax that might appear to be full of linguistic landmines, waiting to scatter verbal shrapnel. If Kirsch bends the rules of conventional grammar — and sometimes breaks them — it is to focus attention on essential images and rhythms which might have simply floated by in language more “normally” conceived. Whether or not you understand the nuances, reading or, better still, hearing the poem “Widmung” (“Dedication”), read to you in German will take you part of the way.

WIDMUNG

Voller Engel ist jedes Blatt
An den Pappeln von T.
Wenn sie tanzen
Zittern die Blätter
Morgens bis abends in T.

DEDICATION

Each leaf on the poplars in T.
Is filled with angels
When they dance
The leaves quiver
From first light to twilight in T.

UNDER WAY

My body which keeps me company
Sentenced for life
Tracked by a dog-shaped
Dark shadow
Crazy about me

On the road during rain
A couple of words
Scrawled in chalk

RUNGHOLT

I'll stay a while
Soon I shall see myself like other women
Treading a spinning-wheel
This winter we'll spin laughter with tears —
Quite modern. Our children will play
In front of mirrors decked with evergreen.

UNTERWEGS

Mein Körper der mich begleitet
Lebenslänglich verfolgt
Von einem dunklen Schatten
Geformt wie ein Hund versessen
Um mich zu sein

Ein paar Worte mit Kreide
Auf die Straße geschrieben im
Regen

RUNGHOLT

Ich bleibe für eine Zeit und sehe mich
Bald imstande wie andere Frau
Das Spinnrad zu treten — wir zwirnen
Lachen mit Weinen wie es in diesem
Winter modern ist. Unsere Kinder
Spielen vor grünbewachsenen Spiegeln.

FREYA'S CATS

The evening star is rising
Above the sea
And Bjarni says
It is the goddess of love
Radiant and ruthless
Smiling down from her chariot
Pulled by purring white cats.

These sleek beasts
See men as their quarry
Heavenly creatures with
Girlish eyes bringing in their wake
Desire and despair
Those scratches, Bjarni says,
Will never heal.

FREYAS KATZEN

Über dem Meer geht jetzt der
Abendstern auf und Bjarni sagt
Es sei die Göttin der Liebe:
Umglänzt und gnadenlos
Lächelt sie aus dem Wagen
Gezogen von weißen
Schnurrenden Katzen.

Die schönen Tiere. Geputzt
Gilt ihre Jagd jetzt den Männern.
Die Himmelstiere sind versehn
Mit Mädchenaugen und bringen
Lust und alles Elend darnach.
Die Kratzer sagt Bjarni von denen
Bleiben für immer.

ONSET OF WINTER

Globes of nests hang
Half-hidden in the purple twigs
Now the frost is come.

The tortoise has been asleep for weeks
Beside the water-gage a vampire
Encoffined in his familiar soil.

As long as the fieldmice
Don't discover the tulip bulbs
We may all yet reach New Year

Drink to each other
Fire rockets to weave spells
Over the soundless ice.

WINTERANFANG

Die Vogelhäuser hängen gefüllt in den
Verschlossenen purpurnen Zweigen
Itzt wenn der Frost kommt.

Die Schildkröte schläft seit Wochen
Neben der Wasseruhr wie ein Vampir
In einer Kiste mit Heimaterde.

Wenn die Schermäuse die Tulpenzwiebeln
Nicht finden werden wir vielleicht alle
Das neue Jahr erreichen

Uns zuprosten und einen Schwärmer
Über dem lautlosen Eis aufsteigen lassen
Die Menschen zu bannen.

TWO MAGPIES

All morning with Wendy
Through beautiful Suffolk
Scattered sheep roam a broad pasture
A hawk rides on the firmly rolling air
We stammer out a narrative of our lives
Walking Devil's Dyke
We smell fox.

TWO MAGPIES

Den ganzen Morgen mit Wendy
Durchs schöne Suffolk. Zerstreut
Auf breiten Weiden gehet die Herde
Es reitet der Falke auf der festen
Rollenden Luft. Wir stotterten
Unser vergangenes Leben zusammen
Während wir Devils Dyke durch-
Streiften den Fuchs riechen konnten.

REFLECTION

There are summer days with green eyes
Like ponds
Shadows skitter over them
Black herds
Graze like kings on the river-bank.

DROWNED

My shadow will fall
Down your stone steps
All the way to the river
If those clouds
Release the moon.

WASSERSPIEGEL

Es gibt Sommertage mit grünen
Augen wie Teiche und Schatten
Laufen darüber es weiden
Königlich schwarze Herden am Ufer.

ERTRUNKEN

Mein Schatten stürzt
Die Steintreppe hinab
Bis in den Fluß
Wenn die Wolken
Den Mond freilassen.

IN WINTER

One night I came from the city
Shapes started dancing in front of me
On the ice and in the meadows
Smaller than humans
Bigger than hares. Black.

I saw a crack
In the dark sky
Another in the open water
Beyond the cracks
A pale green star.

Now surely
Eternity is here
With a pounding heart
I peered
Through a chink in my coffin.

Everything has changed
Only the clouds
Are as they were
I am not yet sure whether I
Am as I was.

IM WINTER

Ich kam nachts aus der Stadt
Und es tanzten Gestalten auf
Dem Eis und den Wiesen
Kleiner als Menschen
Größer als Hasen. Schwarz.

Ich sah einen Riß
Im dunklen Himmel
Und einen im offenen Wasser
Hinter den Rissen
Einen hellgrünen Stern.

Ich dachte nun wäre
Die Ewigkeit angebrochen
Und ich blickte
Klopfenden Herzens
Durch einen Sargspalt.

Alles hat sich verändert
Nur die Wolken
Sind noch wie früher
Ich weiß nicht ob ich
Wie früher bin.

THE ISLAND

Another winter
I have not gone crazy.
The ice-breaker reappears
Like an amen echoing in church
And suddenly
The lambs are hopping.

There are worse things than these
Trees splitting apart
For a long time now
I have loved solitude.
I cannot abide others'
Dead wood.

The sea beats against
The steadfast dykes.
If I were allowed one wish
I would ask for one more
Sheep-pen.

DIE INSEL

Auch in diesem Winter
Bin ich nicht verrückt geworden.
Der Eisbrecher kommt
Wie das Amen noch in der Kirche
Und plötzlich
Hüpfen die Lämmer.

Es gibt Übleres als diese
Zersplitternden Bäume
Und die Einsamkeit
Erfreut mich schon lange.
Das Gewese der Menschen
Ist mir zuwider.

Das Meer schlägt an die
Standhaften Deiche.
Wenn ich einen
Wunsch sagen darf
So hätte ich gern
Noch einen Schafstall.

HAYMAKING

The whooper swan has crossed the shore
Flying further northwards
We forget the shrouding darkness
That for so long made beasts of us.

Very soon the curlew cries
The flowers' silent death
Always the self-same song. I cannot
Go into the house.

MARCH

The little white teeth the
Snowdrop bulbs by the ditch
Black black the universe of earth oh Christ
Says my child when he reads the word
Grass or life the wrong way round.

HEUMONAT

Der Singschwan ist über den Strand
Weiter nach Norden geflogen
Wir vergessen die Dunkelheit die
So lange uns eingehüllt und verbiestert.

Und bald der Brachvogel schreit
Vom stillen Blumentod immer die
Nämliche Weise. Ich will
Nicht ins Haus gehn.

MÄRZ

Weißer Zähne die
Schneeglöckchenzwiebeln beim Graben
Schwarz schwarz das Erdreich o weh
Sagt mein Kind wenn es das Wort
Gras rückwärts liest oder Leben.

THE PLAIN

My beloved
Valleys smile at me

Every day these vast images
The piercing air's clarity
Sharp lines around grasses and clouds at night
The plate of the moon on the water
The flying beasts of the field
Heavy climbing bodies their gentle throats
Intimately offered to the wind
How can I tire of finding a name
Bitterness sinks
Mourning everywhere swept away in our gaiety
Like leaves falling from the tree like
Autumn midges at play after
Heavy frost we are snuffed out
Before the breath quits our bodies
How relaxed our parting would be
If we could leave
Certain that this earth of ours
Will survive

DIE EBENE

Meine geliebten
Tale lächeln mich an.

Die großen Bilder alltäglich
Deutliche Klarheit der Luft scharfe
Linien um Gräser und Wolken nachts
Der Teller des Monds auf dem Wasser
Die fliegenden Tiere der Erde
Schwere steigende Leiber die sanften
Hälse vertraulich dem Wind
Dargeboten wie soll ich
Müde werden es zu benennen
Bitternis sinkt allenthalben die Trauer
In unser Frohsein weggefegt
Wie die Blätter vom Baum die
Spielenden herbstlichen Mücken
Nach starkem Frost sind wir gleich
Eh noch der Atem uns ausgeht vernichtet
Wie gelassen wäre der Abschied
Könnten wir in leichter Gewißheit
Daß diese Erde lange noch
Dauert gerne doch gehn

SNOW-HEAT

I lived all winter
Trapped in pack-ice.
The sun-god's lioness
Burned beyond the pole-star.

In the half-light I came upon
Dead souls the shadows of
Frozen lakes and rivers
Bright but lifeless.

I saw where I had come from
In the spreading pelt
Ice between its claws
Murmuring blood

I heard voices for a long time
Always the same
Inscrutably cutting wind.
Happiness encircled me like wolves.

We went to the villages delivering
The first squealing lambs
From the sky's rim
Winged beasts detached themselves.

I grew heavier
Carrying a litter of savage children
Once these forked creatures
Start fiddling with fire and flame

It's time to take cover.

SCHNEEWÄRME

Den Winter lebte ich
Im Packeis gefangen.
Gottes Löwin die Sonne
Hinterm Erdstern verbrannt.

In der Dämmerung fand ich
Tote Seelen die Schatten
Erstarrter Seen und Flüsse
Blank ohne Leben.

Ein Fell war gewachsen.
Das Eis zwischen den Krallen
Rief Blut vor ich sah
Wo ich herkam.

Lange hörte ich Stimmen
Immer war es derselbe
Unbegreifliche schneidende Wind.
Das Glück empfand ich im Rudel.

Wir gingen in Dörfer schlugen
Die ersten jammernden Lämmer
Vom Himmelsrande
Lösten sich Tiere mit Flügeln.

Da wurde ich schwerer ich trug
Einen Wurf unbezähmbarer Kinder
Wenn die gabelförmigen Wesen
Mit Feuer und Flamme hantieren

Galts auf der Hut sein.

CRUSOE

The gift of isolation lives in this place.
It's a memory we have lost.
About the woman writing.
She grows stronger as the civilised world
that mocks the natural dies back. What delight
in my green prison. The vixen shows no fear
when I, Crusoe, cultivate my fields, and the birds
laugh.
Or the pagan oak-trees wake me with their fruits.

CRUSOE

Es gibt ihn den
Charme hier der
Einsamkeit etwas
Wovon niemand mehr
Weiß der Schreiberin
Aber ermutigt wenn die
Abnehmende Welt immer
Schneller versinkt deren
Verdienst es war das
Grün zu verspotten.

Mein grün Gefängnis es schenkt
Außerordentlich Freude die
Füchsin fürchtet mich nicht
Vögel lachen wenn ich Crusoe
Meine eigenen Felder bestelle.
Oder die heidnischen Eichen
Mit ihren Früchten mich wecken.

ANTHONY VIVIS

Anthony Vivis, recently elected Chair of the Translators Association, has been a freelance writer and translator, mainly of drama, since 1983.

His co-translation with John Grillo of Martin Sperr's play *Hunting Scenes from Lower Bavaria* was presented at the Gate Theatre, London, in 1995. He has just translated a new play by F X Kroetz (*Desire*), and his co-translation with Jean Boase-Beier of poems by Rose Ausländer (*Mother Tongue*) is due to be published by Arc Publications during 1995.

In 1991, his co-translation with Wendy Mulford of poems by Sarah Kirsch (*The Brontës Hats*) was published by Street Editions, Cambridge, and his translations of some of Kirsch's prose pieces appeared in "Storm 5" the following year.

WENDY MULFORD

Wendy Mulford lives and works as a writer in Suffolk and teaches part-time at Cambridge. Her most recent book of poetry is *The Bay of Naples* (1992). In 1993 she was the recipient of a Hawthornden Fellowship. She is currently at work on *Virtuous Magic: Meanings in Female Sainthood* with Sarah Maitland. She edited *The Virago Book of Love Poetry* in 1990. In 1991, she co-translated Sarah Kirsch's *The Brontës Hats* (see above).

Other titles published by Reality Street Editions

Kelvin Corcoran: *Lyric Lyric*

Allen Fisher: *Dispossession and Cure*

Susan Gevirtz: *Taken Place*

Fanny Howe: *O'Clock*

Maggie O'Sullivan: *In the House of the Shaman*

Denise Riley: *Mop Mop Georgette*

Peter Riley: *Distant Points*

Out of Everywhere (ed. by Maggie O'Sullivan)

Please write for further details.

Also available from RSE by Sarah Kirsch:

The Brontës Hats, translated by Anthony Vivis and Wendy Mulford, from *Landaufentbalt* (1969) – *Schneewärme* (1989), with brief biodata and bibliography, in dual-language edition, Street Editions 1991.