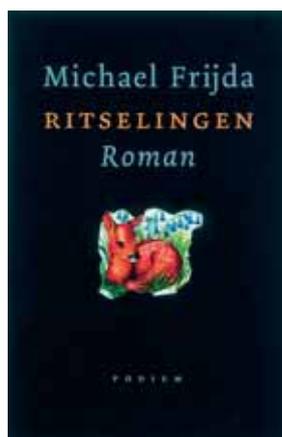


Poetic and enigmatic

Michael Frijda

Rustling



FRIJDA'S *RITSELINGEN* ('Rustling'), is a mysterious novel about identity and origin. The complex family history of the book closely resembles a fairy tale – not only because the events take place in a forest but also because, for example, there is no dialogue, rather a lyrical use of language which gives the story its intrinsic beauty.

Equally fairytale-like and archaic is the profession of one of the many nameless main characters – a woodcutter who lives on the edge of the forest with his son Karel. The son is crippled and asks his father for a deer, preferably a live one. (But this is no Bambi-like story; Frijda gives Disney sentimentality a wide berth.) The woodcutter's mother, who seems right out of a Grimms' fairy tale, lives isolated in the middle of the forest.

The woodcutter's father is a poacher and also appears to have stepped straight out of an old folk tale. The scenes evoked in *Ritselingen* are oppressive and yet stimulating at the same time. Frijda gradually ratchets up the tension into a dense web of intriguing, hidden relationships between the various characters. The Second World War, for instance, plays a role from the start in the background, and this comes more to the fore with the appearance of a collaborating cheese-maker and a Jewish refugee who's hiding in the forest. In the first chapter, Frijda gives a marvellous description of her flight – an escape that may be linked to the other two main female characters, such as the cheese-maker's daughter who runs away from home at the end of the story to be with Karel in the forest. The latent erotic tension of the novel erupts at their meeting in an extremely sensual scene, in which Frijda unfolds the whole gamut of attraction and repulsion, tenderness and aggression, and shows the merging of one lover's identity with the other. The enigma is intensified since the two are unaware of their origins, whereas the reader, conscious of the secret, is left astonished.

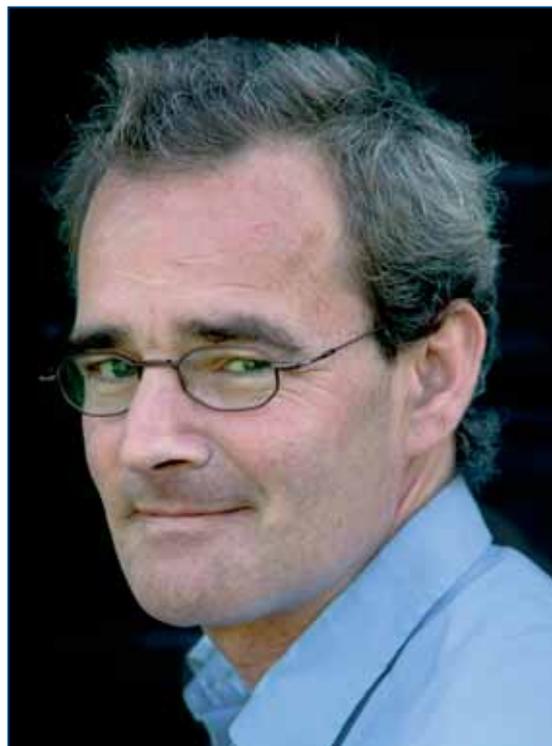


photo Maartje Geels

Michael Frijda (b. 1961) worked for years as a bargee on the inland waterways and on tour boats in the Amsterdam canals. 1998 witnessed the publication of his collection *Schrikdieren* ('Feral Frights'). A year later he received the Rabo Bank Lente Award for his story *Tekening* ('Drawing'). The novel *Ritselingen* (2005) was nominated for the Libris Literature Prize. At present he is working on a novel about his experiences on the tour boats.

Frijda applies a mathematic directness in his approach to family history, which makes *Ritselingen* an original and fascinating book in terms of composition and content. It offers a new perspective on family history. A breath of fresh air. *HET PAROOL*

Ritselingen recalls John Berger's trilogy on the farmers in the French Alps, and the Icelandic novels of Halldór Laxness. Country people and their strong passions against a backdrop of overwhelming nature – these become extremely attractive material in skilful hands. *TROUW*

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Sample Translation

Rustling

(Ritselingen)

by Michael Frijda

(Amsterdam: Podium, 2005)

Translated by S.J. Leinbach

1

It has been a rainy spring, and the foliage is luxuriant and lush. Anyone hovering above the forest, like a pilot, a bird or a spirit, would perceive the cover of treetops as a continuous surface: a soft, green expanse with nothing below, a place to alight and walk around.

In the southeast there are bushes, the transition from meadow to forest. Here, the dirt road between the birches joins the forest path. From this corner the path shines like a strip of bare scalp through the layer of foliage and branches, which is thinner at this point. It meanders through the greenery like a man who has lost his way, eventually emerging from the woods as a perfectly straight line at the top left of this map, where there are only spruces.

As if it had been gouged dug out of the forest floor with a giant gouge, the path lies about half a leg below the surrounding ground. Footsteps running on sand, pounding, resounds through the spruces. The pounding echoes in the hollow space between the green edges in such a way that anyone around to hear would be unable to tell where the sound is coming from or where it is going.

The source of the sound is a girl. She is wearing a light-blue, short-sleeved blouse and boyish, dark blue trousers. Every step takes her deeper into the forest. She is running as fast as she can. Her straight, bright yellow hair bounces up and to the side and falls like heavy silk. A rough canvas bag hangs from her neck, shapeless and too large. Nestled in the indentation above her narrow hip, the bag swings to the same rhythm as her small, firm, young breasts, like a young animal riding on its mother's back.

Here the path veers to the right, and the terrain begins to rise and fall. With a sudden leap to one side, the girl lands on the springy curb of grass and ferns. She runs on among the tree trunks. Shreds and ribbons of sunlight float through the trees, scattering gold in the dancing hair and bleaching a dark spot on her collarbone. The necklace dancing in the collar on her breastbone glints back at the sun, which soon loses contact with her under the thick foliage.

On the hill in the middle of the forest, the sun catches up with her again and glistens with full intensity in the sweat on her perfect, symmetrical face. For a brief moment she stops, just before the top, breathless from the swift climb. With her alert, light grey eyes, now blue from the sheen of her shirt, she blinks at the light. She totters and almost falls, but before the sweat that has accumulated in her eyebrows breaks through and drips into her eyes, she takes the last few steps to the top and plunges down the slope, trampling branches in her path. Grunting, she leaps over an ancient boulder. At the apex of the leap she spits forcefully. The gobs of saliva shoot out ahead of her; droplets gleam, invisible and silvery, and rain down where she has just been running. A string of mucus that stuck to her lower lip beats against her throat, mixing with the shiny sweat that coats her neck and chest, and gathers dust, causing the necklace to abandon its dance and adhere to her skin. She runs towards anything in her path that is too large – a fallen tree, a bush – as if she intends to burst through it. Just before the obstacle she darts to the side like a hunted animal.

Her next change of course, and the one after that, also seem to be dictated only by the obstacles she encounters along the way, not by any final destination in the distance. Her gait is desperate in flight; no one can say where she will collapse in exhaustion and where she will be found by whoever seeks to overpower, cuddle or examine her.

Again the girl rushes headlong into the depths of the path and runs through the reverberation of her own steps. At this point the path twists and turns through the birches, the last group of trees before the bushes and the meadows. Her posture changes. The shoulders curve inward. Each breath forces her chest and head upward, and knocks her off balance.

For another few hundred metres she runs over the path as if she intends to charge past the horizon, but then her pace slackens. Maybe the approaching, luminescent void outside of the forest is playing tricks on her. A dogged stride becomes the listing tread of a drunkard, and she screws her eyes shut, as if by doing so she can muster the last reserves of energy in her body. Two hundred

metres before the edge of the forest where the meadows begin, she jumps out of the path, slips and falls on her stomach in the ferns. As quickly as she can, she gets back up and stumbles along through the birches. Her shadow fades among the branches and blades of grass and discoloured patches on the forest floor. What remains of it disappears under her surrendering body as she crumples to her knees. Her lungs compel her to inhale, at the same time that the mucus in her throat makes her cough. She leans forward and retches, vomits, spits and wipes the snot off her face until she has the strength to crawl away from the stench of digestion. The convulsions of her body slowly ebb away. For several minutes she hides her face in her arms until her breathing returns to normal.

From this point the path is invisible. The girl is close to the edge of the forest beyond which the meadow begins, but from where she now lies the labyrinth of trees still appears endless. Suspended between the whitish grey trunks of the birches is the lustre of the foliage, broken up by gentle bands of sunlight. When she rolls onto her back, a dot of light falls directly on her face. She closes her eyes.

She probably sees a bright red colour punctuated by dark shapes, like slowly moving clouds which could be anything but which float by before their form assumes any significance. The sweat cools off and evaporates in the deathly quiet air. The hair-thin grass appears at once firm and endlessly soft. Stirring minimally, she shifts her limbs until she fits perfectly into the contours of the ground.

2

Close to the place where the girl is lying, at a distance that could be bridged by a falling leaf, twenty years earlier, a young boy had confided his fondest wish to his father.

‘Papa,’ said Karel, ‘I want a deer.’

In a web above the doorjamb, a spider gnawed on a dying moth but Karel didn’t notice, even though he was gazing upwards. The woodcutter leaned against the closed bottom half of the door, a pipe protruding from his mouth.

‘So, you want a deer, do you?’

‘Yes, a deer.’ Karel looked up at him hopefully. In silence, the woodcutter patted him on the head. The boy picked up the jute sack and turned. The woodcutter bit down on his pipe as he saw the boy laboriously limp his way across the grass, because of his foot, that twisted clump of flesh full of stubborn tendons. It had been no one’s fault, yet he yearned to make up for it. The woodcutter gave the lad as much as he could, but of course he never quite knew if he was doing the right thing. He muddled through, just as *his* father had done.

‘We’ll see,’ the woodcutter called out after Karel.

That was at the time of year when the leaves die and turn into humus and later serve as food for other plants. On the musky ground the wood mice mated, and below the forest floor, spores joined together to form invisible chains that branched out and crawled off in unpredictable directions. Here and there the cells would come together to form poisonous or edible fungi and whimsical boletuses. In the garden, birds pulled worms out of the ground and gobbled them up. Even in the thatched roof of the woodcutter’s house, there was life; earwigs and wood lice crawled between the stalks, on their way to and from their nests, on their way to or from one another.

‘We’ll see,’ the woodcutter had said, but his mind was already made up: the boy would get his deer.

That very day the woodcutter headed into the forest. He walked to the far west side, following the muddy narrow path past the crest of the hill whose northern slope was covered with toadstools this time of year. This was where the deer would often congregate. When he came to the spot there was not a sound to be heard. The woodcutter set a snare, as he had been taught by his father, a notorious poacher in his day. The next day he returned to see if he had had any luck, and did the same in the days that followed. For over a week he followed that same long route, every day. Until he caught something. Even from a distance he could see movement. The ground around the trap had been churned up by the thrashing hooves of his prey. As he approached, the animal jumped up and tugged at the trap with its broken leg. From the moment he saw the ensnared animal, the woodcutter's mind shut down. For a brief moment he looked into the deer's brown eyes. Then he slit its throat. It was a magnificent animal. Not too large and not too small, with fine colouring; in short, the ideal deer for his boy.

When he got home, he laid it in the middle of the living room so Karel could admire it as soon as he came in. He put straw under the wounds; he didn't want bloodstains on the floor. The woodcutter rubbed his hands together and looked at them, the hands he had used to set the trap and drive his dagger into the right spot in the carotid artery. Karel would be thrilled. The boy would look up at him, surprise and gratitude in his eyes. The boy had his mother's smile. The woodcutter glanced at the window frame. He moved his head vigorously back and forth as if he wanted to shake the dust out of his hair, and then turned his gaze back on the deer. Its mouth was open. Yes, it was a splendid creature. The woodcutter slumped down in his chair, proud and content, and he filled and then lit the pipe his father had whittled with his own hands. He threw the match into the fireplace. Pleased with himself, he blew a cloud of smoke at the stuffed bird that peered down at him from the mantelpiece. He drifted off to sleep thinking of a recipe for venison.

He was startled back to consciousness by the rattling of the door handle. The woodcutter sat bolt upright in his chair. When the door swung open and Karel

came in, he could not contain himself and pointed at the glorious animal lying on the living room floor: ‘Look, Karel, a deer!’

Karel did not react.

‘A deer!’ the woodcutter cried out again, moving his head back and forth as he laughed. ‘You wanted a deer, didn’t you? It’s a surprise. It took me eight days to do it, and I bet you thought I was out there chopping wood! Now we have a deer. It’ll make for some tasty suppers, don’t you think?’

‘No,’ Karel cried. His upper lip began to tremble, like the upper lip of a child who is about to whimper softly.

Oh, no, thought the woodcutter. There was nothing he hated more than blubbering and those nauseating gurgling noises. He preferred a robust howl, such as a pig gives when dragged to the chopping block by its tail. He raised his hand but remembered in time that Karel was still a child. He lowered it again.

But the whining and snivelling never happened. There was no sound other than the soft plop of the sack of chestnuts that Karel let slip out of his hand. The woodcutter could not bear the sight of that disappointed face. With his gaze fixed on the wall he asked, ‘What’s the matter? Don’t you like it? Eight days...’

‘That’s not it,’ said Karel, pointing at the carcass on the wooden floor. ‘Not a deer like that. I want a deer with fluttering eyes, a deer that runs around in the garden and eats the acorns and beechnuts I bring it from the forest.’

‘Oh,’ said the crestfallen woodcutter. ‘That kind of deer. I didn’t know. Really, I didn’t know you meant that kind of deer.’ He refrained himself from pointing out that deer seldom ate acorns or beechnuts. He took the animal to the shed where he listlessly skinned and quartered it, and hung the pieces over a beam. That night Karel and the woodcutter went to bed early. ‘Good night,’ the woodcutter ventured, but the boy at the foot of the bed did not reply.

After a few days the meat had matured. Now the flavour was at its best, but the woodcutter did not dare serve Karel the delicious haunch of venison he had envisioned preparing. The meat became gamey, and continued to rot in the darkened shed until the stench of death began to waft into the house. The

woodcutter buried the noisome flesh in the far end of the garden. That evening they ate potatoes with fresh butter, but his nose remained filled with the scent of the deer. The potatoes tasted like rotten meat. Even so, he said, ‘Tastes good, eh? The fresh butter.’ And Karel agreed.

Nothing more was said about the deer. The woodcutter was afraid to say anything that might cause painful misunderstanding. At their evening meal he tried to make conversation but he kept swallowing his words, as every subject that occurred to him was a echo of the forest. A grass snake fleeing from danger, or a stone encased in a tree trunk that had sparked when his axe struck it that day – everything that could have acted as fodder for a conversation had taken place among the trees and could have caused Karel to imagine gnawed-off bark, hoofprints and, finally, the deer itself. The woodcutter looked around the room, as if he were hunting something. There was dust on the windowsill. He had almost rebuked Karel for not cleaning more thoroughly, but for some reason it felt intolerable to talk to the boy in that fatherly tone. A spider’s web hung from the ceiling. One side was attached to the cast iron chain of the oil lamp. Greasy deposits had dulled the glass of the green, spherical reservoir. Once it had shone brightly. Forcing himself to shake off the memory the woodcutter stacked the plates and pans. Karel obediently did the dishes. The plates hardly clattered at all.

A live deer, thought the woodcutter, shaking his head. What did the lad want with that? He couldn’t answer, and let the matter rest. Untouched, the question mingled that night with all his other sleeping thoughts.

3

Next morning the question seemed to have vanished. The woodcutter rose at dawn and did what he had done for years, and thus there was no need to expend any thought on his actions. Before sitting down to breakfast, he picked up his razor. He had never had a beard. As soon as one had started to sprout, the poacher would say to him: ‘Animals have no control over how they look, but we do.’

After shaving, the woodcutter made breakfast and filled the mugs. Tea for Karel and coffee for himself. After breakfast he left the house as he did each morning and closed the door behind him. He walked down the side of the house and left it via the narrow path between the pear tree and the shed. The path had once been paved with cobblestones, long since sunk into the ground. Further down, among the beeches, it was just a trail, created by his father’s footsteps and maintained by his own. Something rustled in the treetops, a living thing. Probably a squirrel. The woodcutter did not look up, nor did he seem to notice the birds, beetles, rabbits and moles which hid themselves among the thousands of tree trunks and branches or under the grass. He knew the texture of their fur and plumage, the smell of their droppings, the sound of their cries of terror and mating calls. He knew where their passages and escape routes could be found and how to stalk and ultimately outwit them. But he did not search for his father’s animals. Nor did he need to: a woodcutter is not a hunter.

The woodcutter walked among the white-grey trunks up to the point where the trail reached the sunken forest path. He looked to left and right like a pedestrian about to cross a busy street. He preferred not to run into anyone in the forest. If they were people he knew, they wanted to stop and chat, even though it should be quiet in the forest. He avoided strangers as much as possible.

There was, as he expected, not a soul to be seen, and he stepped off the verge onto the path. He only headed to the right, where the trees let in more and more light and the path turned into the dirt road that led to the village, if he had to go to one of the farmhouses for food or tools. Long ago, years before the last war, the

poacher regularly went to the inn in the village. The woodcutter never accompanied his father; at that time he was scarcely taller than the wheelbarrow. Once he was older he had no cause to go.

Now he turned left, into the forest. His axe hung over his shoulder, although he was unlikely to use it that day. The woodcutter did not like to bury the steel of his axe in a living tree. He was only a woodcutter because he wasn't a hunter, and the idea of becoming a farmer had never occurred to him. Sometimes he would chop down a tree because he was asked to do so by a carpenter who needed the material, or by a villager whose supply of firewood was running low. He chopped down other trees because they were sick or hampered the growth of other, more useful specimens. The payment he received for the wood, which he sometimes left whole and sometimes cut into more manageable pieces, was the result of this working philosophy – like the rain from a cloud or the acorns from an oak – and it varied accordingly: sometimes more, sometimes less.

The woodcutter followed the path for about ten minutes before leaving it on the north side. His sphere of activity lay in the area beyond the path. That was where the trees grew and died, the trees he had learned to classify by type, with names and shapes. Over the course of time he had become so familiar with them that he could see and understand their problems and hardships – disease, or an overly hard patch of ground, the unfortunate place where their seed had once fallen – even before the leaves or bark revealed that there was anything amiss. He observed some trees and groups of trees more closely than others. The Spanish chestnuts stood on a hill, a little less than a mile from the path. At the foot of the trees the woodcutter could clearly see the traces of Karel's presence. The opened shells lay in an orderly pile, which no animal could have made. The boy went out chestnut-picking several times every fall. This year too, there was again a goodly supply of them in the shed.

It must have been an arduous task for Karel to cover that distance over such rugged ground. The woodcutter's head began to glow unpleasantly. The chestnuts made him think of the boy's awkward, laborious gait, of his disappointment and

finally, of the deer. Since the poacher had been gone, the woodcutter had not killed an animal. The act of trapping the deer was lodged in his mind like something that had happened to somebody else, a story he had heard told so many times and in such lifelike detail that he could recall every aspect of it. Among the chestnut trees there were also unopened shells, the fruits gleaming through gashes in the seams. He left them there. Gathering chestnuts was Karel's job, just as it had once been his, before he became a woodcutter. From those very same trees, which had been there, more or less, since the beginning of time. The woodcutter placed the palm of his hand on a tree and let it slide down the bark. He knew exactly how the tree he was now touching looked when he had gone chestnut-gathering for the first time. From close by there was no difference. He peered at the bark. It was just as it had been in the past: a landscape of craters, pits and cracks, through which moisture and small insects could penetrate to the deeper layers, to the place where the growth rings kept their history, for all time, or till the moment someone split open the trunk.

He took a step back and saw the tree in its old shape, as he had seen it as a child: thinner and shorter but no less impressive. And the one next to it; that too he saw as it had once been. But as he stared at it, the first chestnut tree returned to its present form. When he shifted his gaze to the first tree, exactly the same thing happened to the second. And that was not all, every time he looked in a slightly different direction, he saw all those familiar trees alternate between their present shape, and a manifestation to which other memories clung. He hurried away from the chestnuts, but it did no good. The other trees were behaving strangely too. Every time he blinked his eyes, an earlier or later version of the tree would appear, as if he had to listen to hundreds of stories being told simultaneously.

Helpless in the face of all these trees, which needed more water, air, time and attention – not to mention space – than the forest could ever offer, he fixed his eyes on the ground, keeping them that way as he walked on among the trees. And because he refused to look around and was doing his best to rid his head of thought, he did not know where he was going. Only when he saw the roots near

his feet, as thick as a man's arm and surrounded by acorns and brown leaves, did he realize how far he had gone. He went no further. He stopped where he was, arms at his side and eyes closed, waiting for familiar, comprehensible sounds. The wind sighed. The gentle cough of life in the green cathedral lifted up a lock of his hair and tugged at the leaves and branches. The gust picked up strength. There was rustling above and around him as more and more leaves and branches rattled in the wind. The sound surged in volume until it was everywhere, insubstantial and overwhelming at the same time. And just as quickly as it had begun, the sound retreated into nothingness. The returning silence enfolded him and the tree trunks, ran down the grooves in their bark like water and caressed his eardrums like a warm mist.

The woodcutter blinked several times. The trees still looked the way they looked. All that foolishness had been his imagination. Here and there a branch waved in the breeze or a leaf floated to the ground, movements without consequences. But mainly he again saw the actual, reassuring movements of the trees; their growth, florescence and decay, as genuine and inevitable as a flight from danger or a courtship ritual, and in a tempo he knew, with consequences he could predict. Relieved, the woodcutter decided that things would soon be back to normal at home too. If that would take a living deer, so be it. Why not?

On the way back he thought about what keeping a deer would involve. You couldn't just plonk a deer down in the garden. A deer would not want to stay in a garden; it would want to return to the forest as fast as possible, away from incomprehensible, foul-smelling people and their cunning weapons. By the time he was home, he had hit upon a solution. He drove long poles in the ground in a semi-circle around the garden. In the shed, he gathered up whatever pieces of rope and barbed wire he could find and strung them together to form an improvised fence.

'To catch starlings,' he told Karel, who looked inquisitively at him. Hopefully he surveyed the structure, which seemed high enough to keep in a deer, provided the animal was not too big. He was counting on that. An experienced adult deer

was unlikely to wind up in his trap, he knew. Inside the enclosure there was only grass now, the lime tree and a hardy holly bush. A hungry deer would soon make short work of that, the woodcutter considered.

The next day he headed out. He had expected the hill to be deserted, but when he got there it was populated by a herd of deer. The same moment he saw them, they saw him. For half a second, none of them moved a muscle, as if frozen, then they bolted, bounding towards the west, where the forest was denser. The woodcutter felt as if he had been caught red-handed. Even so, he set the snare, knotted the end of the rope tightly to a tree and went home.

A few weeks later he had something. An enormous stag with his leg in the snare. It exhibited a calm unusual in a trapped animal. Cautiously, the woodcutter approached the animal, walking beside the rope. The points of the antlers pointed towards the grey sky from which snowflakes fell, much too early and intermittently, like seed tufts. It was an old deer, a solitary survivor, the father of generations. The woodcutter's gaze glided along the massive neck and the broad chest. The animal was powerful enough to kill him. The woodcutter clasped the handle of the dagger that hung from his belt and stepped over the rope.

The creature jumped back with a jerk, tightening the rope. It struck the woodcutter in his testicles like a wooden truncheon. A paralysing pain shot up to his stomach. He staggered, walked away from the animal and cut the rope. He vented his anger at yet another failure by fetching another snare from the house and retracing his steps through the cold, crunching forest as darkness fell. Since the poacher had taught him all the routes and landmarks in the forest, the woodcutter had no trouble finding his way back home, even though by then it was pitch dark.

4

Fortune finally smiled on the woodcutter, just before the first frost set in. The animal he found in his trap was still young, not yet fully grown. The snare had cut deep into its flesh, but the bone was unharmed. The woodcutter overpowered the animal, without too much of a struggle and bound the four stamping feet together. He carried the quivering package home without once having to set it down. It was not until he was inside the fence that he laid it on the grass. A docile Karl allowed himself to be blindfolded and led out onto the lawn. While he untied the knot around the deer's legs, the woodcutter told the boy to remove the blindfold.

Karel blinked, twice, once at the light and once at the brown shadow that shot off in the opposite direction. The animal covered the fifteen metres to the other side of the enclosure in a few leaps. The last one sent it crashing headlong into the fence. The panicked animal bounced back, rolled over and again leapt into the barbed wire, which pierced its young coat before sending it hurtling back to the ground. The small deer rolled over again, began to shudder strangely and collapsed with its head in their direction. It trembled for a moment, then the body went limp. Karel never thought about death, but he knew he was watching this deer die, just as surely as he knew that the rafters of the house were incredibly heavy even though he had never tried to lift one.

'It's its heart,' said the woodcutter. 'It's broken. Overcome by fear.'

'Papa,' said Karel, but he said nothing more and walked away, as if he wanted to spare the woodcutter his disappointment.

Dismayed, the woodcutter picked up the carcass, without knowing where he was going to take it. In silence he buried it in the garden. And in silence they ate that evening, and the next morning. And during the meals that followed, and all other moments that they were together, the woodcutter could think of nothing to say. The silence became painful. The woodcutter longed to hear the child's sunny voice. And he longed for his own voice, answering questions about the forest or the garden, or asking Karel about the day's adventures. But something constricted

his throat. Everything he wanted to say seemed to be connected by invisible threads to that deer whose throat he had slit so effortlessly, so misguidedly. And Karel was a child, and thus by nature avoided any topic that could have confused the woodcutter.

And so it came to pass that the two exchanged only the most necessary of phrases, like ‘good morning’ or ‘pass the salt’. Sometimes the one would give the other a brief report of the day’s activities, but nothing was said or asked unless the reply was clear from the outset. Their household was simple and consisted largely of routine, which required few words. Whatever *was* said was so meaningless that it merely emphasised all that wasn’t said.

And since the woodcutter’s house stood at the edge of the forest, surrounded by nothing but plants and skittish animals, the silence was virtually all-encompassing. It nestled in the oak floorboards and between the stalks of the thatched roof, and became part of the essence of the house, like the greyish yellow of the brick walls and the sweet hay that had hung in the attic for decades.

In and around the house the woodcutter would listen hard to the soundlessness, which could be broken at any moment by the start of a sentence from Karel’s mouth. And often the silence *was* broken; that was simply the nature of things. A shutter blowing open or closed, the rustling of a leaf being blown against the window or the hiss of a candle going out: each of these sounds made his heart leap greedily, because each sound could be the beginning of a conversation that would permanently relegate his mistake with the deer, and all that it had unleashed, to the past. But at once his heart would shrink with disappointment, because the sounds he heard were fleeting and they vanished as quickly as they had come, refusing to turn into the voice and sentiment he was hoping for, and leaving him behind in silence. The disappointment stung afresh every time, so that the gaps between the sounds filled up with fear of the next one. It was always a release to head into the forest. Sometimes Karel wished him a good day.

Whenever the silence tormented him, he would recall the moment when all had still been well. From a distance, as if he was spying on the house from behind

a bush, he saw himself, the woodcutter, leaning on the bottom half of the door. He looked down at the boy with a fatherly expression. Puffs of smoke rose from his pipe. Karel looked up at him, and longed for a gift from him. Everything was clear and comprehensible. As long as he could remember that, he knew it had existed and could thus be regained.