

SHOCKED EARTH

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Every step makes the rime crunch. The grasslands have changed to a carpet of glassy frost-spines and little stars of ice, glittering in the sunlight. There's an odd stillness hanging over the countryside. For once no fierce wind shakes the grasses, reeds and poplars round the scattered farmhouses. For once there's no shimmering, surging, rippling, billowing, flapping, rattling and rolling. The clay lies heavy in thick furrows that stretch to far beyond the horizon.

The maar, a winding watercourse, has been changed to a crusty road of ice. From behind the horizon the sky flames out bright blue and brilliant pink. Siepke's Sleepstead, an old sheep barn, seems to float up out of veils of mist. The spindly shapes of bare trees loom up along the country road in the distance.

The air is so cold that it's as if the lungs are closing up, just as a mussel shell closes when danger threatens. In this cold everything is slower and more difficult.

Femke hears a soft whoosh: seven swans flying towards the mouth of the river, tired wingbeats, longing for water. Is the estuary still clear of ice?

The moon, pale and almost full, is still high in the heavens, while the day is already well on its way. She keeps on walking firmly, towards the reedbeds. Two days ago, moorhens and mallards were still swimming around in the little ice hole. The wigeons, tufted ducks and teal had already vanished, flying away

from the ice, to the coast or down south. She'd like to understand birds better. How do they warn each other that it's getting cold or that it's time to migrate? How do they know where to meet each other? And who decides when they'll fly up and make that staggering journey? And why does one of them sometimes stay behind? In the winter, every now and then, she sees a solitary bird whose kin have long gone to Africa.

She uses the rubber handgrip to detach the electric wire, steps through the gateway, and attaches it again, even though the electric fence has no purpose in the winter. She walks past the metres-high reeds. Every stem is wrapped in a wafer-thin crystalline layer of ice. The rime has turned the plummy flower spikes into all kinds of amazing, whimsical shapes. There's no sound of ducks quacking, or grunting, or growling, nor the friendly ping-pong of the bearded tits, not even the honking of geese.

She goes along a reed-fringed branch of the maar, and then the pool comes into sight, glittering in the full sunlight, a dark stretch of icy mirror-glass, with here and there some little tufts of reed-stalks.

In the middle of the frozen pool there's a heap of feathers, an untidy white coating of down. It's an enormous swan. Its long neck is folded back and its head is tucked into its wings.

She throws a lump of clay at it. The clod lands close to the swan, which lifts its head and tries to rise, clapping its wings wildly, but it can't move from where it is.

She steps onto the ice and shuffles towards the centre, and then in the reeds at the edge of the pool she sees another swan, anxiously scurrying back and forth, its neck forming a graceful S, swaying its head from side to side. Its black knob and orange-red beak are vivid against the bright white. It's hissing and beating its wings.

As she gets closer to the bird desperately flapping on the frozen pool, it tries to fly up, but it still can't free itself.

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She hurries home and dives into the barn without anyone seeing her. This isn't the right moment to bump into her mother. She's more interested in dead birds than in living ones. If a bird crashes to death against the spic-and-span farmhouse windows, then Trijn stuffs it into a plastic bag and puts it in the separate dead-bird freezer, before eventually transforming it into a cheerful little corpse in her Dead Bird Museum.

Femke swaps her normal mittens for thick work gloves, grabs the aluminium ladder and a claw hammer, and hurries back to the reedbeds.

The swan is beating its wings and it lashes out at her with its beak as she creeps on her belly across the ladder towards it. The other swan comes closer, snorting and hissing. She makes an abrupt gesture to keep it at a distance, then holds the swan that is trapped in the ice firmly by its neck and presses it down. She is now half lying on top of the paralysed creature. She breaks the ice with the hammer and slowly shuffles back along the ladder. The wingbeats become more and more frantic, and once the swan is freed it slaps its feet helplessly across the icy surface, until it reaches the edge of the pool, wings flapping, and then with loud, indignant grunts it flies up with the other swan, vanishing in the direction of the river delta.

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When she has put the ladder back into the barn and goes into the yard, Brian calls out to her: 'You've got to help your mother with the pump.' He nods towards the straw pen.

She goes inside, slowly. Her mother is lying fully stretched on her belly. Her dark-blue overalls fall loosely over her long legs and flat buttocks, making Femke think of a scarecrow that has blown over. 'There's no meat on her at all,' Ootje, a rather weighty woman, would sometimes mutter disapprovingly when

she looked at Trijn.

Trijn's head is deep inside the drain, from which the sharp stench of cow shit and rot is rising. Femke stays in the doorway, until her mother looks up and asks her what she's been up to.

'Nothing special.'

Trijn stands up and brushes the mud from her hands. Femke is a little taller than her mother. She is lanky-legged, like a newborn calf. She forces herself to keep her head held high.

'And that's all?' Trijn asks.

Femke doesn't answer.

'Nothing special,' Trijn repeats. Femke answers her mother's fierce expression with cold eyes. Don't look away. If you lower your eyes you've lost. Her jaw is trembling with tension.

'It's Tuesday,' Trijn continues.

This is going to turn into one of her mother's rants. Femke freezes, like a rabbit caught in the bright light of car headlamps.

'We were going to shave the cows today and repair the pump. Brian has to be guided and you're not here. You don't say anything. You don't tell us where you're going. You just leave things in a mess.' A short silence falls before Trijn continues. 'We're a partnership, remember.'

'I'm here now, aren't I?'

Biting silence.

Trijn purses her lips and narrows her eyes. Femke hates that expression. She'd like to turn round and go back into the reed-beds, or even better she'd like to put her mother in her place by snapping that she should mind her own business. Being in a partnership doesn't mean that Trijn can still boss her around. But instead of snapping at her mother she nods at the drain.

'Do you need help?'

'Yes. The electric cable has to go through the hole. If you push it through in the milking pen, I'll pull it out here. Then a plug will have to go on it at your end. Earth it.'

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The black rubber cable has to go through a small hole under a hatch in the concrete floor. Femke is now lying on the ground, just like her mother on the other side of the wall, and she's trying to fiddle the cable through the hole. The way through is full of clots of earth and straw and manure, and the cable keeps getting stuck in them. Trijn is shouting impatiently at her, asking where it is. She's wriggled countless wires through the wings of dead birds and is much better than Femke at fiddly work. Things only work out after quite some pushing and shoving. Femke cuts off the coloured plastic with a Stanley knife, guides the copper wire onto the contact points, and screws them down.

In the distance the church tower clock strikes twelve. Brian runs in, calls for Trijn, and right after that she pops her head through the doorway of the milking pen.

'Frikandel time. Can you finish sorting out the pump? The cable's already on it. It just has to be set into the drain. And make sure that the float switch is hanging down.'

Femke nods and watches Brian tugging Trijn along with him. Her mother drops everything for that lad. While they're walking towards the farmhouse, Femke thinks to herself that Trijn would probably have preferred a son. Better a simple son than a complicated daughter. Their ease with each other, as they go off to prepare Brian's frikandel sausages, the two of them joking and laughing, is something Femke has never known.

She loves the farm where she grew up and loves the regularity of its life, in which animals play starring roles: mucking out, giving out the feed, milking, sweeping, hosing down, raking, spreading straw in the pens, the eternal cycle of dairy farming, which in its heart of hearts is still the same as it was two hundred years ago, even though automation, mechanisation, and expansion have changed so many things. But she realised when she was still very young that the familiar rhythm she loved was a drag for Trijn, something she'd wanted to escape, and that her birth

had forced her mother to return to this way of life. And perhaps that's why Trijn can't stomach it if Femke has any ideas of her own about how to do things.

Femke once saw a TV programme which claimed that a vegetarian driving an SUV is more environmentally friendly than a carnivore on a bike. That made her decide to become vegetarian. But she was betraying her farming roots by doing this, according to her mother. Being a vegetarian, according to Trijn, is something for hypocritical city-dwellers, who weep when a chicken's neck is wrung or if they have to watch a pig being slaughtered, who accuse farmers of being the ones responsible for climate change, while meanwhile acquiring a new set of clothes every season and flying to this or that trendy city every other day, or to the other side of the world for a sun-snack. Every discussion about whether or not to eat meat is eventually cut off by Trijn's remark that if people were meant to be vegetarians, then the good Lord would have made sure that people couldn't digest meat. 'Ever seen a cow tucking into a drumstick? Point proved.'

But if Brian wants to fry frikandel sausages every week, then Trijn makes that happen. Even though after the big quake of five years ago, the living-kitchen and the scullery have become too dangerous to enter, and so they've had to improvise a kitchen area in the parlour.

The sideboard has to make do as a worktop, a Calor gas ring has replaced the cooker, there's a microwave and a jerrycan of water on the broad windowsill, and they have to do their frying outside, on the terrace. The large dark-oak kitchen table from the old living-kitchen, where people have eaten, spoken, and held their tongues for generations, has been lugged into the parlour. The kitchen is now forbidden territory. And more and more cracks are appearing in the byre walls, caused by ever more frequent tremors. Some of the quakes can't be felt, but the farm buildings can't stand up to them. Zwierv has got used to sticking

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a post-it note on every new crack. At first he'd put a different colour on new cracks after every tremor. But very soon the colours ran out and so he now writes down on the little stickers when the crack first appeared. There have already been many official inspections and plenty of reports have been written, but they're still waiting for a solution.

Outside the house Brian puts the frikandels into the fryer basket and drops that into the bubbling oil. Inside the house Trijn is buttering the bread. When Brian calls out, as he will do very soon, 'Everything must go! Everything must go,' which he once heard the hot dog man call out at the cattle market, then Femke and Zwier are expected to go inside immediately and have a frikandel served up to them. And even Femke will take one, because if someone refuses one of Brian's frikandels it really upsets him. And perhaps also because her mother would never forgive her.

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