

Translated poems from

**Wulf Kirsten**  
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**Wulf Kirsten**  
**Pictures of Earth Life**  
**Poems from Fifty Years**  
**1954-2004**

**Translated by Stefan Tobler**

**Lake Landscape (1968)**

A summer like there never was again.  
The only truth is the night-time breath of the  
lake,  
is the language of things, silhouetted in black;  
nothing heard even in the reed beds where birds  
sleep.

For one breath summer rested.  
In the treetops a soundless stepping,  
summer's path led above walls of cloud,  
a reading of skin in the night's good keeping.

The lake a blind mirror,  
a pair of words dived  
into the water's cool breath:  
a foretaste of handshake and scene change.

Two gasps, a passing symmetry, blown away,  
nothing is as constant  
as the heavenly bodies  
carrying us off with their long arms.

[p. 57]

## **Steps**

*For E. and R. K.* (1969)

Going up the steps  
to the town above the town  
through a silent autumn  
made of stone,  
which starts to fly  
when the wind  
tells the trees to unwind their leaf-balls.  
As we climb, slippery words  
from our throats  
cover the slope.  
Each step that keeps silent  
we hold  
in our common language.

[p. 59]

Translator's Note: *For E. and R. K.* is a dedication for Elisabeth and Reiner Kunze. This poem from 1969 could only be published in the GDR in this reserved, apparently private form, as the poet Reiner Kunze was to the authorities a *persona non grata*.

**Luchian (1973)**

The Sad Master Locksmith. Lorica. Safta's Blossoming Life. The Abandoned Inn. The Cemetery Path. The Ox-cart. Drunk from the fountain at Brebu. Coloured in the Moinești houses scattered on the hill like straw bales. The uprising, smothered in the blood of eleven thousand massacred farmers. The washerwoman's leaden white. Fleecy bundles of flowers, shining like enamel, in Romanian jugs. The vivid poppy flares up. Outlines are trimmed with beams of light. The painter fixes the silvery grey mist in pastels, it rises in the twilight from the Chiajna meadows. A pulsating mass of colour, dipped in sun. Shades of green. Glowing constellations, which scream in anguish. Pain colours the calligraphy of flourished paint, like a suddenly wild wind in the leaves that carries everything off and buries it. A person whose head is slightly cocked to one side pleading for his life, his lips burning hellishly on the devil's doorstep, who defies death. His body already stiff and exhausted, only his eye left unscathed. His paintbrush strapped to his wrist like a spear.

[p. 157]

**Flats on a Sunday (1977)**

Next to each other, on top of each other,  
door beside door, wall against wall,  
sharing the scarce flats  
in the thin-walled house,  
live slander greed numbness,  
the go-getter, consumed by ambition,  
the sniffer dog, who grew  
elephant ears.  
Othello on a crutch  
whose small pension ate away at him.  
The fingers of an elderly aesthete  
flit for hours over the grand piano  
and fill the stairwell  
with a shimmering column  
of dirt and dusty notes,  
while a drunkard  
beats his wife and children.

[p. 163]

**Wasteland** (1981)  
*For Eberhard Haufe*

Just walking across country, nothing to me,  
nothing to you, where nothing grows which is  
of use in farming. A meagre broom-ridden  
terrain rustling with black pods. There's a  
grouchy rattling and crackling around this last  
outpost. Thistles parade proudly, boy scouts,  
heads held high. Their untamed lust for life  
taking off with the wind. Closed gravel pits,  
where nature has a free hand. In the pathless,  
madly growing mat of grass, the gentians  
speckle the turf with their deep-blue, autumn  
goblets. The thorny slope covered with a rich  
variety of self-seeders. A wall of maquis. No  
sign: Danger! Impenetrable Zone! No Access!  
Reserve for foxes and small game. So many  
boltholes, so many goodnights. Camomile  
growing lushly on burnt debris and iron parts  
made by the ever cheerful farm mechanic, God  
rest his soul. Tufts of wool as landmarks in the  
wilderness, ripped from the herd by the bushes.  
Earth over old burrows giving way underfoot.  
Tracks left by gravel carts disappearing under  
burrs and nettles. A burnt spot: this is where the  
shepherd rested after lunch. Above the fertile  
arable land, dull and level as far as the eye can  
see, this wild reef rises up with a plume of  
green bushes. A wave of earth quickens the  
landscape near the placid stream that flows into  
the Gramme.

[p.190]

**Self** (1991)

The garden wall down the slope on its knees,  
the gaping cracks between stones filled with elder,  
bell after bell of wild hop overran the fence  
and tied the world closed before my eyes,  
I lay in the grass, arms under my head.

A pear tree was crumbling beside me, choked  
in brown rot, bundles of shoots poked up into light,  
hole after hole artfully placed by a woodpecker  
made the tree a flute for starlings,  
I looked into the green sun, arms under my head.

The bramble thickets and the hornbeam hedge  
gave the bank down to the river a leafy roof,  
wagging imps whirred from the wrens' nest  
and darted through my private hideaway,  
in which I lay, arms under my head.

A daydreamer, happy to idle away whole afternoons  
and intently follow pictures in the clouds,  
lay quietly in lazy amazement in bloody times  
on a grass-tangled meadow sloping out of the village,  
his knees drawn up, his arms under his head.

[p. 199]

**Unforgettable Moment** (1992)

Summer raises its green roof  
over the track through the fields,  
all the way to the stony vineyards.  
Two wheel ruts run to the woods, cut  
deep in the clay.

Mother talking to Lorenz, the baker's boy,  
strollers under cherry trees.  
My eyes stare at his knee socks,  
topped off with fluffy bobbles,  
Sunday-white.

Face and voice forgotten.  
I paid no attention  
to his words.  
The baker had to enlist.  
He went missing on the Eastern front.

Guided by other hands,  
his peel shoots  
over the ember hole.  
The avenue of cherries has been felled.  
The wind has a free run.

I see myself holding my mother's hand  
in the avenue.  
A shady walk full of leafy coolness.  
A talk under a cherry tree,  
refreshing, weighing light.

My mind's eye  
held spell-bound  
and astonished  
on the bobbles of that  
baker's Sunday.

[p. 201]

## Mecklenburg Summer (1991)

*Every place shelters its own dream.*  
*Alfons Paquet*

Every metaphor for silence  
rudely thrown out and hushed up.  
No steps crunch on the sand  
of a dark summer path.  
Woollen tongues have ground down  
the village tales of simple souls.  
No torrents of corn fall  
from the feeding board into the big farm machine.  
No shimmering dust dancing  
that remembers:  
back then, on the threshing floor.  
I stood tall in the husk storm  
and pitched down a cartload of wheat.  
I pulled the horses' collars  
over their heads  
and looked at them without any fear,  
animals good as gold, gentle  
as the sunsets outside  
on the nettle path, barefoot in my clogs,  
having slipped free of the world towards evening  
above windrows, swallows' wings  
were flitting low and lower over the earth.  
Heaven only knows, look before you step, *the end is  
coming,*  
*the day of trouble is drawing near.*  
Young lady-in-the-green goes in sackcloth and  
ashes,  
the blacksmith's daughter, in whose  
gardens you lived in your day.  
What you knew, what I saw:  
Old Mecklenburg, midland  
pairs of storks, summer faces,  
mirror images of mirror images  
back to front in sharp silhouette  
on the nightly enchanted Leizen lake,  
bewitched on an overgrown byway.  
All words have been lost with the things  
which the big muncher-cruncher ate.  
No farmyard gate creeks on its hinges,  
no flywheel turns any more,  
nothing crumples  
where everything has long been smashed.  
The crankshafts, the riddles –  
scrap, scrap, scrap.

[p. 207]

**Bearwood Hill** (1988)

On Bearwood Hill, a pair of quails called over the field,  
my summer's day followed paths that wheels  
had rolled through burnt-out cereals,  
on Bearwood Hill, where a king sleeps under a silver shield.

On Bearwood Hill, where a pair of quails took wing,  
a dozen steadfast limes ring the circular wall,  
looking under leafy canopies to where their shadows fall,  
on Bearwood Hill, where legend buried a king.

On Bearwood Hill, where a pair of quails flew down the combe,  
the water meadow, green through hazy white,  
flared up as the river valley was hit by light,  
on Bearwood Hill, where the king's jewellery jangles in his silver  
tomb.

On Bearwood Hill, where the quails' song called  
I crossed an abandoned railway line,  
which scaled the hill in a slow wide climb  
from Bearwood Hill to its final stop, Buchenwald.

[p. 221]

Stefan Toblers translation of 'Bearwood Hill' first appeared in *The Rialto*  
magazine, no. 53, summer 2003.

**The Swing** (1990)

From my window:  
a girl swinging.  
She floats and swoops  
absent-mindedly and agile  
under the flowering pear tree.  
The awkward branches  
balled to a bloom-white body  
and billowing, buzzing, upwards.  
A colony of bees are  
bundling over each other  
industriously.  
Without a sound  
the girl floats  
over the lawn.  
She swings  
regular as a pendulum  
between earth and tree blossom.  
The girl lifts spring  
into the heavens.  
The heavens nudge the swing  
back down to earth.

[p. 249]

**Anything, Save . . . (1996)**

Door closed, time to be off,  
I didn't ask what else  
could keep me here  
in Potschappel, no more trains  
left from this rather  
horrendous station, dragged  
my suitcase all night long  
through villages which had sunk  
into themselves, walking on the verge  
of an endless country road,  
suffering the frost yard by yard,  
with every step on Sachsdorf Hill  
knee-deep in snow,  
the toil of plodding  
up a road buried under drifts, just  
a single solitary thought  
kept me awake: anything, save  
foundering in the snow  
with my brown vulcanised suitcase,  
nobody else that night was going  
that way, which was no longer a way,  
after every step, deep into  
the snow, that didn't hold me,  
needing to heave a leg out again  
and thinking as I did, just get  
over Sachsdorf Hill,  
anything, save . . .

[p. 315]

**Witchhunt** (1998)

March day, overbright, glinting like silk,  
an icy patch caught in a cluster of rays  
white beneath the hill, the wood  
along the cliff-top decked  
with cloud trees billowing out,  
the village a monstrosity squatting below  
in dirt and desertion, still camouflaged  
under a drawn-out winter,  
the elderly world left to itself  
and its red-tiled calm when  
another snow-slip is avalanched  
over the eaves of the hip roofs,  
and tree-long logs and wooden planks  
stacked in flat piles, stiff and  
asking no questions, at night  
yet again the hounds howl  
in the frozen forest, fleeing  
russkies run in confusion  
towards their hunters until  
they are trapped  
by a ring of rapid-fire rifles.

[p. 323]

Translated by Tessa Ransford and Stefan Tobler

**The great bordering rope (1999)**

Rolling land carved with notches,  
for all to see as if it had never been  
and yet: just now made new,  
if you believe what you see,  
then you are called, what was once distant  
now isn't, a humpbacked vista,  
hollowed out, prepared for cultivation,  
plucked plump from the air,  
strata faults numbered in relief,  
marked out, encoded, so read  
and see, how the base type  
changes shape under a cloud of light,  
every rock face greened with May growth  
at Whitsun, as if this were still  
the nature of things; long  
lines of meaning are drawn out over  
the miniaturised world, which loses itself  
in layers of mist, church towers pressed  
by the sun into the Meissen landscape,  
reminders, set beyond the Elbe valley,  
which are there to give me a hand  
climbing up and crossing over  
beyond the great bordering rope, if only  
I knew who had called the river that  
in days gone by, a dirty water,  
how it pours itself out, as if it were glistening light  
that the current pulls onwards and carries.

[p. 359]

**A Feast for the Eyes (2000)**

Behind the screening hedge, which scratches  
me,  
grasping at itself, an orchard  
frothes up in white, the umbellifers  
have run to seed, they'll harvest  
thistle wool here, plucked by the wind,  
the heracleums are marauding intruders,  
the fruit, considered worthless,  
is left to fall, a walker  
in wild flight from himself heads  
further towards the fermented horizon, just as  
another, his senses dulled  
under a blanketing haze, sought  
the distant land of Elis  
and King Augeas of the many herds.

[p. 361]

**Vinegar & Mustard (2002)**

Oh, Iddel, your vinegar factory  
caught or set on fire,  
the mustard vats flare up  
at the end of boiling summer days,  
and now? Felt roofs in flames,  
corrosive billows, columns of  
smoke, black clouds, whatever  
the wives can grab, they throw,  
but just where are their husbands?  
out of their windows in  
panic, before it's all torched  
and burnt to cinders, duvets and  
flakes of soot fly through the air, just  
get out, get out now, no  
vinegar, no mustard left to save,  
only blackened beams, the rest  
was nationalised to ash,  
the vinegar factory rose  
on spirit wings, up  
and away, leaning out  
of open windows, arms spread wide  
and folded, the gawpers,  
a crowd of living busts,  
the day is closing, my heart,  
spectator with a box seat,  
a play enjoyed for free,  
finally something's up around here,  
all from vinegar and mustard  
which is stirred in vats,  
even when the world ends  
they will be there watching,  
their chests splashed,  
these cushioned citizens  
gripped with curiosity, just barely  
holding on to life, while all around  
neighbour by neighbour  
disappears  
in the whirlwind.

[p. 364]

### **A Cloud of Starlings (2003)**

Autumn swings a black rattle,  
dare-devil acrobatics are on show  
in the sky, directed by a master  
who bids the cloud of starlings  
to shift shape, a flapping then sagging flag,  
a tender and airy waving, a supple  
and artful waving, until it veers  
upwards, a cloud of black,  
as if the devil had possessed it,  
a sight to admire, how elegantly  
starlings group themselves, in a secret  
ballet that suddenly coils  
and as fast again disbands  
on a heavenly command,  
a staged effect, circus-like  
in nature, the whirring of  
wings in their thousands, harmonious  
in black, the sky stripped  
bare, myriad after myriad,  
a fleetingly revealed trailer  
that flashes up, transience  
sketching eloquent tableaux,  
not aimless, not by chance, but mindful,  
as of you, as of me.

[p. 371]