

Translated excerpt

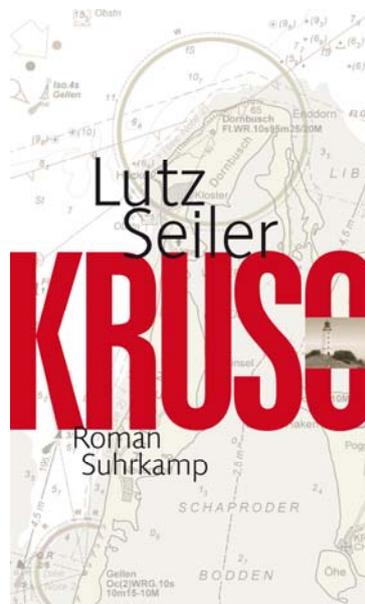
Lutz Seiler
Kruso
Novel

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Translated by Alexander Booth



Chapter 4: The Station Hotel

He could smell the sea before even leaving the train. He still remembered the "The Station Hotel" from his childhood (the one and only trip they had ever taken to the Baltic). It was directly across the street from the station, a big, beautiful, turreted attraction with bay windows and weather vanes where the seasons slowly crumbled.

He let a few cars pass by then paused. It wasn't that smart as far as money was concerned. And furthermore, there was no point landing on the island in the afternoon, as there probably wouldn't be enough time to get checked in to a place to stay – that is, if he could find a place at all. He was carrying around one hundred and fifty marks and if he found a good job waiting tables, he could live for three, maybe even four weeks. He had left behind about ninety marks in his bank account, enough to last through September. With a little luck, no one would even notice his disappearance. He could just as well have been sick. In three weeks' time the semester break would begin. He had written his parents a postcard. As far as they knew, he was in Poland, in Katowice at the so-called International Student Summer Meeting, just like last year.

The hotel reception was set abnormally high up and looked as if it had been swept completely clean, no papers, no keys. On the other hand, what did Ed really know about hotels? It was only at the last moment that the heads of three women popped up, deployed like the pistons of a four-stroke engine where the fourth spark plug hadn't fired. It was impossible to figure out with any precision at all from just what depths the receptionists had arrived. Maybe the high bank was connected to a backroom or maybe over the years the women had simply gotten used to being under cover as long as possible, utterly still, hiding there behind their darkly veneered barrier.

"Hello, I..."

His voice sounded flat. Alone in his train compartment, once again it had been impossible for him to sleep. A group of military police, most likely a type of pre-border guard, had taken away his map of the Baltic Sea. In

Aklam, the train had stopped for quite some time, and that is where they must have gotten on-board. He regretted not having thought of anything cleverer to say than that it was not *actually* his map...and therefore he really couldn't know why certain places had been underlined nor why certain coastlines had been traced...All of the sudden his voice had choked, and instead he heard only a buzzing: Brockes, Eichendorff, and over and over again the relentless sound of Trakl's poems, those poems so full of leaves and brown, and this was precisely why Ed had suddenly grabbed hold of his head. An unexpected gesture and immediately one of the soldiers reflexively raised his machine gun.

In the end, Ed could happily say that they had left him alone. "Strange bird," the Kalashnikov-toting soldier muttered once out in the corridor again. Ed's forehead was covered in sweat, fields passed by, black blades of grass along the embankment.

"Do you have a reservation?"

For the first time in his life, he was getting a room. And what was amazing was that it had worked. Ed was given a detailed form on dull paper, and asked for identification. As he began to fill it out, elbows forced up over the high bank, wrist stiff, the receptionists flipped thorough his identification booklet. In a moment of panic, Ed feared that his secret escape might somehow have been automatically entered into the little book, all the way in the back maybe, on one of the empty pages, under visas and trips. *Unauthorized movement* – this one little mysterious stamp and its various punishments had already existed at the time of his military service.

"I'm sorry, I'm doing this for the first time," Ed said.

"What?" the concierge asked.

Ed raised his head and tried to smile, but the attempt fell flat. He received a key that was attached to a lacquered cube of wood by a little cord. He closed his fist around it but knew the number. It had been burned cleanly into the wood. For a moment he saw the hotel's maintenance supervisor in his cellar workshop: there he was sitting before an endless row of little

sawn and sanded blocks upon which he would carefully place his glowing soldering iron, number for number, room for room. Ed too had once been a hand-worker, and a part of him still seemed to be at home in the workshops, in the caverns of the *working class*, those side rooms of the world in which things had asserted their clear and tangible shapes.

“Second floor, to the left of the stairs, young man.”

Above a brass fitted door next to the stairs shimmered the word *Mocca Room*. On the first landing, Ed turned around again. Two of the three women’s heads had once more disappeared, while the third woman was on the phone and at the same time following him with her eyes. By the time he woke up, it was already after four o’clock. At the end of the double bed was a sink. In the corner a television mounted on a chrome under-frame. Above the toilet hung a cast iron tank that must have come from a much older time and which was covered in condensation. The lever was in the form of two jumping dolphins. In the time it took the animals to leisurely return to their original position, there was an endless torrent of water. Ed enjoyed the sound and felt himself somehow close to the two. But the fact that one could go into a hotel, ask for and receive a room (to some degree without any particular reason), had to belong to the few wonders of the world that had survived “in spite-of-it-all” Ed gurgled to himself beneath the shower’s jet of water. With the passing of time, you simply forgot that such things still existed, you just didn’t believe it any longer, you forgot how good life could be. Or that, at any rate, is what Ed thought. He wanted to masturbate, but was unable to concentrate. To the right of the hotel there was a small lake with a little fountain that regularly shot up into the air, broke back into itself, then disappeared for a number of seconds. A couple in a paddleboat glided slowly across the water. While crossing the street to the lake, all of the sudden Ed was overcome by a *good feeling*. This is all the beginning of something. Someone who’s already been through a lot suddenly seems capable of...His sentence stopped. It became clear to him that his had been an

escape delayed. He could feel the pain. It was as if he was only just now waking up from out of anesthesia, millimeter for millimeter.

A cobbled road to the left was called *At the Bleachers*. He passed a few rundown villas complete with conservatories, courtyards, and garages. He walked up to one of the nameplates to glance at the house's former itinerary. The small and stalwart light within the doorbell panel still made legible some of the lower, older names that had likely already been covered up for years. Proceeding along his way, Ed tried to take up their rhythm: Schiele, Dunst, Glambeck, Krieger...With his muttering he began to build a jetty out into the sea while his steps across the wood became a metronome. *Do the-al-read-y-de-ceased...*Ed whispered while automatically grabbing his face...see with other eyes? The old city-wall appeared, then an archway, and then a café called the Torschließerhaus. Ed cut through the old city down to the port and checked the departure times of the ferries. In the Kiosk of the "White Fleet" he purchased a trip for the following day. The view of the ships made him almost euphoric. The steps down to the quay were of a light gray concrete and then: the sea.

In order to eat for little money, Ed turned to go back toward the station. He was calm and contemplated his chances. Hide-out in the sea, secret sea, Hiddensee...He knew the stories. A whispering forever washed about the island.

Ed thoughtfully chewed his food and drank his coffee in tiny sips. It wouldn't be easy to get onto one of the ships. Then it'd be almost impossible to find a place to stay, but any other destination *within the borders* was inconceivable. Sure, he had listened to experts who maintained that Hiddensee lay outside of them, that it was exterritorial, an island of the blessed, of dreamers and of dream dancers, of the washed-up and outcast. Others called it the Capri of the north, already booked for decades.

In Halle, Ed had gotten to know a historian who worked every winter as a server in the Offenbach-Rooms, a wine restaurant where he had gone to

the bar a few times with G. Every spring, at the beginning of the season, the Historian (that's what everyone called him) would go back to the island. "At last, at last!" as he would happily say to his guests who would simply nod indulgently as soon as he began one of his eulogies, having already been addressed with his familiar "Dear Friends!" "The island, dear friends, has everything I need, everything I have always sought. As soon as it appears upon the horizon from the deck of the steamer, its slender and fragile face, its delicate outline, the last gray coxcomb of the mainland still at one's back, Stralsund with its steeples, the whole hinterland and its filth, you know, my dear friends, what I mean, my dear friends, the island appears and all of a sudden you forget *everything*, for there she lays before you and something new begins, indeed, right there, on the very steamer!" The man, a gray-haired middle-fortyish retiree from the university (of his own accord, as it was officially called, and thus even more deeply sunk into his dreams), would rhapsodize, his face, like many thinkers of the land, covered in a type of Marx-like beard. "Freedom, dear friends, at heart, consists of forging one's very own laws within the frame of existent laws, to be simultaneously both object and subject of legislation, that is one of the chief characteristics of life up there in the north." That is how the Historian of the Offenbach-Rooms would summarize it all, a tray of wine glasses before his chest.

The most important bit of news for Ed, however, was learning that, even in the middle of the season, sometimes jobs could suddenly appear. From one day to the next waiters might be sought, dishwashers, kitchen help. For a variety of reasons, there were seasonal workers who disappeared overnight. Most of the time, the storytellers would stop at this point to cast a glance at the person sitting across from them and then, depending on the way things were going, would set off in one of the possible or impossible directions: "Of course there are always people who give up on going back to the mainland, people who are just not cut out for it." Or: "You know, a trip out of the country can suddenly be authorized, right in the middle of summer..." Or: "Sure, it's almost impossible to believe, fifty

kilometers, but there have always been some good swimmers out there..." By the end of all the stories, the tiny piece of land that was Hiddensee had attained a mythical stature, it was the last place, the only place, an island that led one ever further out, out of eyesight even – and you had to get moving if you too wanted to become a part.

After his meal, Ed went back to his hotel. Someone had gone through his things, but nothing was missing. He went to the window and looked over to the station. Once in bed, he began to call out for his cat Matthew – a relapse. But he did so only very quietly, and only in order to hear his own voice once again before falling asleep. No, in the end he hadn't jumped.

Chapter 5: The Island

Most of the time the refusal came straight away. Someone walking past with an "all full!" Then a few heads would lift up when in a half-loud voice Ed said "thank you" and tried as quickly as possible to move away, hands in fists around the sweaty straps of his imitation leather bag.

He had started at the north of the island and wandered southward, about six kilometers, which he then once more had to retrace. At times, the island was so narrow that one could see the water on both sides. To the left a sea of silver, to the right the rushes, a darkblue glass, almost black. Here the clouds seemed to hang lower than usual, and for a time their strange, elongated forms lingered in his thoughts. As the horizon continued to grow, the distance of the sky grew smaller as one dimension displaced the other. At the end of the day, as he was beginning to lose hope, the question didn't bother him all that much any longer: "Would you happen perhaps to have a job for me? I'd also need a room, though."

At an inn called "Norderende" he was offered 1.40 Mark an hour to do just about everything, as they said, "but without accommodation." Somewhat off to the side stood a pair of discarded strandkorbs. The bleached out blue of their covers appealed to Ed, being the color of doing nothing, July, sun in your face. While the crabby host exchanged a few words with him (Ed's first conversation on the island), two employees scurried past with

sunken heads, almost as if they were afraid of losing their jobs. For a moment Ed remained between the garbage cans and the drink crates. Without having noticed, he had taken on the timidity of a beggar. As he was getting ready to move on, one of the employees called to him through the almost closed door of the storage shed so that Ed could not quite recognize him. The only thing he understood was the word "Hermit" and then "Crusoe, Crusoe – " as if Ed were being offered a secret message. What was entirely more likely, however, was that the man only wanted to make fun of him with the old story of shipwreck.

It was getting dark and lights began to come on in all the houses. The weight of Ed's bag constantly forced him to walk with a bit of a stoop. The straps were far too small and cut into his shoulder, the imitation leather frayed. Ed wondered whether it might have not been smarter to have put the bag down somewhere, or better yet, to have hidden it in a sea-buckthorn bush somewhere along the way. Without any doubt he had phrased his question about a job poorly, poorly and stupidly, as if he hadn't been a member of the same society. Here one *had* work, you didn't need to ask for it, and certainly not like that, going from door to door with a ratty old bag over your shoulder. Work was like a pass, you had to be able to show it; not having a job contradicted the law and was therefore punishable. Ed sensed that his question, as he had phrased it, couldn't be answered at all, on the contrary, it was equivalent to a provocation. And as he trudged along with his far too heavy bag, he reformulated it:

"Would you happen to need a bit more help this season?"

He had found the right words.

On the way through Kloster, the northernmost village on the island, he encountered a pair of vacationers. He offhandedly asked them about a place to stay. They only laughed, as if he had told a great joke and wished him "all the luck in the world." He came past a row of beautiful old wooden houses. A man about the age of his father called him names from his balcony while repeatedly thrusting his beer bottles jerkily into the air. Apparently he was drunk enough to automatically recognize a *nonentity*.

“Would you happen to need help in your kitchen? I happen to have a bit of time.”

Thanks to the waiter from the Offenbach-Rooms (he kept his eye forever open on the chance he might glimpse the Marx-beard), Ed knew that it could be dangerous to sleep on the beach. It had to do with the border patrol. They would find him, they would find him in the middle of some dream and shine their heavy flashlights into his face and ask him about his escape plans. It was forbidden to be around the border without a permit or accommodation. The inspectors on the steamboat hadn't been too interested, as they figured those on the early ferries were day tourists. What was important, however, was that one could respond with a name, an address, if asked. The naturalist Gerhard Hauptmann had maintained that everyone on the island was named either Schluck or Gau, and, essentially, it was as if there were only these two families: Schluck and Gau. Ed mistrusted these names though as, to him, they seemed implausible, made up. Sure, in literature it was possible, but not in life. In the harbor in Stralsund therefore he had looked through the telephone book and chosen the name Weidner, scribbling it on a piece of paper that he kept folded up and by him at all times. Weidner, Kloster Nr. 42.

“Would you happen perchance to need additional help in your restaurant?”
Terribly wooden.

And furthermore, it was more than likely that one saw he only wanted to find a place to crawl off to, to disappear, that, essentially, he was washed-up, run aground, a wreck, only twenty four years old and already a wreck. The beach was out of the question and the rest of the coastal bunker too. His fears were childlike: someone could come up and step on his head by mistake while he was asleep. All of the sudden the water could rise and drown him. There could be rats in the bunker.

With the onset of darkness, Ed reached the northern end of the island. He had already walked through each of the three villages twice: Neuendorf, Vitte, and Kloster. On a sign he came across in the harbor (it was strange to once again be there where he had first come ashore, as it seemed to

him now, years ago) he learned that the surrounding area was a bird sanctuary called *Bessiner Haken*.

He deserved a night out under the stars, of that much Ed was convinced, and it was indeed just that all should begin that way, in spite of his fears. At the edge of the village was a weather-beaten sign labeled "Institute of Radiation." On a hill in the distance, behind a group of poplars, he recognized the outline of a large building. He walked past a big shed and fencing that had been smeared with spent oil. The rushes at the edge of the path rustled and towered over him so that he could no longer see the water. The evening cries of geese echoed through the air. The last house had a thatched roof overgrown with moss. Its vegetable garden reminded Ed of his grandmother's: potatoes, kohlrabi, asters. The sloppily laid concrete path disappeared into a soggy meadow.

The first stand looked like a cabin, a tree house, a great hiding spot, but, sadly, was bolted shut. The second, smaller perch was open but swayed, and Ed wondered whether it was in use any more at all. With difficulty, he heaved his bag up and did his best to do everything as quietly as he could. He picked up a bit of wood to place in front of the entry as a sort of makeshift barricade. As he was taking a pair of rotten branches to place above him, a light passed across him. As if struck, Ed threw himself to the ground and hit his forehead against the seat. He lay there dead still. It was hard for him to breathe, he could smell the wood, his forehead burned. The tiny space did not allow him to stretch out his legs. He thought about "Wolfsblood", the man in the desert of snow who at the very last second was able to start a fire with his very last match, but then... After a little while, the light returned. Slowly Ed raised himself up and greeted the lighthouse like an old friend he had only temporarily lost track of.

"And do you still need someone?"

The beacon fanned jerkily out and then telescoped once again – most likely a "no." It was strange how the prismatic finger of light could shoot

out in sections, only to pause in the very next moment as if it had come across something that was more important than to forever turn in circles. "I mean, only as help for this season?" Ed murmured.

He had given up on his plan to go back to the village again to eat something at a bar. He still hadn't even been to the beach. But the very fact that he was *here*, on the island...For a while he continued to listen to the sound of the jungle around him, then pulled on his sweater and jacket. He spread out the rest of his things as best he could on the wooden floor of the cabin. The night was cold.

Chapter 6: To The Hermit

June 13th. Ed's perch was still immersed in darkness when an ear-splitting noise began to arise. The birds from the sanctuary were waking and began to call for day, a great din of displeasure and interminable, ever repeating complaints. Although the sun still had not yet risen, Ed left his room and trotted inland, face full of insect bites, forehead still aflame. His first job would be to take a lay of the land, and more than anything, find a better hiding place or, at the very least, a place where he could keep his bag and his things (his heavy Thälmann jacket, his sweater) during the day. Apart from the mainland's fairy tales and myths, Ed knew little about the island, neither its geography nor the border company's cycles of surveillance and control. Everything seemed so open: meadows, moors, and a single road, partially fixed with concrete slabs, no landscape at all for hideaways. The forest and the highland in the north, however, they were attractive options.

The next night Ed crawled into one of the high recesses at the foot of the coast. His hollow was like a wide, fresh fissure; the crag had opened itself up just for him. There were no mosquitoes, but water dripped from out of the loam onto his neck. The sea was black and almost silent, with the exception of a regular, recurring boiling sound in the pebbles between the stones along the shore – as if someone were pouring water onto a glowing hotplate. There were a number of sounds in his hollow that Ed could not

recognize. Something crinkled above him, and it crinkled *within the loam*. And, sometimes, it breathed, or softly groaned. Then, in his mind, he heard the hum of verses saying that the tiny, listless Baltic waves were like the whispers of the dead. These whispers annoyed Ed; if he really took his having broken out seriously (and his new beginning as well), he would have to fight back, which is why he once again tried with *his own thoughts*.

He closed his eyes and, after a while, saw the Baltic Man of the Waves. He was big, stooped, he was the maintenance man of the institute. He scooped water from out of the sea and threw it over his fire-pit on the shore. The water evaporated, smoke rose, and the man himself grew ever thinner and more transparent. In the end, only his face remained. It smiled at Ed from the sand, thereby exposing its rotten teeth, a cold mass of mussels, bitumen, and algae. Then it spoke, "My presence now is spent."

In the morning he awoke to find his things soaked through and a fine delta burrowed into the shore. The water turned the loam into shining pieces of earth you could walk across with no trouble at all. At certain points, it was backed up. At first kneeling awkwardly (like an animal with its hindquarters raised and head dipped), and then stretched out, he tried to drink. Although no one would be on the beach so shortly after sunrise, Ed felt as if he were being watched. With one hand he pushed his half-long hair back toward his neck, with the other he kept the stones that kept trying to push through his ribs at bay. "Nature sure isn't just a walk in the park, no sir," he muttered. He imitated the voice of his father and had to giggle. He had managed to make it through the second night. The water tasted soapy and smelled fermented. He followed the delta back to the crevice from which it came, which was directly next to where he had slept. An animal was staring at him. A fox. It was protecting the water source and watching Ed, and most likely had been for quite some time already.

"You gave me a start, you little rascal," Ed whispered. The fox said nothing, and remained motionless. Its head lay upon its front paws, like a dog; its eyes faced the sea. An uprooted sea-buckthorn bush overshadowed its fur, which looked clean and healthy.

"You sure have a nice place here, you old rascal, nice and hidden. No mosquitoes, fresh water... You're a pretty smart guy, aren't you?"

Ed spread his things out to dry on the stones, but immediately felt uneasy and gathered them back up. He was hungry and had a rotten taste on his tongue. The rolls he had bought in Kloster from a baker named Kasten had turned into a single paste. He kneaded a few balls and pressed the liquid out of the dough, then chewed slowly and swallowed. The energy from his escape was gone, and he felt a pulling behind his eyes. It wasn't pain, only a memory of chewed fingernails. Enflamed nail beds and fibrous, frayed adhesive bandages – G.'s fingernails. He wondered how long he'd be able to go on like this. How long his strength would last. When he would have to turn back.

"There'd be no point, old rascal."

The high, pitted coastline – he had never seen anything like it. It was made up of breaks and overhangs and a glacier-like landscape, huge meandering tongues of loam and clay on their way into the sea. There were vegetated sections and barren sections, fissured and furrowed, and there were gray, loamy walls from out of which, now and again, the skull of a cyclops emerged to look disdainfully down at Ed. But Ed hardly looked upwards at all, he wasn't interested in cylopses or whatever else people might have taken those pieces of rock to be. With a lowered head, he trudged on along the stony beach and tried to keep the small fire of his conversation with himself going, full of both encouragement and good arguments. And in his own words.

A little bit ahead, toward the north, all of the sudden between the coastal brush he saw some stairs. The concrete blocks with which they had tried to anchor their steely construction to the shore hung in the air, about a meter above the ground. As Ed swung himself down onto the lowest step,

there was a bright, metallic sound. Just like the sheet steel of sinking ships softly begins to sing, Ed whispered and waited; the rusty iron teetered threateningly. In the end, Ed counted three hundred stairs (every third either rotten or broken) distributed over the various parts and sections all the way up the fifty or sixty meter high cliff.

Through the pines shone a bright, wood-gabled building. At first glance, it resembled a Mississippi steamboat, a stranded paddle steamer that had tried to make through the woods to the sea. Several small log cabins were anchored around it, circling the mother ship like lifeboats.

So that it couldn't vanish, Ed kept it all firmly in sight. From the ship outwards spread a paved terrace with tables and beer stools almost all the way to the cliff's edge. The outer rows of tables were canopied and looked like mangers for the animals of the woods. On a slate board next to the entrance, there was something written in a spirited hand, but Ed was still too far away to see. To the left of the entrance, above a sliding window in the wooden front building (which belonged to the wheel case of the steamer), hung a stiff little flag with the words ICE CREAM. To the right of that, in the middle of the same building, someone had screwed a handwritten sign:

TO THE HERMIT

The "T" was extravagantly detailed, and for a moment Ed saw the sign-painter in his mind: he could see the man receive his commission, see how he noted down the name of the ship and the date of its christening. Ed sensed the intense amount of dedication with which the man must have prepared that initial letter and was suddenly overcome by a feeling of uselessness.

In order to be certain that a third dimension did, in fact, exist, Ed circled slowly around the building. It was a ship in the style of a forest house. The gables had taken on a moss green stain and saltpeter crust bloomed from out of the lower parts of the walls. Behind the first, there was a second, somewhat more modern house, in between the two a courtyard, and behind that, the woods. Seen roughly, the grounds consisted of three

concentric circles. In the center there was a courtyard with the two main buildings and an additional small terrace covered with a mass of wrought-iron café stools, painted white and flecked with rust. In the second circle, in addition to two sheds and a log yard with a chopping block, were the log cabins. At its northern end, the courtyard opened up into a clearing, a sloping and root-filled meadow that rose slightly up to the edge of the woods and a path that had to lead to his old friend the lighthouse. In the middle of the clearing, someone had erected a playground with a jungle gym, a seesaw, a sandbox, and a concrete ping-pong table. For a moment Ed was amazed that a playground like any other in the country had made it to even this magical place high above the breakers. The third, outermost circle marked a kind of palisade, or more precisely, a type of game fence made out of driftwood and carefully wattled between the foremost trunks of the woods. The entire site was embraced by pine trees and beech.

Ed drifted through the clearing to the coast and looked out to the sea. A soft and sweet current of air, a bewitching mixture of wood and water, wafted through the morning damp. It was foggy, a milk-white and washed-out horizon that you could breathe if only you took the air deep enough down into your lungs. You are both here, and way out there, Ed thought.

On the hill above the playground, a man lay dead, or dreaming. As Ed got closer, he could hear that the man was speaking, quietly, up into the sky. Maybe it's a prayer, Ed thought, but it sounded like the sound a snake might make, some kind of hiss, and then, at a certain point, he understood.

"Fuck off, fuck off, fuck off..."