

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Dog King

Christoph Ransmayr

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The Dog King

Christoph Ransmayr

ALSO BY CHRISTOPH RANSMAYR

THE LAST WORLD

THE TERRORS OF ICE AND DARKNESS

Christoph Ransmayr

THE DOG KING

TRANSLATED BY JOHN E. WOODS

Chatto & Windus
London

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*For Fred Rotblatt
and in memory of my father,
Karl Richard Ransmayr*

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CHAPTER 1

A FIRE IN THE OCEAN

TWO BODIES LAY BLACKENED IN THE Brazilian January. A fire that for days now had leapt through an island's wilderness, leaving charred corridors behind, had freed the corpses from a tangle of blossoming lianas and also burned the clothes from their wounds—two men in the shade of an overhanging rock. They lay a few yards apart wrenched to inhuman poses among stumps of ferns. A red rope that bound them together guttered in the embers.

The blaze swept across the dead men, erased eyes and facial features, moved on crackling, returned once more in the draft of its own heat and danced on the decaying shapes—until a cloudburst drove the flames into the iron-gray ashes of toppled quaresma trees, finally forcing all the heat into the moist heart of their trunks. There the fire burned out.

And so a third corpse was spared incineration. A good distance from the remains of the men, a woman lay under dangling roots and swaying fronds. Her small body had been minced by hacking beaks, the fare of beautiful birds; had been gnawed until it was a labyrinth for beetles, larvae, and flies that crept and buzzed about this grand repast, battled over it—a panoply of silky, lustrous wings and armor, a festival.

At the same time, an airplane was tracing rumbling loops above the Bahia de São Marcos, although gathering storm clouds repeatedly forced it to turn back toward Cabo do Bom Jesus. Scarcely ten nautical miles from the Atlantic

coast, the pilot, a surveyor, spotted that rocky, surfbound island across which the brushfire's ribbons strayed now here, now there—a crazy, smoky path through the wilderness. The surveyor flew over the devastation twice and concluded his radio message, amid hisses of atmospheric interference, with the same word written beneath the island's name on his map: *Deserto*. Uninhabited.

CHAPTER 2

THE CRIER FROM MOOR

BERING WAS A CHILD OF WAR AND KNEW only peace. Whenever talk turned to the hour of his birth, he was told to remember that he had cried his first cry during Moor's only night of bombs. It was a rainy night in April, shortly before the signing of the armistice that in postwar schoolrooms was still just called the Peace of Oranienburg.

A bomber squadron heading toward the Adriatic coast that night had dropped the rest of its fiery burden into the darkness above Moor's lake. Bering's mother, her legs swollen from pregnancy, was carrying a sack of horsemeat home from the black-market slaughterhouse. The soft meat, barely drained of its blood, lay heavy in her arms, which made her think of her husband's belly—when she saw a huge fist of fire rise into the sky above the plane trees along the lakeshore, then another . . . and left her sack behind in the lane and began to run madly toward the burning town.

The heat from the biggest fire she had ever seen had already singed her eyebrows and hair, when suddenly from out of a black house two arms grabbed hold and dragged her into the depths of a cellar. There she wept until a contraction took her breath away.

Among mildewed barrels, then, and several weeks too soon, she brought her second son into a world that seemed to have reverted to the age of volcanoes—nights when the earth flickered beneath a red sky. By day, clouds of phosphorus obscured the sun, and in wastelands of rubble the inhabitants of caves hunted pigeons, lizards, and rats.

Rains of ash fell. And Bering's father, the blacksmith of Moor, was far away.

Years later that same father, deaf to the terrors of the night his son was born, would frighten his family by describing what he, *he* had suffered during the war. Bering's throat would go dry and his eyes burned each time, each of the many times, he heard how as a soldier his father had been so thirsty that on the twelfth day of battle he had drunk his own blood. It was in the Libyan desert. It was at Halfayah Pass. The shock wave from a tank grenade had hurled his father to the hot gravel. And there in the blazing desert, a red, strangely cool trickle had suddenly run down his father's face, and jutting his chin like a monkey and puckering his lips, he had begun to slurp, distraught and disgusted at first, but then with growing greed—this spring would save him. He returned from the desert with a wide scar on his forehead.

Bering's mother prayed a lot. Even when the war and its dead sank deeper into the earth with each passing year and finally vanished under fields of beets and lupines, she still heard the booming of artillery in summer thunderstorms. And on many nights the Virgin appeared to her, just as She had back then, whispering prophecies to her and news of Paradise. When Mary had faded and Bering's mother stepped to the window to ease the fever of the visitation, she saw the lake's unlighted shores and fallow hills that rolled in black waves toward even blacker mountain ranges.

Bering lost both his brothers: the younger one dead, drowned in a bay of Moor's lake, where he had been diving in the icy water for "teeth," for a disbanded army's scuttled ammunition overgrown with red algae and freshwater mussels, for copper projectiles that he would pound with stones to remove the casings and, after drilling a hole into each, would wear like a string of fangs around his neck. The oldest brother was lost as well, had emigrated to somewhere in the forests of upstate New York. The last news

they had of him, years ago, was a picture postcard of the Hudson River, whose gray flood always reawakened sorrow for the drowned boy, too.

On the anniversary of her son's drowning, when Bering's mother would set a garland of blue anemones and wooden bowls filled with wax adrift on the lake, there was always one such floating candle for Celina as well, the Polish woman who had stood beside her during that night of bombs.

Celina, who had been deported from Podolia and conscripted for forced labor, had fled that night into the dirt cellar of a burning vineyard and dragged Bering's mother with her to safety. When the blacksmith's wife screamed at the sudden onset of labor, Celina had prepared her a bed of gunnysacks and damp cardboard between oaken barrels, then had cut the newborn's umbilical cord with an apron string and her teeth, had washed him in wine.

While from the world above only the crash and tremor of impact found its way into depths barely lit by suet candles, the Polish woman held mother and child in her arms, prayed loudly to the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, and drank more and more of the half-fermented wine, until along with her fervent prayers and litanies she began to pass judgment on the past few years:

This night's firestorm was the Madonna's punishment for Moor having flung its men into war, for letting them march in terrible armies to Szonowice, and even to the Black Sea and to Egypt. It was retribution for the order that sent Jerzy, her fiancé in the cavalry, to storm tanks beside the river Bug—and then had come the barrage . . . his beautiful hands . . . his beautiful face . . . ,

Queen of Heaven!

Punishment for the charred ruins of Warsaw and for stonemason Bugaj, who together with his family and neighbors had been herded into the woodyard where

Szonowice's charcoal was burned, then made to shovel their own graves,

Madonna, Comforter of the Afflicted!

Revenge for her ravished sister-in-law Krystyna,

Refuge of Sinners!

And for Silberschatz, the sexton from Ozenna . . . The poor man had hidden in a lime pit for two years, until someone betrayed him and he was found and thrown into the lime pit at Treblinka for all eternity,

Queen of Mercy!

Atonement! for the ashes on Polish soil and for the meadows of Podolia trodden to mud . . .

And Celina the Pole was still weeping and lamenting long after the world above had turned as silent as death and Bering's mother had fallen asleep exhausted.

The men of Moor, Celina whispered into the baby's tiny fists, pressing them again and again to her mouth to kiss them, the men of Moor had risen up against the whole world—and in its fury the world with all its living and dead would come storming across the fields in a Last Judgment: angels with flaming swords, Kalmyks from the steppes of Russia, hordes of troubled souls deprived of their mortal remains without consolation of the Church, ghosts! . . . And fierce Polish uhlans on charging steeds, and Jews from the Holy Land, their munition belts and bayonets jangling, and all those who had nothing more to lose and no other faith to embrace than faith in revenge,

Amen.

In the end, Celina Kobro from Szonowice in Podolia, shipped to Moor to do forced labor, became its first casualty, when four days later she died beneath the bullets of a victorious battalion sweeping down over the town. It was a misunderstanding. A frightened infantryman mistook the bundled-up figure of the Polish woman, who was leading a horse through the darkness, for a sniper, for an escaping

foe, shouted “Stop!” and “Don’t move!” twice to no avail in an unintelligible language—and shot.

The very first burst of fire hit Celina in the chest and neck and wounded the horse. Celina had wrapped the old nag’s muzzle and hooves in rags and was quietly leading the unclaimed animal out of the occupied town in order to hide it in a stand of firs, thus saving it from requisition or slaughter—the horse was *her* booty. Lamed, it hobbled off into the night, while Celina lay there on mossy stones and heard the approaching infantryman’s rapid strides only as the distant, strangely solemn sound of her death: the rustling of leaves, breaking twigs, a deep, profoundly deep breath—and finally that suppressed cry, the private’s curse, after which every sound died away and fell back forever into silence.

Celina was buried the next morning near the train station, beneath charred acacias and next to a miner from Moor Quarry, a Georgian prisoner of war who had starved to death a few hours after the victors marched into town.

In Moor, citizens were driven from their homes. The farmsteads of defeated partisans of the war burned. In Moor, once-feared quarry overseers had to endure every humiliation in silence: seven days after liberation—it was a cold Friday—two of them were dangling from wire rope.

In Moor, chickens and scrawny pigs were chased across sooty fields and Heroes’ Square as moving targets for rifle practice, and their carcasses were left for the dogs—in starving Moor. . . . And all the suddenly outmoded medals, decorations, and heroic busts, wrapped now in flags and discarded uniforms, went up in flames or were sunk to the bottom of cesspits, vanished into attics, cellar hideaways, and hastily dug holes. In Moor, the victors ruled. And whatever complaints about their rule might be lodged at their headquarters, the answers and decisions of the occupying forces were generally just an ugly reminder of the

cruelty of the army in which Moor's men had served and obeyed.

True, these were not the riders of the Last Judgment who moved through the town on mud-caked packhorses and stared down out of tank hatches and from open-roofed troop transporters, not the avenging angels and ghosts of Celina's prophecies—all the same, the first in a series of foreign commandants who moved into the community hall, converted now to headquarters, was a colonel from the district of Krasnoyarsk, a flaxen-haired Siberian with watery eyes, who could not forget the dead in his own family, moaned in his troubled dreams, and gave orders to shoot on sight anything that moved in Moor's alleys and yards during what seemed like randomly imposed curfews.

The war was over. But during just that first year of peace, Moor, so remote from battlefields, would see more soldiers than in all the drab centuries of its previous history. So that at times it seemed as if Moor's hilly landscape encircled by mountains was not simply the site for a strategic deployment of forces, but as if the world's concentrated power had chosen, of all places, this remote spot for some equally monstrous and chaotic maneuver. During that first year, the occupation zones of six different armies overlapped and criss-crossed in Moor's battered fields and vineyards, in its deserted farmyard lanes and boggy meadows that swallowed a man's every step.

On the wall map at headquarters, Moor's hilly region resembled nothing so much as a sample page of capitulation. Negotiations among competing victors were forever defining and distorting lines of demarcation, transferring valleys and streets from the mercy of one general to the despotism of another, dividing up cratered landscapes, moving mountains. . . . And next month's conference would then come to entirely new and different decisions. For two weeks at one point, Moor suddenly ended up a gaping no-man's-land between armies, was evacuated

—and reoccupied. Bering's farmstead likewise remained tied in a knot of transient borders—and yet was never anything more than a wretched bit of booty: a sooty forge, an empty stall, a sheep meadow, fallow fields.

And if for the first two weeks of the armistice it had been only the Siberians of the colonel from Krasnoyarsk who held Moor under their control, after they departed a Moroccan battery under French command marched into the town. May arrived, but the year remained cold. The Moroccans butchered two milch cows hidden in the ruins of Moor's sawmill, unrolled their prayer rugs on the pavement outside headquarters, and to the incredulous horror of Bering's mother no bolt struck from out of the blue when an *African* shot the cemetery chapel's Madonna off her gilded wooden cloud.

The battery stayed on into summer. It was followed by a regiment of Scottish Highlanders, Gaelic sharpshooters, who at least once a week celebrated the anniversary of yet another unforgotten battle with a trooping of the colors, bagpipe music, and black beer. Finally, when the few cultivated fields had already been harvested and again lay as dark and barren in the frost as the rest of the land, an American company relieved the Highlanders—and the regime of a major from Oklahoma began.

Major Elliot was a willful man. He ordered a full-length mirror screwed to the front door at headquarters, and he would ask everyone from the occupied zone who arrived with a petition or a complaint what or who he had seen in the mirror before entering. If he was in a rage or bad mood, he kept asking the same sequence of questions, bored away until the petitioner finally described what the commandant wanted to hear: a pig's head, a sow's bristles and hooves.

With Major Elliot, however, Moor would not only be subjected to strange punishments—humiliations that the defeated population finally came to accept as incomprehensible lunacies—but it would also see a

noticeable improvement. In place of the savage and random revenge of passing troops or prisoners freed from the labor camp, there was now the martial law of a victorious army. During the first winter of peace, hardly a day passed without at least one new decree issued to deal with the threatening chaos—laws against plundering, sabotage, or pilfering coal. A skinny sergeant, a fan of baseball and nineteenth-century German poets, translated paragraph after paragraph of the new penal code into a strange bureaucratese and then posted his work on the bulletin board at headquarters.

While the town of his birth grew poorer each day, Bering, swaddled in shredded flags, lay in a swaying clothes basket suspended from a beam, lay there and cried—a gaunt baby plagued by scabies, lay helpless, reeking of milk and spittle—and grew. And even if Moor should perish, the son of the blacksmith lost somewhere in the desert grew tougher with each new day. He cried and was nursed, cried and was carried, cried and was kissed and cradled in the arms of the blacksmith's wife, who passed many nights keeping his basket in motion and imploring the Madonna to let her husband return. As if contact with the earth terrified him, the baby could not bear any fixed spot and raged wide-eyed if his exhausted mother took him from the basket and brought him with her to bed. Try as she might to soothe and reassure him, he cried.

It was dark during Bering's first year. Well into the Peace of Oranienburg, both windows of his chamber stayed boarded shut—at least this room, the only one in the blacksmith's house whose walls bore no cracks or traces of fire from Moor's night of bombs, was going to remain safe from plunderers and whizzing shrapnel. There were still mines out in the fields. And so Bering rocked, floated, sailed away through his darkness and listened sometimes to the cracked voices of three hens rising from the depths below him—they had been rescued from the forge's burning stall

on the night of bombs and finally locked up along with all other valuables inside this one undamaged room.

In Bering's darkness, the clucking and scrabbling of these hens in their wire cage was always louder than the din of the locked-out world. Even the rumble of tanks maneuvering in the meadow—once the sound found its way through the nailed-down planks—seemed muffled and very remote. Bering, a flier among caged birds, seemed to love these chickens—and sometimes he would even cease his desperate cries when, with a sudden jerk and blink, one of the birds would raise its voice.

Whenever his mother set out to go from farm to farm—and sometimes to other villages, for days on end—to trade screws, horseshoe nails, and even the blacksmith's welding tools hidden in the cellar, for bread, meat, or a glass of moldy jam, Bering was watched over by his brother, a jealous, foul-tempered teenager, who hated this screeching bundle. His brother frightened moths and cockroaches out from behind the wallboards and in helpless rage tore the insects to pieces; he plucked threadlike legs, one after the other, from the plates of beetles and tossed their maimed bodies to the chickens beneath the baby's basket—and having fed the birds, would then set them in panic with a candle flame. Never stirring, Bering listened to these voices of fear.

Even years later, it took only a single cry of a cock to awaken in him the most puzzling feelings. Often it was a melancholy, helpless anger directed at nothing in particular, and yet it bound him to his hometown better than any other human or animal sound could.

When, one snowy February morning, after a quiet hour of spellbound listening, her baby began to cry again, Bering's mother took it as a sign from heaven and, horrified, she bore the hens' cage from the room—for the voice was like a chicken's squawk. The crier was clucking like a laying hen! The crier rowed with his arms, and from his basket were

stretched little white fingers cramped into claws. And hadn't he raised his head with a jerk, too?

The crier wanted to be a bird.

CHAPTER 3

A TRAIN STATION BY THE LAKE

WHEN MOOR'S BLACKSMITH, NO LONGER a prisoner of war, returned home from Africa that stark autumn, Bering could say about three dozen words, but with greater enthusiasm he could cry recognizable imitations of several birdcalls—he *was* a chicken, was a collared dove, was a screech-owl. This was in the second year of peace.

The news, scribbled on an army postcard, that his father would soon be arriving had brought changes to the forge: in return for a loaf of bread, a Moravian refugee plastered cracks and whitewashed walls, and the windows of Bering's room were open again at last, the nails removed. The noise of the world now found its way to him undiminished. He cried in pain. It was his hearing, the Moravian said as he covered traces of the fire, his broom dripping lime—the boy's ears were too sensitive. His hearing was too delicate.

As always, Bering cried inconsolably—and indeed it was as if he were *fleeing* into his own voice, as if his voice were his defense . . . yes, as if his own cries were more bearable and less shrill and piercing than the clamor of the world outside those open windows. But long before he had taken his first step into that world, the crier seemed to have sensed that for someone with delicate hearing the voice of a bird offered a much better refuge than the crude bellowing of a human being. Between the lows and highs of animal song lay all the peace and security you could yearn for in a ramshackle house.

The whitewashed rooms were scarcely dry when the Moravian refugee departed, leaving behind an odor of foul water—and a quieted child. Bering's mother had taken the Moravian's advice, had paid him two glasses of schnapps for wax plugs that he claimed were formed from tears shed by candles at Meteora—the healing candles of the rockbound monasteries of Meteora! And now whenever her son cried, she stopped his ears.

Moor's blacksmith arrived on the day of harvest home, on a transport train infected with dysentery. In the ruins of the train station by the lake, a great press of people waited for the released prisoners. A sullen uneasiness spread along the platforms. Rumors from the countryside around the lake claimed this transport would be the last train to arrive in Moor before the railroad line was shut down.

It was a day hung with clouds, the first frost was on the fields, and the chill stank of burnt stubble. In the stillness of October, the thud of the approaching steam engine was audible long before the pennant of smoke they longed to see appeared above the poplars lining the carp pond—now it crept toward the lake.

Deep in the crowd was Bering, a scrawny child barely eighteen months old, holding his mother's hand, invisible among legs, coats, and shoulders merging and parting again above him, but he heard the gasps of the engine long before all the others and listened spellbound. Coming ever nearer was a puzzling breathing he had never heard before.

The train that finally pulled into the bombed-out shell of the station at a crawl consisted of four closed cattle cars and at first glance looked like those trains of misery that had rolled into Moor Quarry during the war years—usually at dawn and crammed with captured *enemies* and conscripts for forced labor. The same groans came from inside this train's cars when it was shunted onto the sidetrack by the shore and came to a screeching metallic stop at the bumping-post. The stench was the same, too, when the

sliding doors stood open at last. Except this time there were no heavily armed, uniformed overseers and no bellowing military police positioned along the embankments, but only a few bored infantrymen from Major Elliot's company, who were watching the spectacle of arrival, but with no orders to interfere.

As the train stopped, the crowd suddenly came, burst to life. Hundreds of people, released now from years of waiting, pressed around the train as if it were a monstrous animal they had hunted down. A murmur grew to a loud jumble of voices, an uproar. Most of these people were no less emaciated and ragged than the freed prisoners, stumbling now with no baggage from the cars, holding up their hands to shield their eyes from the light. A thicket of arms rolled toward them—a uniform blur of faces barely recognizable in the blinding light. Tattered flowers and photographs, pictures of missing men were held out like trumps in a card game with death. Names were called out, pleas and entreaties:

Have you seen this man, my husband!

Seen my brother, do you know him

Is he with you

He has to be with you

But you 've just come from Africa

. . . they shove and push, until those who have now found each other share caresses as they stammer or embrace without speaking and at last take their first steps together away from war—and are suddenly scuffling again to be the first to the waiting room, which has no roof. It is said there is bread there.

Under the waiting room's open sky stands Major Elliot, arms dangling, the town secretary at his side, behind them a brass band without uniforms, which, when the secretary gives the sign, first plays an old, slow tune, and only then a march. It is obvious the band is missing a lot of instruments. Just one clarinet. And no bugle.

Then it grows still. No one out on the platform can recognize whoever that is giving a speech there under those two flags. A pair of loudspeakers on wooden poles carry the words over tracks and heads and far out on the lake.

Welcome . . . homeland in ruins . . . future . . . and take courage!

Who still has ears for words now! Bering feels only the pain of layered shrill tones coming from the loudspeakers, which he takes to be the sound of a single ugly voice.

Once the speaker falls silent, more music, the thin song of a zither, backed by an accordion, the sort of thing heard in taverns before the war; then a woman sings, but has to break off twice, because she's sobbing or sneezing, it isn't clear which.

Musicians, singers, speakers, even Major Elliot himself are finally swallowed up in the crowd. The welcoming ceremony is over. Now bread and powdered milk are doled out to these wretches, a week's ration. The secretary keeps the lists and signs forms. Some of the recipients can no longer stay on their feet; they buckle, sink to their knees. At last each of them may go wherever he pleases, for the first time in years, wherever he pleases. But where?

As if lost in the tumult, the blacksmith's wife stands with Bering on one hand, and his brother on the other—who is angry as always, but keeps quiet for fear of his mother's threats. There is no sound from Bering either. The engine's breathing still roars in his ears.

The blacksmith's wife has not held up a photo. She and her sons were pushed and shoved by the crowd, here and there—any direction would do for her. She knew, wanted to believe more than anything in the world, that this time she would not wait in vain among the blackened walls of Moor's station. She has brought flowers; Bering's brother holds them clenched in his fist. They are cyclamens from the overgrown banks of the millpool.

With her sons on both hands, the blacksmith's wife cannot fight her way through the crowd as the others do. She and he have never raced toward each other, but have always approached each other hesitantly, often in shame and embarrassment. Then the war blew the sand dunes of North Africa—and even dammed up a whole sea—between them. They hardly know each other.

But as in the past, the blacksmith's wife must wait for him this time, too. Deep in the crowd, she has to wait and stand on tiptoe and keep looking until her eyes sting from the cold wind off the lake and tears run down her face.

She is not aware that she is weeping, doesn't hear herself speaking the blacksmith's name, over and over, a charm, a magic formula. Bering is at her side, dazed by this first crowd of his life and by the racing pulse he feels in the hand holding his.

Once the bread is doled out, the skirmish for returnees grows easier, almost festive; little groups separate from the throng, hugging and even laughing now; horse-drawn wagons pull up—a truck, too. Elliot's soldiers wrest a forbidden flag from a grumbling driver, rip it up, shove the man into their jeep. Hardly anyone seems to notice. Only the arrested man's mud-caked, scraggly dog circles the vehicle, barking and jumping and snapping at his master's foes, and stops only after one of the soldiers whacks its skull with his rifle butt.

Immeasurable,

immeasurable the time that must pass until the shoulders and heads in the sky above Bering fly away and the crowd thins out. As if that gasped breathing, which has ceased now, has cleared them a path, Bering suddenly feels his mother's hand tug him away, and his brother with him.

At last the blacksmith's wife can move forward to where several figures are still standing, gray against gray, not mingling with the waiting crowd. Twice she thinks she has discovered that lost face, that familiar face, which is then

twice transformed into the face of a stranger, until after an eternity, not ten feet away, there the blacksmith stands before her. Only now does her heartbeat rob her of all her strength, and she realizes that she was already prepared for failure.

The blacksmith is a thin man, who has stopped in his tracks so suddenly that the man behind him bumps into him hard. He holds against the blow and looks at her. He has a beard. His face has black spots. She has remembered him just like this and yet so different. She knows about the scar on his forehead from a letter sent from the field. But it terrifies her now. What kind of war was it that he had been lost inside it for so long and has come back to her now like *this*? She no longer knows. Half the world has perished with Moor, that she knows, and also that, along with Celina the Pole and the four cows from their stall, half of humanity has vanished into the earth or gone up in flames—Holy Mary! But he is the only one of all those who vanished who has ever held her in his arms. And he has returned.

His sons are afraid. The brother claims no longer to remember that man there, and Bering has never seen him before now. His sons clutch tightly to their mother's hands, who has no free arms like the others, those happy women in the ruins of the station.

So they stare at one another, the sons at the terrible stranger, the stranger at the mother, at the brother, at Bering. Each is silent. And then the stranger does something that makes Bering gape his mouth wide for a cry of terror. The thin man points at *him*, is beside him in two long strides, reaches for him with both hands, lifts him away from his mother, lifts him up to himself.

Bering senses that the breathing he heard in the distance must come from this man. And before him now he sees the scar on the blacksmith's forehead, the wound that has surely made that man there so thin and makes him gasp for breath; and at eye level now with his father he cries for

help, cries words that are meant to tell his mother there behind him what is terrible about this man, he cries,

Bleeds!

he cries,

Stinks!

and squirms in the arms of the thin man and knows that no words can help him. His mother is a mere shadow far behind him. He floats there like that, catches three breaths, four, and suddenly feels a tug that rips his cry in two, feels a hammering that hurls the tatters of his voice high up into his head, and from his own mouth he hears again at last that other, protective voice that bore him through the darkness of his first year. And in his father's arms he begins to cackle! to cackle like a crazed, panicked chicken, waving its arms, its wings, a bird that is frightened to death, so that the thin man finally can hold on to it no longer. He drops fluttering toward the earth.

CHAPTER 4

THE STONY SEA

THREE WEEKS AFTER THE BLACKSMITH returned home, the Freedom Train was still standing at the bumping-post. The stench of urine and shit drifted from the open sliding doors of the cattle cars, and pigeons cooed in the fetid straw; refugees lying in wait along the embankment hunted them with slingshots and nets. These were days when the first ice sparkled in the deep ruts of the road to the lake, when peddlers banged on shutters and doors, yet behind the rolled-down grille of Moor's grocery only withered bunches of lavender swayed in the draft—and when Major Elliot approved the blacksmith's petition and, until further notice, assigned the freed prisoner welding apparatus from army stocks.

The first glimmers and sparks from the reopened forge were followed by ear-splitting hammer blows on axles, stall gratings, and weathervanes; and an iron oak branch, the first item ordered by a newly founded veterans' organization, glowed red as it writhed on the anvil. The blacksmith talked to himself, yammered in his sleep, but sometimes amid the din of work he would abruptly begin to sing, stanzas of army songs and *la/la/la*, whereas Bering still bore injuries from being dropped from his father's arms. A turban of hospital bandages now made his face look tiny and truly like a bird's.

For the blacksmith, however, this stained dressing on his son's head was merely a reminder of his days in the desert, and he told stories about wandering dunes that buried

demolished convoys beneath them, sat at the kitchen table and conjured up drifting fields of sand spouts that rose up and fell away again within a single second, heralding a storm, and sounded like needles dropping on an earth made of glass. . . . And he described oases where a caravan might find refuge before the murky sun was put out by clouds of sand.

But try as he would to explain the desert to his family, even attempting to imitate a dromedary's grimace or the laugh of hyenas, the thin man in Bering's mother's bed remained so terrifying to the boy that for weeks Bering spoke not a word, could not even manage the sound of a bird.

The train on which the thin man had arrived, nine cars and a tank locomotive, stood week after week in the ruins of Moor's train station like some crazy misrouted stray forgotten by all offices and headquarters—and in the end, it was never again to leave its last stop.

It was a cloudless frosty day, when a column of American sappers who had moved up from the lowlands began dismantling the tracks. As if to signal some special punishment, the first hammer blows fell on a switch-tower infamous among quarry laborers as *The Cross of Moor*. From this tower—its switch hidden among nettles, peppermint, and brambleberries—all trains rolling along the shores of Moor's lake during the war had been divided into *white* and *blind*.

In war and in peace, white trains had brought the same passengers to the lake: spa guests whose breathing whistled, fat sufferers from the gout, fish vendors every Tuesday, and commuters from the lowlands. As the faraway battles went on, there arrived more and more soldiers on leave from the front and severely wounded officers, who spent the final days of their lives on striped lounge chairs under the sunshades of the Grand Hotel. For white trains,