

Nataša Kramberger: Stonecrop

an excerpt from the novel translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

'It could've killed me.'

'Killed me.'

'Could have killed me.'

Mother comes rushing from the garden in her old waterproof coat, pale as a ghost, and without any kind of greeting throws herself into my arms. It's true she hasn't seen me for almost three weeks but I have never had such rapturous welcomes even when I was away from home for months, years.

'I went to see whether the lungwort was flowering...'

Hands still around my shoulders, she launches into a narrative, making me sway. No. This has nothing to do with welcoming me.

'There wasn't any there on the edge of the forest, so I decided to walk up the path, you know, up there at the stream...'

She finally breaks free from the embrace and I can see her face. Ashen-faced, grey and white, bone white. I can't help myself, 'You went into the forest in clogs?'

'What does it matter what I went in. I use these clogs for the garden. They're comfortable, fit well over my thick socks. Everything was dry as a bone anyway.'

Finally a little colour in her face but her voice is still shaking.

'And I am walking along, walking, and suddenly I get the feeling that something is rustling behind my back. You know, a kind of whoosh, whoosh sound, but louder, together with a cracking sound.'

My mother is an excellent narrator and I almost feel as if there in the yard, behind our backs, something is rustling violently, aggressively.

'I didn't have time to think what it could be, all I know is that I said to myself – that's not the wind, because we have had no wind today since morning. And, just as well that I didn't turn round, goodness knows why, something bothered me, I could feel the tension across my shoulder blades, making me shudder, strange goose bumps appeared across my neck, as if creeping upwards into my brain. Then a sharp cramp

in my stomach and I heard a loud yell ringing in my ears, ruuuun! And without thinking I leaped, flew forward. There was a bluster and a roar behind me and a massive thump against the ground so the whole forest shook as if a giant rock had come tumbling through, and I was thrown forward, hurled through the air. It fell less than half a metre... only a few inches away from me. It could've killed me.'

A tree. On a clear, windless afternoon in March, a tree fell down in our forest, almost killing my mother.

'What was it? A spruce?'

'What, do you think I looked?! I just fled, rushed across the stream and ran, ran, ran, until you appeared and I had to stop.'

There is something elementally aberrant in upturned roots that are pushing up towards the sky instead of into the ground. Close up they look like a basket with severed knots, defeated and useless. There is nothing in them, not even colour, they stick out of the tree trunk like broken cables with a few clods of soil and dry undergrowth accidentally hanging from them. It is impossible to imagine these straggly strands ever having been capable of stubbornly anchoring a tree that was as high as a skyscraper, lavish as a castle. A beech tree and a spruce. The overturned tree was not one but two. From the top of the highest hill in our forest they had toppled over like a pair of corpses, their crowns facing downwards, their trunks lying like some dam across the forest dale.

Drought.

The beech tree and the spruce, two healthy middle-aged trees were on Sunday, 19 March 2023 – the last day of winter – at around five in the afternoon, brought down by drought.

I was shocked at just how much the whole thing unnerved me. Only a few months earlier, in mid-summer, I had received an email from friends in Berlin, farmers, talking about hundred-year-old trees. In the sandy subsoil of Berlin and Brandenburg, that could no longer find water, so they were dying, not gradually but instantly, all of a sudden. 'They lie down on the ground like sedated elephants.' It coincided with the time when we were fervently watering the young apple and plum trees in our

orchards, then we discovered that even the walnut trees planted in the wettest area alongside the forest were wilting. Even though our farm lies in a damp valley and has a well in the courtyard, during that heatwave we were unable to pump enough water for all the thirsty roots. It also all coincided with forest fires raging across Europe, turning the Karst, near the farm of some other friends, into a lunar landscape, something similar happening in Northern Sardinia where we had once celebrated the festival of the full moon. There and on remote islands in the middle of the sea, even cork oaks that were thought to be immortal were dying in forest fires.

Immortal? The first time I entered a cork oak forest, I thought I had lost my hearing. In a magical instant, all sound became muted and I could with perfect clarity hear my heart beating at a calm pace. Anything I said was absorbed by the silence, quite unusual for a country where words are usually swallowed up by noise. Pierfranco who lived in that forest had instantly understood my bafflement. Here there is no other world, he said. These trees are a world unto their own.

Then he showed me how, with three swings of a small axe, you can peel off the cork bark from the trunk of the huge oak. You are left holding in your hand a long curled up boat. On the outside the bark has deep rough grooves that resemble cracked soil, on the inside hides the soft, warm core that makes you want to lie inside like a cradle. When you plant one, the cork oak tree takes twenty years to start growing its bark. And a further twenty before you can peel the bark off its trunk for the first time. But it is only over the twenty years after that that the oak grows a bark that can be used for a boat, a house, or wine corks. Anyone living in the middle of such a forest comprehends that the time of trees and the time of humans run in parallel worlds that can only meet on the rare crossroads of patience and luck. Patience from the person planting the oak tree. Luck for the person able to peel off its bark.

Pierfranco told me about people who sometimes sleep over in the holiday cottage that his family built next to their own house in a rocky clearing in the middle of the forest. 'Few of them last until morning. By ten o'clock at night they come knocking on our windows, asking us to take them somewhere else.' 'Why?' 'They can't sleep because of the silence. It is so deep it reminds them of eternity.'

It overwhelmed my thoughts.

When that mid-summer the cork oaks on the plains of Sardinia were burning, I cried into my pillow. But they are eternal! So eternal that almost every time when tourists sleep in his house in the middle of the forest, poor Pierfranco has to start the car in the middle of the night, load up their suitcases and drive the frightened guests to more noisy apartments, among houses and other people, onto the coast, into the life that is not soundless as eternity but filled with voices here and now. My entire world was shaking. Yet that was nothing compared to the trees falling from thirst into the void on the outskirts of Berlin where the soil is sandy like the coast and every droplet of rain instantly disappears when the Summer shows its menacing face.

But trees falling down in the winter? In my forest? This is a time of year when our area is almost always covered in a blanket of snow. Almost always, only not any more in recent years. In fact, in recent years it hardly snows at all. And when it does, most of the snow melts within a day or two. This past winter was especially dry. Only the occasional heavy shower that washed away roads and moved houses, during which it seemed as if our fields would turn into a sea across which we could row on the tops of car roofs, escape on inflatable unicorns that will be the only thing able to stay on the surface, taking us to other places, nicer and kinder.

But after every downpour, wild and abundant, a warm south wind blew persistently across the land, in December, in January, and all the water, however mighty, vanished from one day to the next. Almost as if the sea in the fields turned into dust so quickly and suddenly that it did not leave behind a single shell or sea snail.

Should I have known? Noticed? Prepared myself?

Should I have done something, taken measures?

Measures, what a word. How does one take measures?

The trees fell on a windless day exactly at the moment when far below them, but precisely on the spot where their crowns crashed to the ground, my mother was looking for lungwort. It is good for coughs, makes excellent tea. Did the trees count to three before they dropped? Was the rustling, whoosh, whoosh sound, the cracking sound, the shudder across my mother's shoulder blades and the loud yell ringing ruuun in her ears their lamentation? Had they chosen the moment themselves or had the moment chosen them?

Was it painful?

Was it predictable?

Had it been hurting for a long time?

The long, straight, brown and scaly uprooted spruce lay across the forest with its crown pointing down the hill and the branchy, grey and smooth uprooted beech tree lay next to it in comradeship, leaning lightly onto its friend's trunk, and when I touched its bark, velvety and greyish blue I could not help but think it really did look like a sedated elephant.

This was how, on the last day of winter, my eighth season of farming began.

Seven beginnings and seven ends of farming seasons were enough for me to learn that beginnings and ends of farming seasons do not exist. All this time since I first planted a tree on my farm, I had the feeling I was running after a waggon I would never catch. I was convinced that this was because I had no idea about farming. It was true that I had grown up on the farm with my grandpa and grandma. My parents had tried various tricks to lure me to nursery school – a new red coat, a starry umbrella, a soft ragdoll – but my two-year-old child's body protested every time at the nursery school gates with instant diarrhoea and vomiting. When they brought me in this state, crying and convulsing, back to my grandmother to look after, she put her hands on her hips and said, 'If this little thing stays with me today, she will stay with me until she goes to proper school. If you still think she should go to nursery school, then I ask you to take some time off work and sort her out yourself. I have no intention of being part of making the poor child this ill and miserable.'

From that day onwards, my mother, instead of driving me to nursery school, took me to my grandma's farm. The chickens and cats became my school friends, the birds, the trees and the clouds my teachers. But even as a child my favourite thing in the entire world was wandering about and making up stories. I didn't even know how to write my name when I answered questions about what I would do when I grew up, by explaining that I will read books; this was followed by the first true realisation of my world, that books could also be written. I wrote all the time, notebook after notebook, in pencil, in colours, a made up writing because I had not yet learned the real alphabet. It was clear to anyone at first glance that I would dedicate my adulthood

to matters far from this earth and the fruits it offers. With such thin wrists, such pale skin, poor little creature, what else can she do.

As soon as it was possible, I switched from the countryside to town. Berlin, where I landed at the age of twenty-one, was the logical sum of sequences of events and coincidences along the way. If only life followed logic...

The farm that I took over from my mother when I was thirty-three stood a thousand kilometres south of my home in Berlin, in the place I was born, the village of Jurovski Dol in Slovenia. It was not the farm my grandma and grandpa had, where I grew up, neither could one really say it was my mother's; she worked as a teacher and librarian all her life and lived in a block of flats. She came up with her farmland idea a few years before retirement and then discovered she had neither the time nor the money for it, which provided an excellent opportunity for her daughter to find both the time and the money.

Three hectares of land and a hectare of forest, an abandoned barn with a leaking roof and without a facade, and a crumbling 19th century house built of earth and straw. I fell in love with the property without running water and electricity the way that falling in love with someone happens without a grain of common sense. At some point during my studies I came across social ecology thinking then that through direct action and the loving books of Vandana Shiva, I would get my hands into something as crazy as a farm that had yet to be established.

So – on the spur of the moment and with a bit of nudging – I dragged everyone around me into this messy endeavour. All of a sudden I saw Daniele, with whom we shared a freelance career and with it an intertwined bouquet of passions, interests and skills, wielding a shovel and a watering can instead of a camera with which he was so attentive and sensitive. Soon it was as if he had worked with them forever, like an advert for career flexibility, an employment agency, a wonderful new world, a utopia and precarious work.

January after January, whenever I bought Maria Thun's biodynamic sowing and planting calendar at the newspaper stand in Rosa Luxemburg Square and marked in advance the good and the bad days for working in the orchard, the vineyard or with herbs in order to coordinate with these my literary tours or writing projects, I would

reproach myself that I had thrown myself into farming too impulsively, with my uncertain yet beloved career of being self-employed in the field of culture, something I had studied and trained for, something I was in no way prepared to give up, with my rented flat in Berlin where I had my only real writing desk and to which in ever rarer intervals – alone or as a pair, almost always as a pair – I travelled on the night train, boarding still out of breath from some crazy session of late summer haymaking, apple picking or lavender weeding, giving me backache all the way from Maribor to Berlin. Elbows throbbing, my neck twisted, I then spent most of the time in Berlin when I was supposed to be writing this or that text, fast asleep, utterly exhausted, meaning that I then only start writing the story, report or book long promised to some editor, on the night train taking me back south from Berlin. Back at the farm, I would move my computer, powered by a generator in the seasons when we did not yet have electricity, from the kitchen table to the window sill, cursing the time I had been away, just long enough for things on the farm to turn stubbornly wild, and everything around me calling out, run, mousekin, run, you will never catch this bandwagon!

Four seasons: a hamster wheel.

Farm seasons: spirals used in copy centres to bind dissertations on global warming.

After the first season, when with the joint efforts of many members of the immediate and extended family, friends, acquaintances, neighbours and comrades, all of whom I had, rather arbitrarily and without giving them a chance to say no, condemned to permanent cooperation in my farm project, we had planted about two hundred saplings of different plum varieties, within half a year these were bloodthirstily attacked by deer, voles, aphids and the plum fruit moth.

By the unusually warm Easter, the trees had quickly developed lush young shoots, just so that a week later they could be hit to the core by the spring frost that suddenly lowered the April morning temperatures from the Easter twenty to minus five. Whatever I did on the land almost instantly turned into the opposite of what I was trying to achieve. My Maria Thun calendar was filled with crossed-out dates and red exclamation marks marking defeats along the line.

I approached the matter as a reportage, it was an approach I was familiar with. D. and I visited endless farms in Slovenia, Italy, Switzerland and Germany. Observe and admire. I found an experienced fruit grower, an elderly gentleman from a remote village in Slovenia, who put all the essential tasks in the eco-orchard into a clear table with precise dates and detailed notes on approaches. Fool proof. With superhuman efforts I did everything possible to follow my new bible, and for a moment it seemed as if I knew what I was doing.

But every time I bit my way through to April, I discovered that the fresh spring had arrived totally too fast, without warning and a bang. It played upon the body and spirit that the winter had not allowed any peace and rest, its own exciting and demanding agendas, one after the other, so that I took a fright every morning when I looked at myself in the mirror – staring at me, like some unhappy Käthe Kollwitz sculpture, was a shadow of confused eyes, muscles and bones, that could not believe they were still moving, up, down, up, down, in a continuous and burdensome flow of matters that insist on going straight where nobody wished them to go.

Whichever way I turned, I kept seeing the same figures, the same eyes, the same muscles and bones. Bodies that had gone into farming with a university degree, sometimes even a doctorate in agronomy, yet their fields and orchards were still running away right in front of their noses, like disobedient mischievous kids, doing exactly the opposite of all conventions or rules of good behaviour.

In January I saw people who– like bears and hedgehogs – should be enjoying the winter sleep under the deep snow, giving respite to their knuckles, their heads, their varicose veins. Instead, backs bent, they were shifting triple piles of gravel, using it to repair roads to their houses that had been washed away by yet another devastating torrential storm. Christmas Day or New Year's Eve, their homes were cut off from the world for days, not even deliveries of mail marked as priority or express could get through.

After the roads it was the turn of uprooted hills and exposed landslides that on several occasions, when things were really bad, had buried in their path orchards, pastures, chicken runs, sometimes even cemeteries, shops, schools, barns, ploughs and people. People who in November had bid farewell to their dead or were preparing for Advent, were now, in sunny short-sleeve weather, having to cut the grass of

meadows gone wild, filled with tall grass, trying to persuade bees and butterflies that it was high time for them to finally hide in their closed chambers because flying in the sun is exhausting and there is no proper food around in November.

But like bees, people are also restless in sunny weather, and when it heats up the world in early February, it looks as if it's time to roll up the sleeves, take off and bloom straight away. Indeed, the trees, plum trees, apricot and peach trees, start opening their buds, send sap to their branches, only to be killed off in early March when frosty nights worthy of their name arrive, destroying in cold and ice the reckless harbingers of spring.

There is a popular Slovene song from a late 1950s film, that says, *Don't wait for spring, don't wait for May...* And in June I have seen people using tractors to pull their cows out of a lake that had formed in a hollow in the sunny meadow where they were grazing when a storm broke out, first with hail so intense, with hailstones so big, that they created wounds on cows' backs, opening up like red carnations, then with rain so wild, so persistent, that the tractor trying to pull the animals to safety became stuck in mud a metre and a half deep. That mud, heavy, clay mud was soon after scorched by the sun to become concrete hard, cracking on the surface with gaping, jagged scars, and I saw a man standing right there, holding his chest, gasping at the sight, having to lean on the wooden fence for the animals.

I have seen villages buried under rivers of white ice – hail that came down on the hills and valleys with a force like a foaming sea. I have seen May, the most beautiful spring month, soaked with rain morning after morning, that turned my farm into an impassable swamp with jungle-like grass. I have seen tropical summers in the heart of the Alps, and the stubble left in the field after the sea of hail gave way to the scorching sun and desert wind blowing red sand across Europe.

Seven beginnings and seven ends of the farming seasons have been enough for me to learn that I am not the only one stumbling on the hamster wheel of the seasons that cannot make up their mind about whether there should be four, two, or whether they should just alternate randomly, without rhyme or reason, at will, all over the place. No. My terrible, crippling exhaustion was not due me not being qualified to do such work. Nor was it due to my self-taught approach, my two-stroke writer-farmer

rotation around Europe, my old-fashioned farm without electricity, or the lack of suitable tools.

It was something else.

It was...

An error in the biodynamic calendar!

Not the one written by Maria Thun, or the one with instructions from the old fruit grower. The calendar mistake was universal, all-encompassing, and it was terrifying.

It was a mistake in geometry.

What should have been a circle had become a spiral.

When I told my grandma that I would be starting a farm, she said, 'But farmers need to work!' I wasn't quite sure what to make of the comment which seemed like a provocation, so I wrote my grandma's words into my book, a novel about farming. Because it was an autobiographical tale, I needed to also add what grandma said a few minutes later, slicing bread over her kitchen table. It all became the first chapter of my novel with the title *Comparable Hectares*, and I waited to see what would happen.

Liza translated the novel into German, it was published by Verbrecher Verlag under the title *Verfluchte Misteln*. It was April when the Literary Club of the Bremerhaven Chamber of Employees invited me to the port city on the North Sea estuary of the Weser, from where people used *en masse* to leave Europe in search of a kinder, more beautiful place under the sun on the far side of the Atlantic. This is why Bremerhaven is home to the German Emigration Centre and the German Maritime Museum where you can see some of the most eccentric vessels of all time, nailed together by people for their travelling adventures, often out of curiosity or technical enterprise, but most often out of necessity.

If you take a short walk north from the Maritime Museum in Bremerhaven, you reach a huge building that looks like a football stadium. It isn't a stadium but the Klimahaus. A scientific research and exhibition centre about global warming. Almost twelve thousand square metres of exhibition space wishes to convey to visitors the essence of climate change, inform them about its causes from the beginning of the world until now, its consequences for humans and other beings in the more or less near future.

The central exhibition at the Klimahaus is titled *The Journey* and travels around the world along longitude 8° 34' E. It is an actual path taken by architect Axel Werner, the initiator of the entire exhibition space. Starting and ending in Bremerhaven, it takes the visitor along the meridian 8°34', through places that lie on this imagined line. Isenthal in Switzerland, Seneghe on Sardinia, Kanak in Niger, Ikonge in Cameroon, Queen Maud Land in the Antarctic, Satitua on Samoa, Gambell in Alaska and Halligen Langeneß in the north of Germany.

What Axel Werner experienced on his journey is recreated in the exhibition in an experiential way that resembles a reportage. The notice at the entrance says: 'feel climate change on your skin'. Right, I thought, this is territory that I know. The sign also says that the temperatures in the exhibition space will change depending on the place each part of the exhibition will look at. From minus ten on a Swiss glacier, to plus thirty-five in the desert. The humidity and wind will also change, and visitors might find it hard to breathe in some rooms (there is a warning: not for people with serious cardiovascular problems, take care with asthma).

It all starts with a sliding door that looks like an elevator entrance. Standing in front of it is a polite lady in a cotton jacket, waiting for a large enough group to gather round her. She then carefully explains how the exhibition area is designed, where the emergency exits are and where on each floor it is possible to escape to buy a drink or snack. Just in case the journey becomes too strenuous. Right at the end, she invites visitors to leave their belongings in the cloakroom before setting off on the journey.

It was late April and an icy northerly wind was blowing down the coast at Bremerhaven. Walking from the Maritime Museum to Klimahaus, I kept being swept right and left like a feather in a storm, the wind lashing against my face, the only skin exposed, so sharply that my cheeks glowed red when I entered the foyer of the exhibition, relentless cold shudders shaking my body. I could not imagine at all going anywhere without my thick, soft winter coat, my woolly hat, tangled scarf and knitted gloves.

The ticket clerk at the entrance repeated the instructions about where to find the cloakroom three times, giving me a knowing nod, as if to say, come one lady, get on with it. I persisted, standing in front of the elevator in my coat, scarf, hat and gloves.

The hostess in her light jacket merely gave me a look of disbelief. Mounted on the door was a small digital clock counting down time, and when it reached 00:00:00, the hostess announced, 'You may now enter.'

We entered and it was fine. The first stop, Isenthal in Switzerland, just as well I had kept my jacket. The temperature fell slightly and it was instantly clear that we were not in a typical museum with fossils and plastic dinosaurs hanging amongst which are posters or interactive panels with statistics, photographs and videos. We had entered a world that tried to mimic real life, and the narrow marked path leading across some rocks which in some places turned into a climbing route, led us into a large room made to look like a cave. A miracle. The walls, the ceiling, the entire cavern was shimmering with real ice, cold and wet, turquoise white, like glass. But it wasn't glass, it was a glacier. Touching it, a current surged through your body, cold, abrupt, but inspiring.

Oh, how I miss the snow! Had there not been others around, I would probably have put my face against that ice, stuck out my tongue and closed my eyes, a child wanting to catch snowflakes. I have never liked snow, at least not a great deal, because I never liked the cold. But: this silence! This freshness! This crystal! I just had to stop for a while.

The climbing route turned into stairs, the stairs into wooden bridges, the wooden bridges into a grassy habitat, enlarged to the point where it seemed that the blades of grass were as tall as skyscrapers, the beetles and caterpillars larger than people. We were being observed from terraria by real spiders and lizards, because, all of a sudden we had arrived in Sardinia, wind blowing everywhere. Washing was hanging on the line outside a stone house, and visitors could turn a switch that changed the weather. Turning it one way, the washing hung still and everything looked like an ordinary sunny day. Turning it the other way, a wind started up from the left corner of the room, blowing the washing about, with a wolf-like howl all around us.

By this station I had long understood that the jacket, hat, scarf and gloves had been a mistake. Fortunately I had also kept my bag, so I stuffed some of the clothes into it and slung it over my shoulder. I undid the zip on the coat, opening it wide, and tried to roll up the sleeves.

I tied my hair up in a bun and held my hat in my hand like a fan. The more I fanned, the less air there was. When we entered a space labelled Kanak, Niger, I was hit by such heat that I could barely stay on my feet. There was sand all around, red desert sand that found its way into our shoes, and against the wall bare, light brown rocks resembling a dried-out canyon. There was a notice on the canyon saying: I was once a sea.

We had reached the land of the Tuareg. There was a single, thin, bare tree in this land. There is nothing sadder than a tiny bare tree in the desert, but I could not help myself from thinking, 'Oh, how beautiful.' The tree was beautiful even though it was dead. Looking like something out of a fairy tale, its crown had intertwined branches, like a dreamcatcher, and when the dark blue desert night sky appeared above it, I could have sworn I heard it whisper. I swear, the tree whispered. It was like a prayer, a plea, the casting of a spell. It was a song. So startling, so beautiful, and so desperate that it was impossible (I thought to myself) there is nobody in the world who could answer it.

A few steps further, I saw her. There was a video projection across the entire wall; you couldn't avoid it. On it was a tent, in front of the tent, sand, sitting in the sand an old lady with long hair, crow-black and strong as string. These were the words I once used in one of my books to describe my grandmother who had cut her strong black hair short, long before I was born. But once I had seen a photograph of her from secondary school in which she stood in the summer shade under the apple tree, her black hair tied in two thick plaits reaching down to her waist, her skin shimmering white, clean and smooth as the clear sky.

The Tuareg grandma sat in the sand outside her tent, her skin wrinkled and brown; she leaned her head slightly towards her shoulder, calmly looking straight into the camera, her eyes jade green, speaking in a language I did not understand. Into the sand before her, she occasionally drew a shape, crosses, circles, lines and squiggles, then, every so often, she would erase everything in front of her with a single swipe.

Drawing. Swipe. Erase.

Drawing. Swipe. Erase.

Creation. A moment. Destruction.

I stood there, staring at her for a long time, and only then discovered that hanging up on the high wall above the space were her words translated into German and English. 'When I was a young girl, I saw things that I no longer see: giraffes, ostriches, different kinds of turtles, antelopes and various deer species.'

'Back then we had lots of water, and a river between the dunes. Sometimes it rained for an entire week, and afterwards lots of plants and trees would grow. Lots of plants! Food. Not like now, now there is no rain, so there is no food.'

'We are hungry, so how can we be happy. Hunger and happiness; these two things don't match.'

Right at the edge was the last quote from her long speech. I thought I was about to run out of air. This is what it said, 'And the wind. Goodness, the winds we get. I am afraid of the wind. I cannot remember wind like this. It blows away everything we had, we have and we will have. It blows away the soil, cracks up the land, taking the life out of all and everything.'

I had to force myself not to faint. This is 35 degrees in a winter coat, I said to myself. I am delirious. But I wasn't delirious. The words the Tuareg grandma from the village of Kanak in Niger was uttering were exactly the words my grandma had said to me when I told her that I would be starting a farm.

It was in her tidy old kitchen, over her large wooden kitchen table. In one hand she was holding a loaf of bread, in the other a knife, and she said, 'People will go hungry, believe me. It's obvious even now, the drought will become worse, and the floods will get worse, the cold will get worse, and the wind, oh dear, the wind will get worse and blow away everything we had, we have and we will have, I am afraid of the wind, I can't remember ever having winds like this, it will blow away the soil, the fields will crack up...'

Two grandmas, almost eight thousand kilometres away from each other. One in the middle of Styria in Slovenia, the other in the dryness of Niger. The same words, the very same words. Wind, hunger. With one single difference: time.

The Tuareg grandma was talking in the present. My grandma was talking in the future.

Seven years ago, when I told her I would start farming, 'People will go hungry, mark my words.'

The following evening I talked about the two grandmothers at a literary event in the youth centre in Bremen. Arriving from Bremerhaven, I was greeted in the town park with tents and banners held by people who had been camping there for months in protest over the lack of both regional and federal government measures against climate change; they demanded the closure of the airport in Bremen, fewer cars, more careful food management. As I was leaving the hotel to go to the youth centre, they were loudly beating on drums.

I thought that this place would be a good opportunity to talk about what had touched me so profoundly the previous day. But as soon as I opened my mouth and mentioned the Klimahaus, the younger part of the audience seemed to flinch and a few irritated groans could be heard. The moderator explained; she too found it odd that I would talk about the climate house in the neighbouring town.

‘That’s a tourist, not a research centre!’

In the eyes of the audience, it was merely another of the many calculated and extravagant attempts by clever entrepreneurs to make money out of the genuine global crisis, packed into attractive green concepts. Words like ‘stereotypical,’ ‘centralistic,’ ‘unificationist,’ ‘western-centred’ came pouring onto the stage, and one girl raised her hand and gave a long speech about the animals, fish, insects and reptiles that are living in captivity at the Klimahaus.

It all developed into a long colourful discussion about how to discuss the seriousness of the of the ecological state of planet Earth without falling into anthropocentric, pathetic, exaggerated scientific or moneymaking accusations. The moderator insisted I told my story to the end.

The situation was particular because the audience knew the Tuareg grandmother. They had all been there, in the desert. Visiting the Klimahaus is part of the school curriculum in northern Germany. I did not have to explain how hot I felt entering with my winter jacket. How hard it was to breathe. The old lady’s eyes as she talked about hunger. I quickly summarized what had happened, then opened my novel and read a passage from the first chapter which had in such a clear cut, identical form repeated itself on my visit to the ‘entertainment-science attraction.’

Silence fell upon the small dark hall in the Bremen Youth Centre.

A long... long... absolutely too long silence.

A fiasco! I could feel a lump forming in my throat and I helplessly glanced at the moderator. What a terrible mistake of judgement! What a supercilious, excessive preoccupation with myself (and my grandmother)!

‘Perhaps the grandmas are friends on Facebook!’

A young man in the third row broke the silence and suddenly the entire auditorium broke into spontaneous redeeming laughter. Only now did I notice that the moderator sitting next to me had tears coming down her cheeks.

A woman from the village of Jurovski Dol in Slovenia and a woman from the village Kanak in Niger needed no social network to be connected. They were connected because they saw what was possible to see with your eyes open, what it is possible to hear with attentive ears, and missed what was possible to miss with a precise awareness of just how much beauty has already disappeared from the world during the course of a single lifetime. What was and what is no more, and what exactly this means for all of us who are still here.

When in the second or third season of farming I was excited to find the old fruit grower’s calendar of seasonal work including precise instructions by date for all the ecological tasks in the orchard, my friend Vesna, head of the agricultural consulting department at the Agricultural and Forestry Institute in Celje, lost patience with me for the first time in our friendship. She began to shout at me, ‘A sowing calendar is not a recipe for making a cake!’ She was angry and disappointed. Using strong terms and in a stern voice she tried to explain to me that the dates noted by the experienced fruit grower are merely an indication and that priggishly adhering to them gets you nowhere. ‘No matter what you do, none of this will work, if you won’t also open your eyes!’