

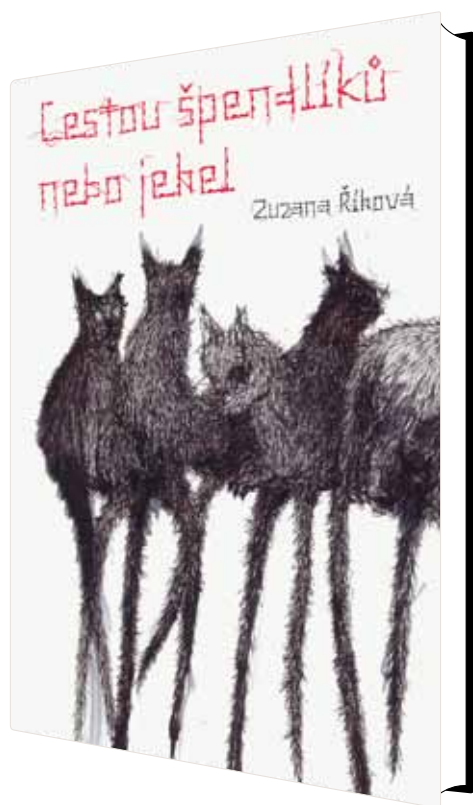


**SHORTLISTED FOR THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS
NATIONAL LITERARY AWARD (2022)**



Playing Wolf

by Zuzana Říhová



September 2021
248 pages

A modern ballad about human destiny and the animal in each of us

Husband and wife Bohumil and Bohumila, together with their son, move from Prague to a remote village with the hopes of salvaging their marriage. In the searing summer heat, they try to fit in with the villagers, only to be met with hostile stares and evasive lies. Each night, the couple hears what they suspect to be a large animal wandering around their cottage – an impression that oddly corresponds to the mysterious flyers found at the local watering hole regarding a wolven fairytale. As inexplicable coincidences begin piling up, it's clear something sinister is afoot.

After a drunken night out, Bohumil and Bohumila come home to find the house empty: their son is gone. After three days of searching, they find the villagers in festive costumes gathered outside their cottage. Is it a bizarre game, or some perverse, folkloric ritual? Are Bohumil and Bohumila in danger? And what has happened to their son?

A dark social tale that slides inexorably towards psychological horror.

"A devilishly creepy work of folk horror... A hair-raising tale of a culture clash."

— *Publishers Weekly*

"A distinctly poetic and disturbingly elegant horror novel for fans of *Midsommar* and *The Witch*."

— *Catapult, US*

Zuzana Říhová (b. 1981) studied Czech Language and Literature and Comparative Literature at the Charles University in Prague. She has been working at the Institute of Czech Literature (Czech Academy of Sciences) since 2007 and was Head of Czech Studies at the University of Oxford from 2014–2017. Říhová, who has a lifelong interest in Czech avant-garde literature, has published a collection of poetry, *I'll Let You in My* (2016), and a novella, *Little Eve* (2018), which was named as one of the Books of the Year in 2018 by a Czech literary web magazine. *Year of Transformation* (2024) explores the life of Franz Kafka in Prague in 1912.



Cestou špendlíků nebo jehel ■ September 2021 ■ 248 pages

RIGHTS SOLD TO: France (Editions du Seuil), Poland (Afera), USA (Catapult)

argo.cz/foreign-rights
veronika.chaloupkova@argo.cz

Playing Wolf by Zuzana Říhová

summary

A married couple, Bohumil and Bohumila, together with their mentally handicapped son, move from Prague to a small village in the borderlands to resolve their marital crisis. In the hot summer they try to fit in with the locals, first attributing their minor misunderstandings to their difference and inability to understand the rural environment. However, small and big lies, strange coincidences and unpleasant incidents increase and the feeling of being threatened grows. The village of Podlesí, where the whole family retreats, is far from a romantic idyll, a claustrophobic place and hostile to its surroundings. People coming from outside, especially from the city, are viewed with distrust and hostility. The local community does not accept outsiders and begins to play a strangely twisted game with the family. The hints that a large animal walks past their cottage at the bottom of the ravine every night correspond strangely with the mysterious leaflets with the tale of the wolf that the couple finds in the local watering hole.

Bohumil and Bohumila try to join in the village life, but from the beginning they are assigned the role of the strangers, the different ones. The closed world of the village community, which has its own rules of operation (everyone knows who drinks too much, who has what kind of illness, whose husband beats whom at home, but such things are not spoken about publicly), becomes a dangerous, threatening place for the family from the city, from which they (unsuccessfully) want to escape. One night the couple return to their empty cottage - their son has disappeared. The strange events culminate on the third day after the boy's disappearance, when all the villagers gather outside the couple's cottage in festive attire. Bohumil and Bohumila become actors in a kind of meta-theatre, a forest ritual inspired by the fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood, which the villagers perform in the hope that it will rescue them from despair and nothingness. In the grand finale, we have no idea whether this is theatre or reality, a twisted form of modern folklore, or whether the couple's and their son's lives are at stake.

Translated by Alex Zucker (opening)

The heat is so scorching it hurts even to breathe. You have to take the air in sips. Heavy, sticky heat clogs the lungs, hot gobs of spit come out your throat as you exhale. The wooden gate at U Fandy is on the verge of melting. Splinter after splinter flopping onto the stone threshold, *tsss, tsss*, hissing like a nest of vipers. The pub is about to burst into flame. A couple more degrees and *whoosh*. The whole thing will boil away. And this is late afternoon!

Inside, two small windows give onto the cracked road dotted with potholes and ill-fitting sewer covers. Hidden behind a large flowerpot with a single withered flower, the windows are covered over by a grayish-yellow curtain, brittle with lager fumes. The pattern is a brownish batik produced by specks of tobacco. But no one really minds, since the windows serve no purpose. Assuming any thirsty soul is still outside, they're too eager to get in the pub to try to peek through the window. And once they're inside, who cares what's happening on the street? There's nothing going on outside anyway. Podlesí is notorious for its boring atmosphere, overlaying everything like a thick blanket.

The pub was a shadowy place. It extended toward the rear like a long noodle—the swinging doors of the small taproom conveniently opening into the hall of the former sokolovna. It was a spacious hall, with room for twenty tables, and a few years back, they had erected a stage at one end. At the annual ball, the sweaty MC from Hradec stood up there, and when the club had a meeting, they carried one of the tables up there for Sláva, so everyone could hear.

It's Saturday and the pub is packed. Everyone is crammed into the dark and ostensibly cool interior. But even here the sweat trickles down from their ears and slithers under the soiled collars of their shirts like a startled lizard.

Bohumila stepped into the pub, blinking into the dark and smoke. She had to stop in the doorway and let her pupils adjust.

She expected the beer-soaked tables. The floor spattered with reddish vomit. The suffocating smell of overflowing ashtrays. And the eyes of the locals—watery, bloodshot from drink, whites cracked from the steady glow of the TV. But U Fandy was utterly nondescript: six identical tables with advertising tablecloths, the TV droning, the barkeep lighting a smoke as he leaned his belly against the tap. The floor spattered with boredom and apathy.

The moment they spotted her, though, the volume level dropped. Bohumila nervously swallowed. She's being a tease, she thinks, attracting their attention, the men having to fight back the urge to rub their groins. She instinctively drew her shoulders together. As long as I hunch they won't look. But she's wrong. They do look, but with unfeigned

disinterest. She isn't turning them on at all. If anything, her presence in the pub slightly annoys them, now they have to watch their tongues. They track her with a hunter's gaze, but a hunter with the grazing roe comfortably in his sights. No need to shoot just yet. They'll hold their fire. They're in no rush. They've already known for a long time which side of the bed she sleeps on, and as of tomorrow they're going to know what she dreams about as well. The locals purr contentedly after an all-day shift at the pig farm: Let the little baby bird from the city settle in, make herself at home. Add one twig to another, spit and droppings and glue it together, caulk it together, you've got your nest. Tidy up, bake up some food. And then we'll come for you.

A pair of men suddenly rose from their seats, blocking her path. She clenched the edge of the table and tried to steer around them. One of the men stepped right in her way. She shrieked softly, preparing to defend herself.

"Excuse us, please. We've got a birth to get to," Michael said politely. Josef, next to him, gave a slight bow.

Bohumila shrugged with a look of befuddlement. The men walked out of the pub and headed up the dusty road to the cowshed.

Jarda Hejl, the bartender and owner, nodded to her. He was on the tall side, with a firm, bulging belly typically damp with slops of beer. Next year he would be fifty and he'd already begun to plan the celebration. He insisted on picking out a few piglets that he was going to personally fatten up himself. Slaughtering them all, on the other hand, was too much work for one. For that he'd arranged a butcher from Hradec, though he did have his own cattle gun. He had a fondness for guns. This one made a soft, hollow sound, like it wasn't even firing, just sighing softly into the cow's brain. He planned to pay for the two large kegs himself, though he was accepting contributions for the pigs. He was surprised how expensive homegrown pork, pampered and raised with care, had become.

Bohumila nodded back to him. Would she find the courage to ask? They'd been here a few weeks now, she had to do something. Even if it was just cleaning. Or doing laundry.

Her sweaty T-shirt stuck to her back.

She was so thirsty her tongue was peeling like the bark on a dead tree. Her eyes flitted over the sign with the three green leaves. An ad for Platan beer. Did that even still exist? Whatever you do, don't start crying. How great would it be if that new girl broke down in tears at the pub! Oo, that'd be nifty. Afterward they would go racing home with the story, holding it tight against their chests as they sprinted down the stony path, so it would still be warm and fresh when they blabbed it all over the village. They might even add a few details to the story. A few extra tears here, some loud moaning there, by the time they reached the convenience store the story would be that she'd flung herself to the ground. And what would the story be like by the time it reached the cowshed, all nicely wrapped

and boxed? And then she just lay on the floor, twitching and foaming at the mouth. And then she peed herself.

★

Marcela, a withered blonde with dark roots, waved to her from the corner table. Bohumila had met her at Bubble's a few times, they had gotten to talking a bit, a tiny bit, about children. Her husband beats her. There is a cowering quality to her body, even her voice. Before she starts to speak, she looks around and hunches in anticipation. She drinks. She has to drink for there to be at least some justice in the world. Because when she's drunk, she's almost happy. And everyone deserves a little piece of happiness. Bohumila sits down across the table from Marcela. The woman rattles on like a coffee grinder. Milan is great, he's just the greatest. Assembly line, odd jobs. He's helping out in the cowshed today. So she was glad to go for a beer. She's got a right to relax a bit too, doesn't she? She's exhausted, so just a little nip, Marcela nods her head. But Bohumila knows that what Marcela's really telling her is how, even just for a little while, vodka and bad beer slow down the steamroller of a life laden with loneliness and desperation. They may not stop it, but at least they slow it down, and that's the point, isn't it, that's what it's about, right? Bohumila even hears what Marcela doesn't say: Sure it hurts when I rub cover cream on my bruises. But what I see in his eyes when he raises his fist hurts me even more. Like he could never love me. No one ever could.

"So, cheers to that, right?"

Then a long time gabbing on about how hot the summer is. Unendingly hot.

Bohumila nods.

Splatter the ugliness with a splash of the hard stuff.

Bohumila nods.

Marcela evidently has been sitting here awhile, she's tripping over her tongue.

"Sorry, guess I'm rambling, huh?" she says, stopping short.

Bohumila shakes her head.

A half-finished beer and an empty shot glass sat in front of Marcela.

"Just make it two of everything?" asked Jarda when he finally made it to their table. Time had slowed down for Bohumila, stuck in the deep, watery wrinkles of Marcela's face. She never would've guessed she had been here only a few minutes.

She couldn't stomach Platan and a shot would've totally floored her in this heat. But the whole reason she'd come was to try to fit in, after all, and maybe get a job. She needed to do something, or she would go out of her mind. She needed to like these people, at least a little, a tiny little bit. It's just that, have you seen them? Bohumila with trembling

fingers smoothed out the tablecloth advertising Gambrinus. Why Platan then? She ran her finger over two cigarette holes. The smoking ban didn't count for much around these parts.

Marcela gave her order. "Make it one large and a vodka, then."

"Tea," Bohumila whispered. She had no idea why she said tea. For God's sake, tea in this heat? I've lost my mind, she thought. She swallowed hard, her tongue swelling up even more in anticipation of the hot beverage, expanding in every direction within her oral cavity. Soon it would have to start coming out her ears and nose.

Marcela rolled her eyes. Jarda didn't say a thing.

"He's going to spit in it, you know that, right?" Marcela laughed.

She felt sorry for Bohumila. Her son a retard, her husband in his cute little coat and loafers cruising the village and obviously beating her. She glanced down at Bohumila's hand. She was hiding bandages underneath those long sleeves, everyone in Podlesí knew. Everyone in Podlesí already knew everything.

Gulping down the rest of her beer, Marcela thirstily reached for the shot, but the glass was empty! Jarda hurried over with a large beer and a vodka and set them in front of her. He marked the check with two lines in the beer & shots section, ignoring the order for tea.

He was going to punish her, Bohumila knew that. She could rest assured of that. Punish. Chasten. I am a weary, grieving cow.

Her hand twitched from the heat. She could feel the cigarette smoke seeping under the bandages, tickling and itching between the stitches. Her swollen hand was practically smoked with pub fumes, just peel off a piece and dip it in mustard and horseradish. She really needed to scratch it. She would have to dig under the bandages tonight. With the cooking spoon. No. The knitting needle.

"Go ahead, drink," she urged Marcela, well-manneredly waiting in front of her freshly poured beer.

"No, thanks, I'll wait," said Marcela, and walked off to the ladies' room.

Bohumila thirstily eyed her beer. It had settled just right, the beer still fresh but no longer so much foam it filled your mouth. She could almost feel the bubbles bursting on her tongue. She should take a drink. She must take a drink. She was unbelievably thirsty. Her tongue was stuck to the roof of her mouth like a piece of bread spread with honey. She pounced on the half liter, cramming the glass into her mouth and guzzling and guzzling, choking on the cool liquid, the foam running up her nose, into her hair. Bohumila gagged, spitting beer all over herself.

“Still didn’t bring it?” Marcela said, shaking off her wet hands. She went on drinking and talking. Bohumila had to avert her gaze from the beer. It made her sad. She stared at the withered flowers in the window. I’m wilting here too. I’m wilting. She turned to the tap. “One small,” she said, a resigned tone in her voice.

“Celebrating, are we?” Jarda set a beer in front of her.

Not a muscle on his face moved. She looked up at him in surprise. Marcela grunted into her glass.

Bohumila shot her a glance. What are you laughing at? I didn’t want to. I had to.

“When’re they coming back?” she asked Marcela.

“Who?”

“The kids.”

“Oh, that.” Marcela lowered her voice and cautiously peered around. “This weekend, or after the weekend, I dunno. They might stay there a few more days.”

“Wait, you don’t even know when they’re coming back? That’s great you’ve got someone to watch them that long,” said Bohumila, nodding in awe.

“Yeah, I guess.” Marcela squirmed in her chair. She knocked back the rest of the vodka, closed and opened her eyes. I’m still here.

“So how’re you doing here, you holding up?” she said, changing the subject.

Holding up? Am I holding up? If only he at least slept at night, I could let off steam in the kitchen. But he doesn’t sleep all the way through the night. She can hear him breathing when he’s awake, tossing and turning under the duvet, fully alive even at night. Am I holding up? If only I could at least let off steam in front of the cottage, but the animal is out there at night. “I’m holding up, yeah.”

“I get that it must be hard, y’know? Prague, right? So much history.”

Bohumila nodded. History, yeah. The village stucco hunters, she knew them well. Pants below the knee, sandals, mom backpack, dad fanny pack. Dashing across the platform to change trains in the Metro, overjoyed they made it.

“But it really is great here, though.” Marcela smiled at her. Why is she so sad all the time? So he beats her, so what, Jesus. She’d come to like her docile nature in the short time since they’d met. The way she sipped her little beer like it was scalding hot. The way she scratched her injured hand, lowering her eyelids like a sleepy kitten. “Beautiful countryside,” Marcela added, to cheer her up a bit.

Fuck your countryside. “Yeah, it is. Beautiful,” said Bohumila.

Marcela took a long swallow and nodded to Jarda. He deftly drew another and was almost on the way over when Marcela looked up again. He nodded lightly, set the beer down on the wet metal surface, reached behind him for a bottle of vodka, poured a shot, and placed it all on the table in front of Marcela. He looked at the empty glass in front of Bohumila. She smiled faintly.

All right then, bring it on.

The gloom inside the pub was starting to appeal to her. It obscured the faces around them, making the view more tolerable. The TV in the corner illuminated only the first few rows, whose backs were turned to her. Her eyes explored the sweaty hair, hairy ears, faded collars. She studied the men with intrigue. Beer and a glass of Turkish coffee with rum. A pack of cigarettes, swollen fingers resting beside it. The flame of their lighters flashed on the TV screen, the eyes of the stuffed wild boar on the wall reflecting a contorted image of the pub. The men looked like monsters. Her face was missing. She ought to be going. But she had to ask.

Jarda brought Marcela another shot.

“Eh-hem, there’s something I wanted to ask,” said Bohumila. I wish he wouldn’t stare at me like that, please stop looking at me that way. “I don’t suppose you’re looking for help? Someone to tap the beer, clean up, I dunno.”

Jarda glanced at her bandaged hand. She demurely slipped it under the table.

“Hey, thanks, but I’m doing all right.”

“Hm.” Her head sank.

He kept staring. He could see she was asking for it. The way she twisted and wriggled her ass on the chair. Tossing her hair. Pouting her lips. Acting like she wasn’t asking for it when obviously she was. He smiled. She was like a mouse sniffing cheese in a trap, testing it out with its whiskers to see if it’ll snap shut, then when nothing happens, sticking in its whole head. Doesn’t even notice the trap swishing past its ears.

“Look, I actually am gonna need someone behind the tap, the next time we have a party. Stop by next week, we’ll work something out.”

Marcela closed her lips tight and gently shook her head. Bohumila didn’t see.

“All right, thanks a lot,” she said.

“No problem.” *Peep peep peep*, look at our little baby bird thanking us, look at her smile, look how delighted she is to have friends around her again, Jarda thought. Maybe he’ll invite her back to the nest, for some coffee and a bilberry tart, you’re always out looking for bilberries anyway, you’re completely obsessed with them, I see you out there every day, squatting down in the bilberry bush like you were taking a pee, but you’re picking

berries and baking tarts and filling dumplings, and if you knew how to make jam, which you don't, since you're a city cow, then you'd have a good few jars of it put up in the pantry by now.

Playing Wolf by Zuzana Říhová

Translated by Ian Finlay

Chapter 1

She shuffled about in the dung. Her enormous belly perforated with pulsating veins strained convulsively and loosened. Under her tail a sharp hoof peeped out. A thin trickle of mucus flowed from the hoof's edge. The grey-white flow did not disperse, but formed a continuous flow before fluttering in the summer breeze and smacking into the litter.

He wrinkled his eyebrows in distaste, swallowed dryly. He observed how Pepa was getting everything ready at the cow's rear. A large metal bucket with lukewarm water, a small cup, and some old towels. He pulled on the long plastic gloves. He is not a pig after all. Šimečka from Dolní Plané regularly reaches up there as far as his elbow without gloves, and thinks it quite normal. But it is disgusting.

Pepa started to twist his arm into the cow, slowly searched a little to the left, then to right. The cow trembled, contracted her belly sharply twice, and the hoof appeared whole. Pepa deftly withdrew his arm and expertly captured the hoof in the prepared hoop of hemp rope. He drew it tight. The cow mooed restlessly. She could have no idea what was happening at her rear. Her head was caught in a metal pail, a place just about big enough for feeding.

"Prrr, old thing," Pepa patted her cheerily on the backside. Pepa looked across at him, and he smiled weakly. Why must every cow here be called old thing, he said to himself.

He watched how the hoof slowly emerged from the cow. He tried to look completely normal, sincere and relaxed, but he desperately wanted to disappear, to run home and pour himself a drop. And then, maybe, watch the birth of a calf on YouTube, if by any chance he wanted to see some birth, as though he would want to. The scene in front of him was full of blood and slime. He felt grubby, even when he was standing several metres away from the cow on the concrete walkway. But all the same he stepped back a little in case he got splattered; he had only had this jacket for a couple of weeks.

Pepa bristled. He would show that waste of space how things work around here. Rough village, rough people. He snorted. A trendy city arsehole, beige jacket, beige shoes; what a daft outfit for going to a cowshed. He was looking at the calf as though he had never seen a piece of veal. A vegetarian, for sure. An idiot, for sure. If he were to come closer to him, he would sense the soft scent of perfume. But he was standing at the cow's rear and pulling a calf out of it. The cow swung her right leg at him slightly, and so he gave it a good kick. He looked around at Bohouš. He had introduced himself as Bohumil, but only a cretin introduced himself in such a way, Pepa knew. After all, I am actually Josef as well, and scratched himself in the crotch. He was really hot.

"I'm sweaty as a gate in a cowshed," he looked at Bohumil again. Ha ha, he is staring like terrified, no time for bothering with fine feelings. He kicked the cow again; she twitched painfully. "Alright now, prrr, old thing, you know what it's like."

Once again Pepa moved his arm along the rope deep into the cow's vagina. He turned his arm and groped around in the dense dark of the vulva. He enjoyed delivering calves.

Bohumil couldn't take his eyes away. He stared at how the hand disappeared into the cow right up to his fist, then up to his elbow. Good God, how far did he want to stick his arm into her? His stomach turned a bit. He half opened his lips in amazement, but was absolutely unaware of doing so. My God, how he hunts around there, how he gropes there! A thin current of blood ran around Pepa's elbow. Got it, yesss, here it is. He wound the prepared rope around the second hoof and smiled imperceptibly. Now everything will go well. He pulled harder, but nothing happened. He pulled harder again, turned red with exertion. He propped himself with his legs, pulled on the rope, farted, certainly he farted, but the calf did not come out of the cow.

"You kid, come and hold this for me. I have to go for a tool," he handed him the rope. Bohumil looked around the empty cowshed. Err, yes, he is talking to me. Oh, no.

He took a couple of steps and automatically took over the harness. He rather looked chastely down at the hay and the circles of cow dung. He was ashamed of that stretched vagina and of the sharp hooves that stuck out of it. A stream of sweat trickled down his back. He heard the flies noisily flying into his face. One of them got into his ear. He did not budge; he did not want to frighten the cow. He was frightened of her. She was enormous. He stood at her backside, examined the hay smeared with foetal water, then the off-white slime on his right shoe, and he let himself be tormented by flies.

I don't deserve anything else. I am standing in a cowshed, my shoes smeared with vaginal slime and a calf on a leash in my hand, he said to himself. If only at least I did not constantly want to weep. He raised his eyes to the level of the limply protruding hooves. He was terribly sorry for the cow; for a moment he was even sorrier for her than for himself.

Pepa returned with an enormous metal instrument.

"Holy shit, you taking the calf for a walk, or what?" Pepa barged into him. "Give her to me," he started to fix the construction on the cow's back.

Bohumil swallowed. If he crams that into her as well, then I will throw up.

He handed back the terrifying leash and quickly stepped back onto the cemented walkway. With one movement Pepa placed the cow's back into the metal construction and inserted the rope holding the hooves into the crowbar. He started to pump and the calf slowly shifted out. Everything had already lasted a terribly long time. Pepa, quite red-faced, shook the hooves here and there; the calf is evidently stuck. He moved the pump back and forth like a madman, increased tempo twice, and in an enormous wave of slime a head with astonished eyes emerged into the light. Bohumil stared at the eyes in fascination. To him they seemed knowing. As though the calf was bringing a prophecy into the world. He knew that he needed some such change, that he was waiting impatiently for it – this change that he was looking for. For God's sake, that change was what he came here for, wasn't it? The calf's head was entirely black, but on the forehead it had a small white map – no, he wrinkled his nose, rather a kind of star; it looked a little bit like a sacred calf. At last he smiled a little. He waited in suspense for what the calf was going to preach. What chance it would give him and his family. He himself did not view their chances very brightly.

The calf was not yet able to perceive anything. It was born almost blind. Its front legs dangled like an old lady's ponytail. It was only half out. It hung from the cow like withered flowers in a vase. Pepa made one more effort. The calf flopped softly onto the hay. Terribly quietly, Bohumil feared. Is that normal? Hopefully, it is alive, he clenched his teeth. It came into the world without crying and groaning. Bohumil nodded as though he had expected this. Silence has been sent down upon me. Quiet and silence. I am alone, I am bad, and I wish that no one is ever happy again. He continued to speak quietly to himself as he watched how they brought the calf to life, rubbed it with straw, poked it in the torso, massaged its heart. He wished that someone would perform the opposite

movements on him. Rid him of life. Rid him of that bad person, surrounded by the silence of those close to him, who did not love him.

"What are you meditating about here, you idiot? That's the lot, end of programme," Pepa splashed over him a little of the water that he had poured over the calf. That will bring him round. Bohumil thinks that Pepa is putting the cow and the calf under a little bit too much strain. Isn't he going to give the calf even a brief moment? They had left his baby boy almost half an hour before taking him to clean him of the blood and slime.

The cow tries to reach her calf, but the metal bar prevents her moving. She feels the new life, still wet and unsteady. She cannot even look at the calf. She shuffles about and moos exhaustedly. Finally, some sound. He already had the feeling that he was an actor in a silent film: disjointed movements, sham falls, pranks, but at the same time a heavy faded blanket of sadness all around. Pepa cleans the calf and gives it a shake. Not so fiercely. He would like to shake it again, but they would laugh at him. Almost everyone is here now, the big village guys. Sláva, the gamekeeper, lives by the field. He is almost six feet tall, thick grey hair, speaks little and slowly. Milan most probably came straight from the pub. He commutes to an assembly line in Hradec. His right middle tooth is cracked and he speaks softly, with a slight lisp. He seems fine. Those two guys there who are sauntering toward the cowshed, he doesn't know yet.

Pepa noticed his glance toward the path, ceased rubbing the calf with straw and looked up.

"Faggots," he grimaced. "Friends from Prague. Very good friends, get it?" he winked at Bohumil meaningfully.

Once again his knees begin to shake. Since the time that he moved here, he has not slept properly. Sure, in the city everyone complains about cars and night trams. But a cockerel? Not sleeping because of how his life has gone to hell in the last few weeks is one thing. But it is not even possible to sleep here, certainly not after five o'clock in the morning. He doesn't know exactly where the cock crowing comes from. But he will lie in wait for it and slit its throat. He would really love to. He would really love to slit its throat so very much. He felt that the time was ripe for violence. He could no longer suppress such anger. However, the mere thought of the knife caused him an unpleasant trembling around his stomach. Then he had to think about trains. That helped. Almost always. Chug chug, chug chug chug.

The male duo arrived. One came closer to the calf. "Oh, it's wonderful, such a softie."

Pepa lowered his sight and kicked the metal gate lightly.

"Jesus, excuse me, I did not even introduce myself, but the calf is really fantastic," he rose and offered his hand to Bohumil. "Josef Broumský."

Pepa watched as they introduced themselves, speeded up his kicking the gate, turned his gaze away, and flinched a little. You beauty, Josef, Josef. He kicked the gate once more until it rattled.

"Bohumil Novotný." He introduced himself.

The second man offered his hand to Bohumil. "Michael Horna. Pleased to meet you."

Pepa stared at the ground. Sure you are, Michael, sure you are.

"We have already heard about you. How long have you been here already?" asked Josef, his head still turned a little toward the calf.

"Two weeks, two." But it was already four weeks. Four weeks of life in Podlesí, a whole month of intensifying summer heat in this shithole.

"So, just a short while. Everything is still completely new here, I guess?"

Bohumil nodded indistinctly.

"And are you going to be here for good, or just as a breather from the city. For the summer?"

"Yes. I mean, yes, for good, for the meanwhile."

Pepa smiled and prodded the calf with his leg: "Where else would you find such fresh veal?"

At the farmer's market on Namesti Míru (Peace Square) he wanted to say, but in the end he said nothing. He had the feeling that this was his new profession. To stand in the cowshed – or rather, in the summer stall in front of the cowshed – to nod, to stare, and never say anything any more. To submit to that silence, to submerge himself in it like in the sea surf. To fill his mouth with salt water. And to fall deeper into total quietness and metallic darkness, kilometres and kilometres right to the bottom in the direction of creatures that no one had ever yet seen. Not until him, Bohumil Novotný. But no one else. He looks silently. He looks into their oval mouths. He waits to see whether in Podlesí there will be love, or not-love. Nothing in between these.

He nodded to Pepa's proposal to meet in the pub. We will have a booze up, he told him. A couple of beers and then we will add some green schnapps to the beer, guessed Bohumil. Do they still drink green schnapps here? He looked around. He drinks. Here people really drink, and they drink their beer with a good head on it. And once again that need to be nasty. To tell him that come the morning they will all throw up from this drinking, and then without a shower straight into their work overalls, straight down to Bublina's shop for a couple of pick-me-ups and a Vlašák salad. I must calm down, he tells himself. Smile. No, that's too much. Yes, that's better. Just slightly raise the corners of the mouth. I don't need to look like another idiot.

I am going to live in Podlesí. Not because I want to, but because I must.

"So, are you coming along for one?" Pepa asked him again. Bohumil watched how they carried the calf away to the hutch. No, a hutch is for rabbits. To the cow pen. In some way that doesn't sound quite right. This farming terminology must have been thought up by some maniac, Bohumil says to himself – for every animal its very own nice warm place.

"No, I reckon not."

"We neither. We have a rabbit in the oven," Michael added, even though no one had asked him directly.

Bohumil smiled sincerely for the first time. He imagined the stunted white rabbit with red eyes that parents buy their children for getting top grades at school, how it tenderly sniffed around with its little red snout in the corner of the oven. He caught their startled looks. He quickly tried to control his wry smile to make it a neutral one, he thought self-consciously. His canine tooth got stuck on a bit of his lower lip, his lips shifted to the left, but his eyes did not cease smiling. He looked crazy.

"But really, many thanks for today. It was good," he did not know how best to evaluate the successful birth.

"No problem. Come by tomorrow; maybe I will know about something. But now in summer everything is out in the field, or on the farm, you see," said Pepa.

"Thanks. I will call by," said Bohumil, "and thanks." He thanked once again, because he needed to thank.

On the way back from the cowshed he went along with Josef and Michael. But he already terribly wanted to be alone. To cry his eyes out somewhere in the bushes before **it** completely suffocated

him.

"How long have you had your cottage here?" he asked in order to attract their attention away from himself. After all, everyone prefers to talk about him or herself, chiefly about him or herself.

"This is our second summer. It is super here, really beautiful. Mostly by bike. Gradually we are here more and more. Sometimes we no longer even go to Prague." Did he imagine it? Was that a sigh?

"And you really live here, then? You are from Prague, aren't you?" asked Michael, and Josef immediately repeated sadly: "It is beautiful here." Like actors. Like out of an advert. Really beautiful, really beautiful and cheap, and the second pack for free.

Calm down, stop.

"Yes, I'm from Prague. From Holešovice. And I live, now I live here. I live in Podlesí," he repeated in order to convince himself. In his voice quivered the anxiety of a middle-aged man who had to choose what he did not want, what he cannot endure, what presses his eyes deep into their sockets, what cuts him up in slices until soon there will be nothing left of him. Like when Bublina in the local shop slices up salami, each slice rolling down lifelessly onto the previous slice, and the last bit, which can no longer be sliced for bread – that tough hind piece with the string – that is the only thing that is left from it. Bublina mostly gobbles this bit immediately, when no one is looking. What will he do, when no one is looking and his eyes are coated in a white mist? He is ashamed. He will crouch down on his haunches and weep. He cannot do otherwise. It cannot be otherwise; it is impossible not to cry.

"I live there," he raised his arm made heavy through lack of sleep. His fingers trembled wildly. Michael looked at Josef meaningfully. Bohumil withdrew his arm ashamedly back to his body. Guys, guys, you will say all this when you get back home – how I am strange, how I most probably drink a lot, when my hands shake like that, perhaps you will guess that it must be debts that drive someone from Prague to move to an old cottage in the border region. Once you find out that how battered my wife is, what scars she has on her arms, you will start greeting me terribly politely, but from a distance, and when I lash out at one of those horseflies that fly around here from the pond and sting you painfully in the thigh, then you will shrink back a little. Then you will feel a bit awkward about this, but you will back off to one side and, before I finish my movement, you will hide your heads between your shoulders. As I say, you will say all this to each other at home when you pour yourself a drink. My eyes today are not going to be white, but quite bloody from your wine. But, okay, guys, really only once you get home, because I can no longer stand these meaningful looks.

"Yes, yes, we know, over there," Michael nodded in the direction of the ravine where Bohumil's cottage stood. "Really nice. It will take a bit of effort to put it in order, I guess? But like we said, the countryside here is really beautiful."

You can stick your countryside somewhere.

"Beautiful," he nodded.

He never spoke vulgarly, never, he couldn't stand it. Now, only the most vulgar words occurred to him, as though he needed to try them all out at once. To shout out something terribly vulgar. To refresh himself with that coarseness from his own mouth, to smirch his gums with the filth from inside himself. Sláva is a motherfucker!

It's bad, really bad. I must disappear as soon as possible, otherwise I will start to shout.

"Okay, so we are going this way, but we will certainly meet again, eh?"

"Yeah, for sure."

"Be sure to stop if you are passing by. Just bang on the gate; it doesn't matter which one. By evening we are mostly at home," Michael nodded at him.

"And we brew really good coffee," added Josef.

"For sure. Thanks." I could do with a shot of schnapps. He turned sharply downhill along the forest path. I will have a shot. No discussion. He went around the traditional wooden cottage of the Prague couple. The lawn beautifully cut, smoothed, vacuumed. The flower beds mulched. Their heads as well. The plants watered every day, the fence trimmed, the sun-beds parked away tidily for the night in the shed. They drive to Baumax and to Obi and to flower exhibitions. And to Makro, for maxi-packages. In the corner a currant bush, laden with fruit every summer like a baby's bottom. It is full of earwigs and wasps, but still we're not getting rid of it anyway. And those grill parties! The best smoked meat, and those fish! And when they have saved up, then a swimming pool. That will be a confirmation. The garden is beautiful. Our garden, beautiful. So, do you like it? Do you like it? Isn't it beautiful?

He stopped and breathed in deeply. Inside him it fomented and sizzled like in a bottle of spoiled young wine. With this approach, I will not survive here, I know that. Today, I will pour myself a drink again and crawl off somewhere to lick my wounds, but tomorrow I must start to do something about this. To like it here. Nature, peace and quiet, clean air, and nice people. Nice people, oh yes, but have you seen them? He almost laughed out loud. It won't work. My love, it has all slipped through our fingers, through your legs.

He left the cluster of cottages and also the last level area by the wood, which was as far as a car could go. It was getting dark. He had already experienced this a few times here. The sun became a bloody orange. And then only dark. A dense liquid dark. An icy air drifted from the wood toward the cottages even now in summer. When you sit in front of the house, it is still warm, but as soon as you go a bit further, it gets cold in your chest and you can't breathe properly. Even now. He thinks that his heart is getting cold, he feels how its beating is slowing down. He imagines death somewhat like this. He is afraid of the dark cold forest beyond the cottage. During the day it is completely silent there. Perhaps a couple of mushroom hunters. But as soon as dusk begins to fall, the wood comes noisily to life, the pine needles start to squeal under the hooves of God knows what. In the night he is awakened by strange neighing and howling, apparently stags yelp, but this cannot be a stag. It sounds like a mouflon, but everyone would laugh at him if he was to claim that mouflons howl behind his cottage. They don't howl. God damn, what sound do mouflons make? It would never have occurred to him that he would search for words here. Precisely here, where every inhabitant of the village has a vocabulary of about 2,000 words. Passive. He slowed down his step. It cannot go on like this, for God's sake. Once again he is moaning, grumbling, griping. Perhaps the people here are fine. Well okay, but has he spoken with them? A shot of schnapps, I need a shot.

He went sharply down, the last cottage in the inhabited embankment below the road was already far behind him. He hurtled down the hill into the heart of the ravine. The bloody orange grew weaker, and he instinctively hastened his step. Most probably it is not a mouflon, but something lives in that wood. And it doesn't sound friendly. He noticed that after nightfall no one set out anywhere outside of the cottage and the pub. But why then? The entrancing eye of the television. Or perhaps they are afraid. This fear can be felt from them. Something can be felt from these people in Podlesí. He shook with cold. But that's enough now. This way I will not survive here. And that is precisely why I am here – to survive. We came here in order to survive. He got a little out of breath as he hurried. But his cottage was at the end of the ravine. The cottage was the ravine. The place where it was no longer possible for anyone to live. There lived Bohumil and Bohumila. And the boy.

He stumbled. He couldn't see the ends of his shoes. Oh no. He looked up at the sky with concern. The orange crashed down into the throat of the violet darkness, and the darkness gobbled it up hungrily. The sweet juice squirted right up to its shoulders. It was sticky. He quickened his pace.

Something dark enveloped him, the night sneezed in his face. Oh no.

Forgive me, young man. I am just spreading out to the sides here, I will touch that place over there, and over there I will stretch out and breathe fear and anxiety into your back, young man. Young man! That must flatter you, mustn't it? Wrinkles branching from your palm all the way to your back, a crumpled head. The corners shine with sweat; your hair is not getting thicker, oh no, it is not getting thicker. Your chest has abated into a tiny ear. But perhaps the best is still to come, am I not right? So, don't be afraid. People don't die of anxiety. The arteries become choked, yes, the heart gets clogged, but written in that final certificate no one has darkness, anxiety, loneliness, let alone night. Because this anxiety, which I am blowing after dark into the farms and cottages, this is a silkily tender anxiety. I understand that when that growling and yelping from the wood, which reaches almost up as far as your doorstep, is added to this anxiety, this does not make you any happier, but you mustn't take all this so hard, my darling. Come and sit with me for a while, we will just sit together for a short while, just stick a couple of fingers, and then we will go on our way again. Where will we stick them? Well, there where it hurts and bleeds, not where it tickles. You can leave that until morning, that titillation and running your nose along the ribs to elicit childish laughter. I will delve into your suffering. I will take your tremulous fingers desirously into my mouth, I will feed on your fear, I will sip it from your clenched lips. Give me a drink, you good-for-nothing, now you belong to me; I will press you so close until you gasp for breath; this is how I will best imbibe your unvaried but sweet sorrow.

The night pokes him in the ribs, but he can no longer go any quicker. He is running already! He hurtles home through the abyss. Home? At last he sees the light on the doorstep, he stretches out his hands in front of him so that the ray of light from the cracked lamp protects him from the encroaching night. The light above the gate embraces him softly; the night pulls back its scrawny claws and hisses. You know what awaits you here; it is going to be almost like death, that's what it's going to be, a dark woodland death.

He crashed into the door, his sweat-soaked shirt stuck to his back.

"What on earth are you up to here?" She passed around him, kicking the basket with the washing in front of her, because her arm still hurt.

"Nothing." He calmed his breath. He no longer looked at the wood. "A calf was born," he said at a loss.

"Well, thanks for telling me." She shoved the washing outside in front of the washing line. She stumbled over something. She knelt down and started to hang up the washing.

"Should I help you?"

"Better warm up his dinner. He's ready for bed."

"Okay, I will just have a quick shower, okay?"

"Yeah, I'll approve a shower."

He compressed his shoulders. She is clever in that way. Telling him that he smells. But not actually telling him. She is good.

He shut himself in the bathroom, took off his shirt and trousers. He was terribly skinny. When did he last eat properly? He sat on the edge of the bath and observed his hairy insteps. A hobbit, she made fun of him. Were they ever going to play again sometime? He strummed with his finger on a protruding tile. The mortar along the bath had crumbled, thus creating a spacious fissure for hornet's nests. Perhaps not. Perhaps they were never going to play. He slipped into the bath even before he started the water running. A spider was sitting by the waste trap. Bohumil looked it over; the spider didn't move. Not a bit. Get lost, you animal, just bugger off. You'd better disappear

somewhere behind the cupboard, you little sod. What are you staring at? The spider moved a little bit away from the waste trap, but remained on the bottom.

I am sitting in the bath with a spider, he blew his nose into his fingers. He looked around himself. Mould in the bath, the water heater didn't work properly, the water flowed rusty. The thick wall did not let in any sun; it is constantly a little bit cold here.

He fished around in the tools under the wash-basin and pulled out a small knife. The tile there in that corner could be prised away; for a long time already he had wanted to have a look what was behind it. He poked around under the tile and tried to insert the knife a bit further. He felt a tension. Was it just his imagination, or was someone holding the knife from the other side? And pulling it. But this certainly just seemed that way to him. The feeling strengthened in him that someone else was living in this house. And the spider nodded agreement: yes, something is living here, in the cottage and also beyond the cottage. And those flies! In the night you are tormented by the ones that I don't manage to catch. They crawl over your face, into your ears and your open mouth. Uh. He did not even want to mention the midges. The tube of fenistil is already almost empty. Everything around is riddled with mould; it just oozes out over you when you are sleeping. And, on top of that, precisely when you are sleeping, when finally you uneasily fall asleep, something walks around in the courtyard. It paces around quietly, rubs its spine on the wall, raises its heavy paw and urinates. In the morning you find the corner of the cottage still damp. I know that you know about it. I saw your eyes in the morning. They are stuffed with its night-time yelping like that fox cub on the shelf in the pub. Like corals, shiny glass beads, the spider speculates further. It watches the thin stream of rusty lukewarm water, then it climbs up to the tap. Do you dream about the sea?

Bohumil turned on the shower. The stream of water almost washed the spider down the plughole, but in the end it climbed out somewhere behind the bath. Actually, it doesn't really matter, thought Bohumil, why not even more spiders, a horde of them. He shifted the shower from his right shoulder to his left and then back again. He thought about the sea.

"Are you ready?" came the call from outside.

He nodded.

"So, are you ready?"

"Yes. In a moment. In a moment I'll be ready."

"I'm not going to warm it up for him."

"Okay. I'm getting out." He turned off the water and looked around. A towel, where for God's sake is some towel? He did not have the strength to ask her. No more, no more imploring. He climbed out the bath. So I will simply shake myself dry somehow. He flexed his legs a little and tried it. For the second time this evening he smiled. For the first time he almost burst into laughter. He shook his legs and his naked bottom and laughed out loud. He put on the same clothes as before again and went out of the bathroom. He left behind a puddle of water; she will be angry.

"It's on the hotplate for him. Just turn it on. I have to sit down and finish that assignment. It should have been sent this morning." And she banged the doors of the bedroom behind her.

He struck a match and burned himself. They had never had gas at home, only a glass-ceramic plate. He lit a new match, turned on the gas, and it ignited with a whoosh. The room smelled of burned skin.

"Where were you?" the boy measured him up inquisitively. He was sitting on the couch in front of a turned-off television. He had not registered it yet and so it was only possible to view a video.

"In the village."

"And how was it?"

"Fine. A calf was born." At least that will go down well here, he knew.

"Yeey. What calf?"

"Black with a small white map in the middle of its forehead."

"What is a map?"

"A kind of picture of the world, towns and villages, and so on."

"And why does that calf have it on its head?"

He would have to go back. To go back to the conversation before he mentioned the map. Because he was not capable of explaining the map to the boy. A beginner's mistake. It can be seen how completely out of it he is. He cannot speak like that with the boy; that leads nowhere. He is twelve, but in his head about six, maybe seven. His last healer was a fine guy; he said seven. And they were pleased about that. They went for an ice cream to celebrate.

"Sorry. I got it wrong. It was not a map, but a white spot."

"Who erased it?"

He went back to the saucepan and started to stir fiercely. Mister Question – that was what they called him at the special needs school in Prague. How are you? Well, how are you? No one knows what is up with him. He has every dysfunction known to child psychology. And IQ of a pumpkin. But what does that say? He loves his son. He is a nice boy. Only it is difficult living with him. Nowadays living is difficult in some way for everyone.

"It's ready. Go and sit at the table. Did you wash your hands?"

"Yes."

"Turn on something while we are eating, okay" he handed him the remote-control for the video and slumped into the chair by the window. The music from Lord of the Rings reverberated around the room. Like every week, like almost every evening. At other times he no longer even noticed it, but today the tom-tom drum beats of the goblins made his head ache. Bohu is working in the bedroom; he could actually be almost alone. He is alone. He looked around himself. He closed his eyes. He is alone.

The boy was sitting at the table. He ate and watched the elves in suspense. Bohumil got up and went to the cupboard beside the fridge and took out a bottle of Jack. There was hardly enough left for two shots. And the evening is only just starting. Bad. This is really bad. You can't just pop down the evening shop here. Perhaps to the field.

He sat in the chair, had a drink, and watched how Frodo disappears, and then is there, and then disappears once again.

The boy finished eating. He watched the film fascinatedly. Bohumil took the plate away to the sink and washed it. There is no dishwasher here, of course, because who would need a dishwasher? What is the use of saving time in a village? If they were to stop in their eternal work, then the emptiness of their own existence would gobble them up even with their trousers. He cleaned the cooker. That is why everything is spick and span and done so nicely by hand. And when everything is finally spick and span inside, they throw themselves into work in the garden, a paradise of endlessly superfluous work. Garden beds and roses, herbs and the greenhouse and cacti and

succulents and watering and watering, well and that cistern does not empty itself either. And if by chance everything were to turn out well and the work was finished and there was nothing on the telly, then they start making jams and preserves. Uff, and there it is. It is all going to be wonderful and the world will end crouched over. Not even the smallest moment of time to just sit back and say to oneself that everything is a complete waste of time. If work itself is contingent on a vain effort to extricate oneself from transience, then here in Podlesí this effort is not in vain. Here in Podlesí life is not transient, because tomorrow there is a market here with foodstuffs grown in the region and its immediate surroundings. And an exhibition of rabbits. He poured himself the last shot. He turned over the empty bottle, viewing it against the window. The sun never shined here, nothing reflected from it, it remained silent in the window up until twilight, it did not even sparkle.

"Did he eat it all?" Bohumila came from the bedroom with notebook in hand and glasses on her nose. She only wore them for work, but when she did not have them, she squinted like a five-day-old kitten. He liked her blind helplessness; he himself had five dioptries.

"Yes, everything," he nodded.

She took out some cream and pulled down the boy's sleeve. He hissed painfully. Where, for God's sake, did he get burned so badly?

When she saw the washed dishes, she nodded her head. She reminded the boy that it was time for bed. But the boy continued sitting.

"Sleep!" Her tone made him get up. He shoved the chair back to the table. He scratched around in his hair.

"Teeth," she stressed. He disappeared into the bathroom.

"It's wet here!" shouted the boy from the bathroom.

She looked at him. He endured the look.

"Did you eat?"

"Yes."

"What did you eat?"

"Soup."

"You're making it up."

"Yes, I am."

Does it matter? Isn't it all the same? Stuff yourself with a hearty meal, or some crunchy snacks, or nothing at all?

She placed a glass in front of him. He apologized to her and lied: there was hardly enough for one there. He tried to smile. She looked at him without smiling.

"A fairy tale?" the boy peeped into the room.

"Not today," they said almost in unison.

"Alright, okay, night night."

"Good night, don't be afraid, we'll come soon, okay?"

"Hmm," he hissed disappointedly and disappeared into the neighbouring room, which they had appointed as a bedroom.

She reached up to the old cupboard, which stood next to the cooker. She bent over, took out two tin pots and a pile of tea-towels, fumbled around a bit, and victoriously pulled out a bottle of Jack. A whole litre! Bohumil looked over at his wife. He loved her. At this moment he loved her deeply.

"But you must buy it then and I will hide it again," she said to him matter-of-factly.

Hide it, he glanced at her, my love. Or don't hide it. This dark drinking is the only thing that sends me tumbling to bed and gives me a little sleep. This dark drinking is the only thing that keeps me from not going further down into that ravine and then even further down. In the end all that would be left of me would be a small dot on the horizon, then it would crack a bit, maybe hiss, and otherwise nothing. Nothing, my love, nothing would be left of it any more. Without drinking I would have gone out into that dark wood already long ago, just like that in my vest and underpants, so that the animal did not have any work with undressing me. Because the animal lives there; those noises in the night, that howling, it is not human.

He watched her open the bottle and pour both of them a double. Learnedly, they raised their glasses to each other. So, to what? To health? He let his hand drop; she continued to keep hers at the level of her chest.

"So, to us," she whispered.

Perplexed, he looked at her. Us, are we still us at all? After all this? He is no longer even sure about himself, let alone about some identity of marriage, family, clan, association. She was still holding her glass opposite him, while he squeezed his in his hand. He looked at her. Possibly I could give you a kiss today.

She sensed his hesitation. She lightly tapped the glass in his hand and drunk deeply.

"Thanks," he said simply.

"Nothing to thank for," she replied.

Of course there wasn't, for Christ's sake, why am I actually thanking her? I endured it, all those diagnoses, psychologists, healers, homeopathy! A couple of drops under the tongue, a few minutes until the miracle. But she didn't. It is you, my dear Bohumila, who were knocked flat by all this.

My dear Bohumila. My dear Bohumila.