



Verena Güntner

POWER

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Chapters 1 and 2 (pp.5-27)

Sample translation © by Deborah Langton

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*The rocks in our hands
preparing for flight*
Peter Broderick

Kerze stands barefoot at the store entrance. She hears the air-con roaring over her head and, as people stream past her and push against the glass on the swing doors, she sees how they vanish down the aisles beyond the shelves of perfume and potions. As the door swings open and closed, Kerze's image repeatedly reflects back at her like a benign spirit. She stands quite still. Her straggly blonde hair hangs matted around her shoulders. Pauli's pullover is too big, only her fingertips poke out from the sleeves and Henne's shorts, ending above the knee in his case, in Kerze's reach her grimy calves. They're filthy, actually, like her face, hands and feet. The reflection clearly shows how shoppers deliberately step round her just like a strutting pigeon steers clear of all the passing feet, at times nervously spreading its wings and hopping away a few centimetres. Kerze's eyes are on the bird and its slight limp, one of its feet crushed by a plastic tie that has lashed the claws together. There's nobody to take it off for him, thinks Kerze, nobody the pigeon means anything to, and so his foot has become deformed by this thing. She's waiting until the pigeon senses the moment to end his stupid slalom but decides any waiting's pointless and reaches behind for her bundle of willow switches, wraps it round her hand so firmly that it digs into her skin, then gives it a hefty sideways swing towards the fake marble that extends as far as the store entrance. The startled pigeon hops and flutters back and forth but Kerze thwacks at the marble until the bird clumsily takes to the air, rises above the heads of passers-by, ducks just enough to pass beneath the shop front and soars abruptly skyward. Kerze stands watching, drops the bundle when a man, seething about something or other, barges into her and makes her fall against the glass door. Kerze, who hates the town and hates big stores, tumbles into the flashy display of bling.

1

'Kerze!' Someone's calling her, but she doesn't turn. Let them catch up, she's not one to go over, let alone look back.

'Kerze,' comes the call again. She recognises Hitschke's voice, stops and waits because Hitschke's bad on her feet, a bit lame, can't help it.

'Kerze!' She's out of breath. 'Kerze, have you seen Power?'

Kerze shakes her head. 'Why d'you ask?'

'Power's gone missing.'

Hitschke is now standing in front of Kerze, puffing, clutching at her sides, her face red like a hen's backside, like skin that's been repeatedly slapped.

'Power's been missing since yesterday, and I don't know where he is.' She starts crying.

Kerze reaches out and puts put her hand over Hitschke's mouth. Kerze doesn't do crying, Hitschke knows that and shuts up.

'Hitschke,' said Kerze, 'if Power's really been missing since yesterday, I'll go looking for him right now. It's not okay for Power to go missing, we both know it's not okay.'

Hitschke gives a vehement nod of agreement. 'Does that mean you'll take on the mission?'

'Of course I'll take on the mission.'

She smiles in gratitude and wipes her nose on her sleeve. Kerze wags a disapproving finger.'

'Sorry, no hankie.'

'No excuse.'

She gives another nod. 'Won't do it again,' she whispers, her voice breaking.

Kerze asks where she last saw Power. Outside Edeka. She asks when. Just after two. She asks if he was on the leash, he was, did he have his doggy coat on, he did. Then she holds her finger to her lips. 'Hitschke, that's all I need to know. You go home, watch some telly. Have your phone on the coffee table. I'll call the minute I've got him.'

Seven weeks long she searched for Power. In the end she found him. Dead, of course, devoured by maggots. But that's not the important bit. The important bit is that she found him and brought him back. That's what Kerze does best: keeps a promise. Everyone knows it and that's why people come to her, entrusting her with a mission when they don't know what to do next, and they have faith in her to do it, to do

everything she takes on. Because she's Kerze. That's what her name means. A light in this world of darkness.

First of all Kerze asks every person in Edeka. She asks Erika on the till, then the cheese and cold meat lady, then she presses the bottle machine intercom and says, 'I'd like to talk to the shop manager.' The shop manager has no time and no idea who Power is. He doesn't live round here but drives out from the city every day in a silver-grey Honda, always parks it with two wheels on the pavement. Now he pushes her aside in the spirits aisle and moves on. She follows him until he stops at the chill cabinet and begins to count yoghourts. She watches his every move because she considers him a suspect... '163, that's right,' he says at last, turning to Kerze. 'Never seen the bastard animal, now push off.' His lips quiver with anger as he speaks. Maybe he's just hungry, thinks Kerze. She doesn't leave yet, of course, not immediately. For a full three minutes more she tails him until she's certain that he hasn't got Power. He's not the one to decide whether she can believe him. Only Kerze can decide that.

Once outside she stays in front of Edeka. She takes a good look at every single person going in. Here comes Lisa, all grown up now. Here comes Mazur, hat on as usual, and there's a kid she doesn't know, younger than her, now rooting around in the freezer for ice-cream. Kerze's standing right by the door and steps forward each time someone approaches so they have to dodge a bit and look straight at her. Kerze can tell if someone's bad and a dog thief from their small eyes. Her mother always says, 'Small eyes are a sign of a bad person.' Even if her mother doesn't have much idea about anything else, she's dead right there, Kerze reckons. She knows Huber, he's bad, she knows Kerstin, she's bad, and the Schiller twins next door, both bad, and they've all got tiny weeny eyes. They've got the kind of eyes Kerze can't help thinking of before she goes to sleep at night, can't help thinking of those pairs of piggy eyes and feeling a pleasurable shiver because she somehow likes "bad" but doesn't know why.

Here outside Edeka nobody has eyes like that, not Lisa, not the unknown kid, and sadly not Mazur either. They're clean. Like the next ones coming in, and the next and the next after that, and after half an hour Kerze's lost interest and trots over to the fountain.

'Hey, Kerze!'

She gives a curt nod. 'What's up?'

'Loads. How about you?'

Flori's in his new Spiderman tee shirt again, been wearing it every day for a week. 'Been for an ice cream with my Nan.'

Kerze looks over at the ice cream place, a long queue at the counter, no sign of Flori's Nan. 'Where's your Nan gone?'

'Home for a bit. She's coming back for me.'

'Flori?'

'Yup?' says Flori.

'Flori, I've got something important to ask you.'

'Go on then. Shoot.' Flori's leaning over the edge of the fountain and swirling one arm back and forth in the water.

'Flori, are you ready for this?'

'Course,' he says, now plunging his other arm into the water too.

'Can you please look at me, this is really important.'

Flori straightens up, water dripping from his arms onto the ground.

'Right then,' says Kerze, with an intake of breath. 'Now I'm asking you: Have you seen Power?'

Flori's face is a blank, his eyes widen, but he says nothing. Kerze feels the hairs stand up on the back of her neck. Red alert.

'Flori, I'm going to ask you again and hope you'll tell me the truth. Have you seen Power?'

Flori lowers his eyes, rubs his wet hands and arms on his shorts.

'Power?'

'Yes, Hitschke's dog.' Kerze sounded impatient.

'Oh, yeah.' He claps his hand to his forehead. 'That fluffy one?'

'That's the one. Have you seen him?' She gives him a hard look.

'Nah,' says Flori, leaning over the fountain edge again.

'You sure?'

'Yes, course.'

'Shit.'

'Eh?' He looks over at her.

'I'm looking for him, gone missing.'

'Since when?'

'Since yesterday.' She clears her throat before saying, 'Didn't you once nick Sarah's cat?'

'What?' Flori straightens up. Kerze's looking menacing.

'Are you off your head? I never nicked it. The cat was always coming to ours for food, she was always tired, too. That's why I put a box in my cupboard for her, somewhere

for her to have a rest. That's why I shut the cupboard door, so she could have a nice sleep. That don't mean I nicked her.' He folded his arms across his chest. 'Anyway, I was four then!' Kerze was still glaring at him, so he added, 'I haven't seen Hitschke and her stupid dog for ages.'

Kerze looks hard at Flori, weighing up whether she can believe him. He hasn't gone red and in Kerze's view that's always a good sign. She decides to believe Flori. He leans right over the edge of the fountain this time, edging his upper body closer to the water so he can lap it with his outstretched tongue.

'Flori?'

'Yes,' he answers, both his hands now resting on the bottom of the fountain all the better to drink.

'Flori, you're well disgusting.'

He props himself up to look at her. 'I know.' As he gives a broad smile, water trickles from his mouth, down his chin and onto Spiderman's glowing white eyes making them darken, and if Kerze hadn't been Kerze, Spiderman's now sinister gaze would have scared her. But she's Kerze. And Kerze's never scared.

In the wood that afternoon rays of sunshine fall softly between the tree canopies to light the moss and fallen leaves. Kerze knows every path, she's spent her life in the wood. For her the wood's never a monster, the wood's her friend. 'Power!' she calls, hurling small sticks ahead of her as she goes, waiting to see if he'll come racing towards her, snapping after one of her twigs. There's no Power. Not in the wood, not in the fields surrounding the wood, not there either. A sheep, four cows, a cat a long way off. That's it for animals.

She cuts across farmland to the road and follows it back to the village, never taking her eye off the church tower. She might hate God but she likes the church. The tower always means home for anyone trudging across the meadow and looking towards the village.

2

All the lights are on at Hitschke's house. It's nowhere near dark but all the lights are on.

'Hitschke, why've you got all the lights on?' asks Kerze as soon as the door opens.

'Cos I'm frightened in the dark, I'm frightened when Power isn't here and the house is so empty.'

'Quite understand.'

‘So have you found him?’

Kerze raises her eyebrows and leans towards Hitschke.

‘Now think about it, just think about it really hard,’ she says, ‘then you’ll get it.’

Hitschke thinks hard, furrowing her brow into countless little creases. Behind her in the hall is a rack, tidily hung about with a coat, an anorak and an umbrella. Next to it is a large framed picture of Power. He’s got his home-knitted doggy coat on, he’s placed his front paws on a small pink plastic stool. As usual he looks like he’s smiling, and in the photo he really comes across not like a dog at all but a human, and Kerze thinks about how that’s what he really is for Hitschke, he is her life, and it doesn’t matter whether he’s a bog-standard terrier or an extra-terrestrial.

‘You haven’t found him.’ Hitschke’s voice is faint as she noisily sniffs back the contents of her nose. ‘That means you haven’t found him...’ Her jaw trembles, Kerze was still giving her the severe stare, so she closes her eyes for a moment to stop the shaking. ‘If you’d found him, you’d have him with you now.’

Kerze gives a slow nod and an indulgent smile. ‘That’s right, Hitschke, that’s right. It’s good you’ve given it some thought.’

Hitschke places her hands together in prayer, throws back her head and looks up into the evening sky.

‘Dear God, please give me my Power back.’

‘God won’t, but I’ll get him back for you. You mark my words! If it helps, you can call me God. If it really helps, I’ll be the God to bring you back Power.’ She looks Hitschke in the eye. ‘You can absolutely count on me.’

Hitschke gives a silent nod.

‘You know that, don’t you?’

More nodding.

‘And why d’you know that?’

‘Because you,’ says Hitschke, beginning the sentence that they complete in unison, ‘always keep a promise!’

‘Quite right,’ says Kerze. ‘And now let me have that photo, the one behind you.’

Hitschke turns a little. ‘The one of Power?’

Kerze purses her lips. ‘Do you see any photos there other than the one of Power?’

‘No,’ sniffs Hitschke, her eyes filling with tears again.

‘Even if there was another photo there, like one of you, why would I want it? Just remember what this is about, who’s missing and who isn’t missing.’

Hitschke hangs her head in shame.

'I know and can tell from your overall behaviour that you've been through the wringer today but this'll have to be a joint effort, you'll have to do your share of thinking, if you want Power back.'

Hitschke takes down the photo with loving care, caressing the glass before placing the picture in Kerze's hands, head turned away. Kerze makes as if to go but Hitschke shouts 'Wait!' and hurries into the kitchen. The coat, the anorak and the umbrella are all the same colour: beige.

She comes back.

'Hold out your hand,' she says. Kerze does as she's told and receives in her open palm a stream of chocolate raisins, all a bit melty from Hitschke's constantly warm, slightly perspiring hands.

Kerze thanks her but still waits a bit. 'Hitschke, what's your favourite colour?'

'Red,' she replies, licking the fingers of the hand that brought the chocolate raisins.

'So what's all this about?' Kerze gestures at the coat stand.

Hitschke gives a shrug. Kerze shakes her head.

'Give it some thought – let some colour into your life. By tomorrow.' Kerze adopts a more kindly tone. 'I'll come as soon as I find Power. If I don't find him, I'll be here in the evening and will tell you I still haven't found him.'

Hitschke nods. 'Thank you,' she calls after her.

At the first corner Kerze takes a look back. Hitschke's watching her from the kitchen window. Kerze stands and looks until she disappears from view. The light doesn't go off.

Once on Heilandstrasse Kerze stops near some bushes and examines the palm of her hand. All the chocolate's melted so she picks out the raisins and sticks them one by one on the spindly branches. Then she looks up, scanning the evening sky for birds. In the distance she makes out a flight of swallows, cups her hands round her mouth and calls out, 'They're for all of you!' Then she bends down, wipes her palm back and forth on the grass and whispers to the earthworms making their way through their underground tunnels, 'And that's for all of you.'

Kerze's mother sits on the sofa, laughing at a TV repeat of a Stefan Raab entertainment show.

'What are you laughing at him for?' Kerze plonks herself down on the floor in front of the sofa.

'He's funny.'

'He's not funny, Mum.'

'He is to me.'

'You can't know what's funny.' Kerze stretches out on the rug in front of the television.

'So what *is* funny, then?' asks her mother.

'Nothing. Life is a very serious matter, and I hope you always bear that in mind'

They watch Stefan Raab to the end and say goodnight to one another. Once in her room Kerze opens her window. She always opens her window at night, whether it's snowing or raining, whether it's cold or stormy. She does it because otherwise ghosts gather in her room. It was her fifth birthday when they first showed up and they've been coming ever since. They don't do anything to her, just stand in silence round her bed and look at her. When they're awake, she's supposed to sleep. And because it doesn't help if she says to them go and do your looking somewhere else, she just opens the window every night when she wants to sleep, and they fly out. Kerze knows that ghosts don't like a draught because it messes up their robes, leaving them looking just like bed sheets and then nobody's scared of them. All this means that in the winter Kerze is, of course, freezing cold if the window stays open and at the beginning in the first ghost year her Mum had gone on at her about it the whole time. But once her mother could see that going on at her made no difference, and that Kerze continued to open the window at night the minute she left the room, she gave up and bought a good thick woollen blanket for her instead. Without asking anything more.

Kerze doesn't know what the ghosts want with her. They've never told her, although she's asked them often enough. So are you good ghosts or bad ghosts, she would say. What do you want with me? Then at some point she'd stopped asking them and had got used to them, got used to the feeling of not being alone.

When the ghosts have flown off, Kerze picks up Power's photo and removes it from the frame. She slides it under her pillow in the hope that in a dream Power will tell her where he is. She lies down properly, pulls the rug up to her chin and prays.

'Dear No-God

I'm going to sleep now and tomorrow I'll wake up again.

Good Night, No-God.'

But she can't get to sleep straight away because she keeps thinking about Power and wondering whether he's okay. Yesterday morning he was still there. Yesterday morning Hitschke had filled his bowl with dog food, and he'd eaten it all up, licked the bowl clean, like every day. Today Hitschke had again stood looking at an empty bowl, morning and evening alike. That Power has gone missing, that the only thing left of him is his status as 'missing' is something Kerze just won't accept. She'll fight it. She'll do whatever it takes to make everything like it used to be.

That night she doesn't dream about Power, she dreams of other things including a swarm of bees encircling her head like a living crown.

The next morning at school Kerze can't follow a thing because her thoughts are so taken up with Power. During the last lesson, Geography, she neatly tears all the written pages out of her notebook. She does it really slowly so no ripping sounds can alert the

teacher. Then she subtracts from the last page, only half-written on, a nice clean square and sticks it to the cover of the book with careful use of her glue pen along its edges, smoothing it over and over until every bubble has been flattened. Pulling the pencil case closer, she peers inside, her face deadly serious as she ponders which of her colour crayons to select. In the end she goes for black. With rapt attention she writes in capitals MISSION, then a colon, following this with SEARCH FOR AND FIND POWER. She presses so hard with the crayon that she makes a hole in the paper. That annoys her. But there's no time to be annoyed, the lesson's nearly over, so she chooses another crayon, red this time. She writes her name, KERZE, but in normal handwriting and without pressing so hard. Finally she slides out a brown from her crayon set and bends really close to the notebook, the tip of her nose almost brushing the cover until she's ready to sit up again and consider her work. It could be him, but it could equally be another dog. The paws are the hardest to draw, just like hands and feet are hard when she draws people, she can't ever get that quite right. Using the black again she makes a dot for the eye and gives him a smiling mouth. She tidies each crayon away before sliding out her ink pen and opening up the notebook. She starts writing and records everything about yesterday, seeing Hitschke, the search inside and outside Edeka, the conversation with Flori at the fountain, throwing sticks in the wood and then the second encounter with Hitschke at her house. Then she makes a 'wanted' poster with his size and fur colour, including a detailed sketch of his doggy coat. By now she's filled three sides of A5 paper. On the final page she enters today's date before she sinks back in her chair, exhausted.

The bell signalling the end of class makes her jump.

When she goes out into the yard there are already various groups of children hanging around. They're all chattering, sometimes looking at mobiles as they stand in a huddle playing music. Kerze adjusts the straps on her school bag and heads straight for the bike racks.

In the air rushing by her ears as she cycles, she keeps thinking she can hear barking. Each time she hears it, she stops and looks round. But there's no Power to be seen, and no other dog either. 'Stop it,' says Kerze, talking really to the ghosts as it could only be them barking in place of Power, she's quite sure of that. Then she presses down on the pedal once more and is home even before her mother has warmed up yesterday's mash.

After their meal Mum says, 'Where're you off to?' Kerze slowly turns to look at her. The mission notebook is concealed in her left inside pocket, her heart beats against it, and she can feel how it moves in time with her breath. 'Mum,' says Kerze. 'I can't tell you that.' Her Mum leans back on the kitchen bench and looks straight into her eyes. Kerze looks right back, she's used to it, knows this one by heart, knows how long it'll last, knows its intensity and how they'll each escape its hold.

'Bye,' she says, just as Mum's eyes let go of her.

'Be back in time to eat.'

'I won't be.'

'Have you got a mission?'

Kerze nods.

'Good. Then be careful.'

She trawls the streets, looks into doorways, over garden fences, and peeks into a half-open garage. Every person she comes across gets asked about Power.

'Have you seen him, or maybe you have?'

But people shake their heads and hurry on. Once in the wood Kerze opts for rather bigger and longer sticks than the last time. She hurls them into the undergrowth, calling Power's name over and over again. When she gets to the bit that's a conservation area, she sits down at its boundary on a tree stump. She slips her shoes off, thrusts her toes into the moss, pulls the notebook out of her inside pocket and writes down: Not in the wood. Then she puts it away again and studies the fir trees, most now half her height, their boughs rich with light green, sweet-smelling needles. For as long as she's been on this earth she's been watching the trees grow. She comes here once, sometimes twice a week, and learns by watching. Learns that we have to be patient, that nothing happens just like that. Growing one centimetre takes real effort. As she pulls her Swiss Army Knife out of her trouser pocket to scratch a new mark on the trunk of the old maple, just a few millimetres above the last from a couple of months ago, she thinks about what her body's achieved in the last few weeks simply to get this far.

Standing with her back pushed hard against the maple's trunk, she raises the knife above her head and lays it flat against her crown with the sharp edge of the blade towards the tree. She presses it into the bark from close to and then turns to look at the mark left behind. A hair's breadth of difference, as always. The marks wind their way up the tree, each closely nuzzling the next. With her finger Kerze traces the marks down to the first one. It's at shoulder height now. She'd been six then and had been given the pocket knife on her birthday two days before.

Ants march steadily up the trunk past her height marks, transporting crumbs of soil and pine needles as they go, far bigger and darker than the ants in town. They'd be terrifying to anything as tiny as a village ant.

She stays in the wood a long time, goes further and further in than before, calling Power's name out loud. As dusk falls she stops and looks around her. Trees as far as she can see, nothing but trees. She listens intently to the non-silence of the wood. Beneath the undergrowth is the bustling that signals nature at work. How far she is from home, well, she's not sure. If only she could feel scared, she thinks to herself. Other kids would be scared, that's for sure. With one step forward and one back, she strives for that tipping point, just when the body could be seized by fear and then occupied by it, and she braces herself against it with all her strength. It's like arm

wrestling and Kerze wins. Enough for today, she thinks, and turns to go. In town everyone's sitting over their supper. Kerze turns into Heilandstrasse, Hitschke's house at the end looking deserted even though all the lights are on. The place gives off an air of sadness that makes her glance away and down at the ground, where she sees a large beetle, its rear half squashed against the asphalt. Bending for a closer look she sees the antennae still moving slightly, feeling for something that's no longer there.

Hitschke flings the door open after only one ring. Her gaze goes straight to Kerze's ankles, her shoulders sag in disappointment.

'It's only day two,' says Kerze soothingly.

Hitschke nods. Kerze pulls out her notebook and looks hard at every entry. She keeps glancing up at Hitschke, frowning with concentration before turning the page and eventually closing the book.

'More tomorrow,' she says, placing the notebook back carefully inside her jacket as Hitschke watches, deflated still.

Kerze points to the way she's just come.

'Back there by the Beilmann's fir tree, there's a half dead beetle on the pavement. Just you go there right now, and have a look at it, stay there until it dies.'

Hitschke stared at her, puzzled.

'Why?'

'It's your chance to prepare yourself for the worst.'

At home Kerze finds a plate of pizza slices on the table. Three separated by gaps. Like the symbol for radioactivity. She helps herself to one and bites into it. It's cold but she hasn't eaten for ages and realises how hungry she is. Then she clears up and goes into the living room, no lights on in there. Mum's room upstairs is empty too. On the window ledge is a Swiss Cheese Plant that Mum frequently forgets to water. In the half-light it always looks like a monster with multiple hands and a wobbly stance. 'You don't scare me one bit,' she says, stroking one of its leaves, slipping off her shoes and stretching out on Mum's bed. Give the No-God a little wave before falling asleep, that'll have to be it for today.